

Joys and Terrors On the Home Front

By MICHAEL KIMMELMAN

THE photograph by Philip-Lorca diCorcia presents a stout figure, a seeming giant in bare feet and cutoffs whose head almost touches the ridiculously low ceiling he is sanding. Or perhaps he is holding up the ceiling, preventing it from squashing him and everything else in the disheveled room. For Mr. diCorcia, as for many of the photographers in "Pleasures and Terrors of Domestic Comfort," the big, provocative and groundbreaking exhibition that has just opened at the Museum of Modern Art, the American home is no safe haven.

It is a kind of psychological and sociological war zone, the battles no less intense for being waged bloodlessly in the trenches of the bedroom. The fire of a barbecue in a backyard

is a conflagration in a photograph by Mary Kocol. And in another of Mr. diCorcia's magnificently stagy photographs, a man stands before an open refrigerator at night. "We see," observes Peter Galassi, the curator, in his essay for the exhibition's catalogue, "not a banal search for a snack but a man confronting the chaos and dissolution of his life."

The more than 150 images by 74 artists in "Pleasures and Terrors" were taken mostly during the 1980's, when the home became increasingly the focus of photographic attention as it became, not coincidentally, the focus of political attention in debates over issues like abortion, the family and women's rights.

The 80's also witnessed a deep split in the field of photography. On the one hand were the modernists who upheld

Pleasures and Terrors In Home Photographs

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the notion of documentary or candid images. On the other hand were the post-modernists who, in borrowing images from mass culture and in putting forth contrived and manipulated photographs, both challenged photography's role in shaping social conventions and cast doubt on the credibility of the medium itself.

Mr. Galassi's goal in "Pleasures and Terrors" is to bridge the gap in the photography world, to demonstrate that, despite the rhetoric and theoretical posturing on each side, the two camps may not have been all that far apart when it came to images of domestic life. "Thus it is that the beleaguered modernist tradition, in its aim to clarify personal experience, and the post-modernist juggernaut, eager to unmask Big Brother, meet (of all places) in the kitchen," Mr. Galassi writes.

For the photography department of the Modern, such a premise is groundbreaking because, under its former director, John Szarkowski, post-modernism went virtually unacknowledged. "Pleasures and Terrors" is the first attempt by the museum to deal with the diversity of photography in the 80's.

Yet to strengthen the links between the modernist and post-modernist camps, Mr. Galassi must glide over certain key differences that diminish the significance of the post-modernists. The large scale of post-modern photography, as in the works of Barbara Kruger, an artist conspicuous by her absence from the show, is underemphasized presumably to put every work in the exhibition on roughly equal footing. And to see an artist like Cindy Sherman's post-modernist photographs on their own is to understand them in a different context than they are presented here, on a small scale where they are made to echo the efforts of such candid-shot modernists as Thomas Roma.

Mr. Galassi has tried something tricky and worthwhile, without perfectly succeeding — to signal a break with the Modern's recent past while not renouncing Mr. Szarkowski's legacy. If some of the artists in the show might not have been to Mr. Szarkowski's taste (Carrie Mae Weems and Laurie Simmons are among those being exhibited for the first time by the photography department), many of them have been seen before at the museum. "Pleasures and Terrors" still leans heavily toward the Modern's and the modernist's traditional position that photographs can depict the world unencumbered by ideological baggage.

At the same time, the show demonstrates that both the modernists and post-modernists have clearly been looking at one another. In the case of post-modernists like James Casebere, his constructions of imagery take cues from the modernist devices of set-up photography. In the case of modernists like Joel Sternfeld, elements of theatricality and scale have entered into their photographs. And a work like Gregory Crewdson's image of a tree viewed through a window is indebted at once to modernism's history of nature studies and post-modernism's emphasis on

have set alight a small tree in backyard, seems a miraculous combination of planning and good fortune. Mr. Nicosia concocted the alignment of the tree with another bigger tree in the background, which seems to grow out of the smaller one; he lined up a wooden fence with the trunk of the tree and managed to create an echo between the flaming trunk and the design of one of the children's shorts. But it was his luck to capture the wonderfully guilty and frightening look on the face of the little girl which seals the photograph as an image of domestic terror.

Sharon Rupp's "Hillsboro, N.H." makes nearly as much of an effect in its unprepossessing way. A boy of about 12 plays with a rifle while a girl stands nearby in her swimsuit, observing a younger, naked boy standing between them. Ms. Rupp's subtle but pointed synopsis of sexual clichés accomplishes much of what Ms. Sherman aims to achieve on a bigger and self-consciously dramatic scale.

At first it is not clear what is going on in Sage Sohier's "Gordon and Jim with Gordon's Mother Margot," a photograph of three figures on a sofa whose meaning is complicated by the curious presence of a dog's head peeking from behind a chair and of two dolls like those in Mike Kelley's sculptures resting on the couch. Ms. Sohier's image of a gay couple is also about sexual roles, but in this case about confounding expectations.

There are a great number of images of people at home but not at ease, of people physically but not

The Museum of Modern Art seeks to bridge a gap in photography.

spiritually together, of parental love gone awry. It is impossible not to be alarmed by Susan Kandel's photograph of a father sitting on a couch kissing his little boy so hard that the boy's face becomes squashed, while at the other end of the couch another child lies unattended, looking ominously like a corpse.

There are also affectionate portraits like Nicholas Nixon's "Sam, Bebe and Clementine" and Lee Friedlander's "Nesuhi and Leyla Ertegün." And there are a lot of images that depend largely on what a viewer brings to them. Mr. Szarkowski's adage that photography explains nothing seems nowhere more clearly borne out than in "Pleasures and Terrors," where works like the pair of Joel Sternfeld's photographs of a Malibu, Calif., investment banker and lawyer can be interpreted either as homages to the good life or indictments of the Reagan years.

It is difficult not to be reminded, for better and worse, of "The Family of Man," the vast, propagandistic exhibition

photography's role in shaping social conventions and cast doubt on the credibility of the medium itself.

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One of Mr. Galassi's most important accomplishments in the show is to sweep aside the supposed distinctions between art and photography that were as much a commercial issue in the 80's as they were an intellectual one. "Pleasures and Terrors" insists on a democracy of viewpoint that concentrates attention on the images and away from theory.

Those images are principally about middle-class America, and many of them, including a number by less familiar artists, are startling. Nic Nicosia's "Real Pictures No. 11," which depicts two boys and a girl who

of the tree and managed to create an echo between the flaming trunk and the design of one of the children's shorts. But it was his luck to capture the wonderfully guilty and frightening look on the face of the little girl, which seals the photograph as an image of domestic terror.

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It is difficult not to be reminded, for better and worse, of "The Family of Man," the vast, propagandistic exhibition that Edward Steichen organized for the Modern in 1955. That show endorsed a warm-hearted notion of global man. Mr. Galassi's "Pleasures and Terrors" keeps front and center the ambiguities and alienation that pervade middle-class American domestic life. The distance between the earlier show and this one is another measure of how far the Modern and American photography have come together.

"Pleasures and Terrors of Domestic Comfort" remains at the Museum of Modern Art, 11 West 53d Street,