

Steven Baldi

THOMAS DUNCAN GALLERY

“Branded Light,” Steven Baldi’s second solo exhibition at Thomas Duncan Gallery, picked up the theme of the camera as simultaneously tool and institution previously broached in “Lens Reflex,” a group show the artist curated at the gallery earlier this year with pieces in various media by Zoë Ghertner, Jacob Kassay, Stephen Prina, Eileen Quinlan, H. Armstrong Roberts, and Tørbjørn Rødland. A sort of second act, “Branded Light” furthered the photographer’s take on photographic prints as entities in dialogue with the machines that generate them.



Steven Baldi, *Branded Light (Mamiya)*, 2014, gelatin silver print, 26 3/4 x 22 1/4".

For Baldi, this claim is demonstrated by works that “both allow and utilize the [camera’s] ability to create a tertiary, magic-like, presence within the objects it creates.” The photographic apparatus was here presented as a third term—connected to but also figured apart from the medium of photography as such (as the inclusion of non-photographic works in this exhibition indicated)—which produces objects, but also allegories of making.

Nowhere was this more forcefully accomplished than in the namesake series of seven crisp twenty-six-by-twenty-two-inch gelatin silver prints that encircled the upstairs gallery. Each photograph presents a composition in which a brand name appears. The letters that spell MAMIYA in *Branded Light (Mamiya)* (all works 2014) hold together only through a feat of cognitive agility, while those in *Branded Light (Canon)* are turned on their sides, forming vertical columns that seem poised to spin off frame. To achieve the dramatic and often disarticulating effects of stuttering, fragmented, or otherwise warped text, Baldi worked from maquettes, which he lit and shot. Taking his cue from the material substrate of merchandising—product pedestals and corporate desk signs, including a category of paperweight trophies perversely dubbed “tombstones”—Baldi used as a kind of second lens Plexiglas blocks, to which the various logotypes were adhered in vinyl. These placards became vehicles through which light would pass, therein manipulating and refracting the proper names, as in *Branded Light (Leica)*, where, in a canny play of mirroring, the loopy cursive *L* appears backward and forward from a midline visual hinge. The apparatus, here made visible, returned us to Baldi’s interest in reflexivity as the condition and subject of—and image within—the work itself.

Downstairs, a series of six Tetris-shaped monochromes bracketed the experience of the “Branded Light” series: Because of their placement on the second floor, the photographs were necessarily seen after a first encounter with these light-absorbing black wall works, still there to be confronted one more time on the way out. (Albeit a decision made to accommodate the parameters of the space, this division between the works, and the circumnavigation it necessitated, additionally recalled Baldi’s installation at Sfeir-Semler Gallery in Beirut, Lebanon, in 2009, for which the artist erected a glass wall to force viewers to double back through the gallery to exit.) Like the photos, the wall works share a moniker, *Black box*, followed by a parenthetical designation. In fact, in their information-rich subtitles, the works offered their direct relation to the gallery architecture. The otherwise nondescript rectangle *Black box (Thomas Duncan Gallery East Wall L1)* served as a deductive structure, guiding the viewer to the corresponding gallery wall from which it took its shape. Yet where Michael Fried famously understood Frank Stella’s shaped canvases to pressure the pictorial field within, Baldi uses architectural givens to determine the nature of the various supports. In stretching black book-cloth across the aluminum-framed stretchers, he denied in these cold, handsome panels further compositional incident as though it were superfluous, even as Baldi himself became the medium for achieving such an index.

—Suzanne Hudson