

 Visuals | Steven Heller

Signs and Portents

I OWN a fairly large vintage sign that sits imposingly on my living room floor. It once hung outside a place called Velulich's Bakery, somewhere in New Jersey, and is typical of the painted metal displays of the 1930s, with Art Deco contours and neon illumination. It's as beautiful as the hand-painted shoe-repair sign I keep in my bedroom. Both are artifacts of consumer culture before commercial branding and environmental signage (as signs are now called) became so self-conscious — when sign painters plied their craft without pretense. A store sign had to be bold, eye-catching and immediately recognizable, so that customers would understand the purpose of the establishment. Clever names designed to tickle the imagination would not do. What you saw was what you got: Bakery, Drugstore, Smoke Shop, Meat Market, Liquors, Dry Cleaners. Examples of these signs are, of course, still found on old buildings all over New York City, but are gradually being replaced by more contemporary designs and L.E.D. screens.

For those who think modernization is always a virtue, the demise of these relics may be a good thing. For me, it marks the end of an era of sign painting and storefront innocence. Which is why my eyes widened when I saw James T. Murray and Karla L. Murray's oversize (11¾ by 13¼ inches) coffee-table book, **STORE FRONT: The Disappearing Face of New York (Ginkgo, \$65)**. The Murrays, authors of two books on graffiti art, "Broken Windows" and "Burning New York," have been photographing storefronts for more than eight years, and in this book they employ large-scale horizontal pages (and a few gate-folds) as they track their odyssey from the Lower East Side to Harlem to the Bronx, from Brooklyn to Queens to Staten Island. If you're at all interested in the passing cityscape, this book is a documentary mother lode; if you're happy to see these joints disappear, it might at least kindle appreciation for them.

The Murrays' photographs, however, do not romanticize these not very picturesque locales. The images are bright and crisp, though most of what the authors photographed was dingy and covered with graffiti; quite a few fronts and signs were falling apart or grungy to begin with. Yet it is in this state of decay that the stores hold a curious fascination — indeed, a raw beauty — for anyone concerned with vernacular design. I was particularly taken with the Lower East Side remnants that are slowly being squeezed out by hip restaurants and shops. Zelig Blumenthal's religious articles store, on Essex Street, appears not to have changed since my grandparents lived nearby. The Hebrew lettering on the window is as clean as it was back then. Meanwhile, at Rabbi M. Eisenbach's shop, the painted signs seem to be fading. Beny's Authorized Sales and Service, which sells "fine jewelry, electric shavers, lighters, pens," is not just a throwback; it also exhibits a totally alien aesthetic compared with that of most stores today.

"Store Front" is not mired in nostalgia. Take the photo-

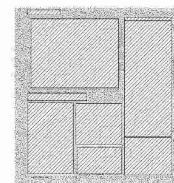
graph of the (now closed) Jade Mountain Restaurant, on Second Avenue near 12th Street, where I ate cheap Chinese food as a teenager. It is not a storefront I get misty-eyed seeing again; even the so-called chop-suey-style sign lettering does not make me long for what's lost. But it's part of a larger mosaic that was (and is) New York's retail consumer culture.

The book is also a study of urban migration, featuring Jewish delis and Italian "latticini freschi" stores downtown, Hispanic bodegas and Irish bars uptown, and a white-bread Howard Johnson's in Midtown (now gone). There are also photos of single blocks, with various contrasting storefronts tightly packed next to one another, that resemble a third-world market. Downtown is much more alluring than uptown — but maybe that's because I was raised downtown.

Nonetheless, as I was examining all the images in sequence, somewhere around the middle of the book, actually in Midtown, my interest began to wane and picked up again only toward the end, when I reached the pages devoted to Coney Island. Funny, that was the exact experience I had as a kid in the '60s when my dad would drive us across the Manhattan Bridge and then through Brooklyn, past all those old neighborhood shops, to the famous amusement park, with its great storefronts and signs.

At the risk of sounding too nostalgic, I would say that Laurence S. Cutler and Judy Goffman Cutler's **J.C. LEYENDECKER: American Imagist (Abrams, \$50)**, a profusely illustrated monograph, demonstrates how beautifully composed and exquisitely painted the editorial and advertising illustration was during the profession's golden age — the turn of the century through the mid-'40s. Magazines and billboards were wellsprings of illustrious popular art, created by masters like J.C. Leyendecker, his brother F.X. Leyendecker, Charles Dana Gibson, Coles Phillips, Maxfield Parrish, Norman Rockwell, James Montgomery Flagg and others. This is not to imply that illustrators today are less proficient or creative; but with the current preference for raw expressionism over pristine exactitude, not as many artists do the same level of virtuosic work today.

The German-born Joseph Christian Leyendecker (1874-1951) left behind a huge number of images, mostly covers for The Saturday Evening Post (when Rockwell wasn't doing them), as well as others for The Century, The Literary Digest, McClure's, Vanity Fair and dozens more. All of his Post covers from the early 1900s to the early 1940s were stylized vignettes, each painted in the same muted brown-and-red palette. But the nuances he captured — in such details as leather coats, athletes' jerseys and the shiny skin of New Year's cherubs (he did a lot of them) — were luminescent. Apparently, he wiped oil on his models' muscles (though not on the cherubs) to enhance those "male surfaces" he most admired. He also often painted in a dark room by candlelight to underscore a model's erotic qualities. His most famous advertising campaign, for Ar-



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row shirts and collars, which is still cited as a symbol of the flapper era, was the quintessence of stylishness and put the company on the fashion map. His "Man and Woman Dancing" (1923), "Dancing Couple" (1930) and "Couple Descending Staircase" (1932), for which he painted his friend Phyllis Frederic and the actor Brian Donlevy, were reproduced in so many magazines that the models became starring characters in their own right.

Leyendecker was a keen commercial strategist. "In evaluating how to best promote himself and his work," the Cutlers write, "Leyendecker believed that his greatest impact as an artist was creating images easily reproduced, immediately recognized and broadly distributed for audiences by the millions to appreciate." He made certain that upon seeing his work people would say, "That's a Leyendecker!"

Still, not much is known about him, which accounts for the book's limited, though entertaining, narrative. We are

told Leyendecker shied away from the limelight and "an adoring public" because he was "a homosexual when it was nearly impossible to live such a life openly." So, to ensure his privacy and "conceal his gay lifestyle, Leyendecker meticulously cleansed his files and records of anything homosexually explicit or implicit." The only clues were in his artwork. "The gay subculture saw the irony in his work and appreciated the erotic images he lavished upon the world," the authors explain. Yet "these homoerotic images appealed to heterosexual viewers as well."

Despite the fame during his lifetime, Leyendecker has never received the kind of acclaim bestowed on Norman Rockwell, who in 2001 was the subject of an exhibition at the Guggenheim Museum. According to the Cutlers, only one other book devoted to Leyendecker has been published since his death, and that came out in 1974. So it is time for reassessment, and the wealth of illustrations here allows readers to reassess for themselves.

LEYENDECKER represented the epitome of craft. Another kind of illustration, the manipulated news photographs common in tabloid and broadsheet newspapers from the turn of the century through the '50s (and even into the '70s at some papers), was at the lower end. Virtually every periodical used some form of manipulation: retouchers would remove backgrounds to make stark silhouettes or add additional elements, including cut-in vignettes or cutaway diagrams of events. Today, "regulation and standards for newspaper photographic submission and publication have come under the scrutiny of industry and professional organizations," according to Stanley B. Burns and Sara Cleary-Burns, the authors of **NEWS ART: Manipulated Photographs From the Burns Archive (PowerHouse, \$45)**. "If a photojournalist for a newspaper stage-manages a news event without telling the editor, it is grounds for immediate dismissal." But in the early days (The New York Daily Graphic published the first photograph in a newspaper in 1880), manipulation designed to make an image clearer or enhance the information was de rigueur. I remember seeing such photographs in the old picture morgue at The New York Times; they were covered with thick, cracking paint to block out unwanted details or smoothly airbrushed in gouache to make the backgrounds lighter. Some were even painted with

contoured borders around them.

In this handsomely designed book, the authors present original photographic prints (as well as reproductions of some newspaper clippings) to show how the truth was helped along. Included are a photograph of Leopold and Loeb, the "notorious coldblooded killers of young friend Bobby Franks," in which the background is sloppily blotted out by airbrush; a picture of American soldiers on leave in Paris during World War I in which light airbrushing, India ink outlines of the figures and a fully painted woman's coat are visible; a photo collage of the Mexican revolutionary Pancho Villa that consists of several photographs pasted together to make one image, with airbrushing, as well as India ink and white and gray paint, to fill in seams and backgrounds; and a photo of a model in evening dress in which a suggestive keyhole is painted around the figure. Another trope in the more sensational tabloids included artists' renderings of murder scenes. In "Montage With Signed Drawing of Shooting," the outline of a dead man on a kitchen floor is glued onto the picture. In fact, it was "post-mortem and spirit photography" that piqued Stanley Burns's curiosity about photo manipulation in the first place.

Taken out of context, the images in "News Art" (they're referred to as "art" in newspaper lingo) are a distinct artistic form born of necessity. While each photograph represents a real person or event, the enhancements and the way they are applied to the photographic surface can be seen as a kind of proto-Pop Art, and the results are not all that dissimilar to some Dada pieces. This book provides a fresh perspective on a common aspect of photography.

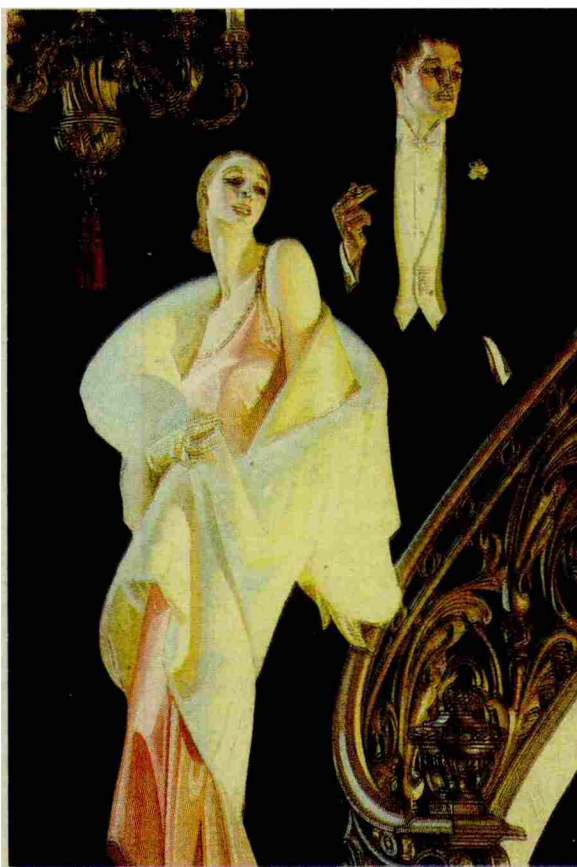
STAGED photography may be verboten in the newspaper industry, but in the fashion and art worlds it has a long history, building on the concept of the tableau vivant. In Eleanor Antin's **HISTORICAL TAKES (San Diego Museum of Art/Prestel, \$45)**, the staging is as ambitious as that of any major Broadway production or Hollywood costume drama. Antin, who is based in San Diego, has made a career of producing "shrewd narratives that are delivered with all the cool detachment expected of conceptual artists," Derrick R. Cartwright says in the foreword. Her work here includes human friezes set in ancient times, organized in historical groupings like "The Last Days of Pompeii," in which photos titled "Drusilla and the Elders" (2001) and "The Sacrifice" (2001) represent key scenes before the eruption of the volcano. In the section "Helen's Odyssey," an image called "Judgment of Paris (After Rubens) — Light Helen" (2007) mixes a cast of old and contemporary characters: a sexy guerrilla fighter; a woman in a '50s-style polka-dot dress, holding a vacuum cleaner; a cherub.

Antin has said that she "invents histories," as Amelia Jones notes in one of the essays in this book. Jones adds, "Antin's practice is profoundly critical and profoundly feminist in that it articulates a self in process that performs across time and space to enliven the past and to prick us where we are right now." I have not been pricked by the tableaux' social meanings, but I admire the devotion to exactitude and the level of wit Antin brings to these extremely ambitious works.

Antin makes art that looks like the stage. In Jerry Pinto

and Sheena Sippy's **BOLLYWOOD POSTERS** (Thames & Hudson, paper, \$34.95), advertising artists and designers manipulate film images into staged posters. And the images for some of the films — like the posters for the 2008 movie “Jodhaa Akbar,” showing a Rajput princess and a Mughal emperor — come across as the humorless counterparts of Antin's amusing heroes and heroines.

These posters do show, though, a range of styles and approaches, from the slavishly historical pastiche of the ones for “Mughal-E-Azam” to the pulp-crime look of “Pocket Maar” to the steamy romance of “Barsaat.” There are also a few very contemporary, Hollywood-type posters, like the comic one for “Chandni Chowk to China.” As a history of Bollywood (a name the authors say is itself contentious), the narrative is informative. As a book of popular art, it is evidence that in India the graphic design used to promote movies to the masses is just as clunky as it often is in the United States. □



An ad for Arrow Collar, from “J.C. Leyendecker.”