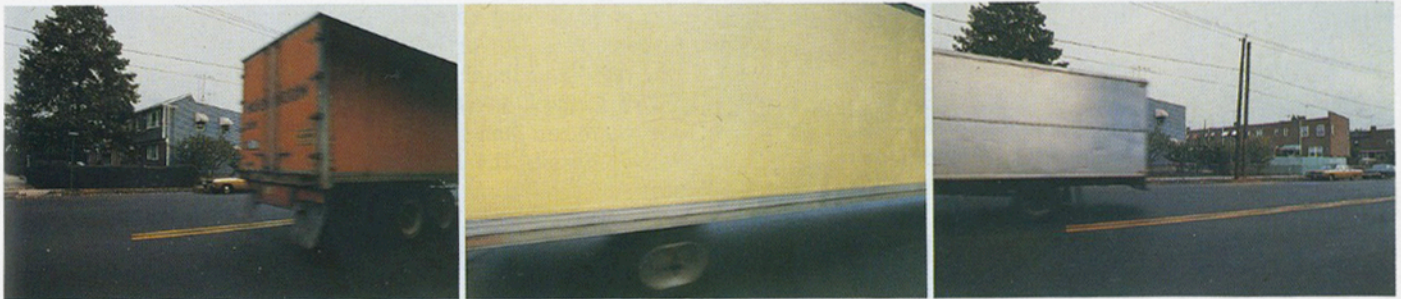


# Jan Groover: Melancholy Modernist

*Though it does homage to the patriarchal tradition of American formalist photography, Jan Groover's work is here seen as more urgent, more obsessive and more disabused than the optimistic images of her mentors.*



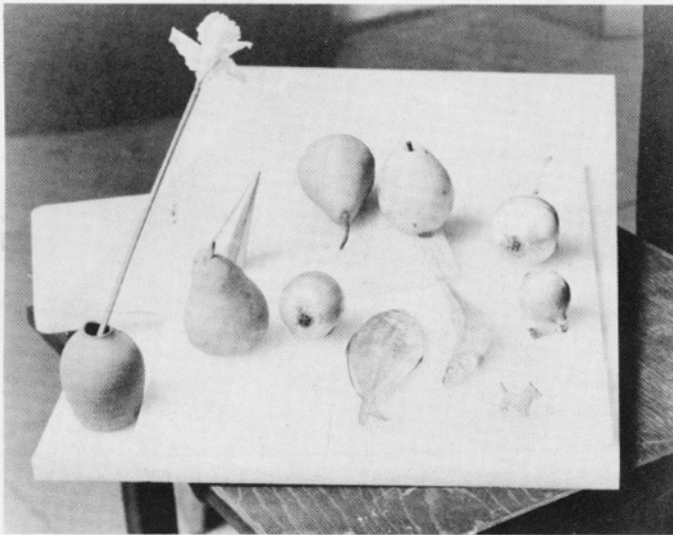
*Untitled, 1975, 3 chromogenic color prints, each 9 by 13½ inches. All photos this article courtesy Museum of Modern Art.*

**BY MAX KOZLOFF**

**W**hen she was asked, with good reason, why she switched from painting to photography, Jan Groover gave an odd answer. This one-time Minimalist painter replied: "With photography I didn't have to make things up, everything was already there." Since taking up the camera in the mid-'70s, Groover has become very well known, even celebrated, as a photographer who has imposed the most stringent visual reductions on her chosen themes: still life, the main focus; some cityscapes, with accent on architectural detail; and a few portraits. All these things were certainly already "there," but they exist for us *now* so very willfully arranged in her photographs, so wrenchingly transformed, that they almost look made up.

One has the sense that they existed for her chiefly as material that had no significance whatsoever, other than their potential for giving rise to her flat, graphically simplified sort of picture. The real world in all its variety and unpredictability, and the human face in all its sociability and expressiveness—both subjects for which photography is wonderfully suited—Groover rejected. Instead, she renders motifs (for her subjects have no more status than that) as platforms, surfaces, foils; and she photographs them disorientingly close up, so that their only partially included shapes run beyond the frame, leaving pictorial content under a weird pressure. Her work takes a lot of fussing, the equivalent of the adjustments made by an abstract painter.

**Because of the tightness of her pictorial control, the pictures reveal color nuances which Groover could not have anticipated—nor could painting itself have matched.**



*Untitled, 1983, platinum palladium print, 7½ by 9¾ inches. Robert Miller Gallery.*



*Untitled, 1980, platinum palladium print, 9¾ by 7¾ inches.*

Yet, it counts decisively that her pictures were taken with a camera rather than done with a brush.

The Museum of Modern Art has just given us [to June 2] the occasion to review Jan Groover's work in considerable force and at mid-career. Predictably, she's seen as no more than a modernist at the museum, for curator Susan Kismaric has taken the photographer's own rap and much previous criticism at face value. But the emotional charge in Groover's work has far more to do with a personal urgency than any modernist program.

It's true that the styles of blue-chip American modernist photographers of the older generation are recapitulated in her work, particularly the three S's—Stieglitz, Steichen, Strand—and also Edward Weston. In this age, when the typical artistic move is promiscuously to *appropriate* earlier sources, Groover does straightforward homage to hers. These photographic forebears had been most defensive in their early-century claims for photography as a fine art. Not only has Groover emulated them—though in reverse, from her initial hard-edge machine style to her current soft pictorialism, redolent of the 1890s—she has even serially portrayed her husband, artist Bruce Boice, as if he were Stieglitz's "Georgia O'Keeffe." And, of course, she has learned from the masters' luxurious print technology. But the idea of recovering an earlier historical moment is quixotic and futile, unless the artist's commitment to it is excessive, as Groover's undoubtedly is. Her historicist venture burns with an ardent flame, if anything *fed* by her puritanical sensibility. This young woman honors her patriarchal mentors all the more fiercely despite the great gap opened up between her abused, post-industrial scene, and their more innocent and optimistic era.

**S**o, for example, the dense, highlighted materiality of her still-life description stands in bizarre contrast to her professed abstraction. "Formalism," she has said, throwing down her archaic gauntlet, "is everything." But the New York that emerges fitfully from her images of its outer truck lanes (in her earlier fixed-place, time-study triptychs), its bank fronts, its moldering tenements and empty lots, is either forbiddingly inhumane or melancholy—quite the opposite of the masters' faith in the city's progress. They had intuited a heroic, interior force in their subjects, no matter how humble. In contrast, Groover is reduced to energizing her subjects by the mannered artifice of her framing instincts. She depicts cleavers, forks and cookie molds as light reflectors and color modulators, disjointed and marooned within a shallow, unrecognizable space.

Still, despite, or rather because of the tightness of her pictorial control, the pictures reveal shimmers and ravishing color nuances which she could not have anticipated—nor could painting itself have matched them. Since her still lifes are composed of objects that reflect neither her desire nor even her interest, there's something wildly unpsychological and disproportionate about the obsessive way in which Groover regards them. Some artists expand outward with their appetites and their curiosity. This one draws inward, narrowly and passionately, upon the displacements and illusions that alone make it possible for her to create authentic art. □

*"Jan Groover" travels to the Gibbes Art Gallery, Charleston (Nov. 3-Dec. 31, 1987); the Contemporary Arts Center, Cincinnati (Jan. 15-Feb. 27, 1988); and the Berkshire Museum, Pittsfield, Mass. (May-July, 1988).*

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