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## Change and Permanence, Captured by Cameras

By HOLLAND COTTER

Although few and far between, gallery shows by the American artist Zoe Leonard have been among the most moving I've seen in New York over the last 15 years or so.

For a 1995 solo show she painstakingly sewed and mended discarded fruit skins and scattered them across the floor of her emptied-out Lower East Side tenement studio as a memorial to friends who had died of AIDS.

In 2000 she filled the Paula Cooper Gallery's cathedral-like Chelsea space with a standing army of battered and soiled female dolls she had found on the street or at flea markets, with each doll projecting a distinctive personality and a personal history of love and abandonment

At the same gallery she reassembled a dead and cut-up tree, joining its trunk and branches with metal braces and then using cables to hold the whole thing upright. In the gallery, photographs of living trees pushing their way up through city sidewalks surrounded the resurrected one like a silently encouraging chorus.

At the moment Ms. Leonard has unusually high local visibility, with a two-part exhibition at the Hispanic Society of America in Washington Heights, organized under the auspices of the Dia Art Foundation, and another at Dia:Beacon an hour and a half north of the city. They are different from some of her earlier shows: cooler and less intimate, documentary in form, broadly social in scope. At the same they share a sensibility with what has come before, one attuned to realities of constant change, which as often as not means loss.

The Hispanic Society show is made up of separate but related installations, the larger being an ensemble of some 400 photographs that function as a single piece. Titled "Analogue," it is the product of nearly a decade of work and much travel. The earliest pictures are of the Lower East Side, where Ms. Leonard lived in the early 1990s; she began taking them with a 1940s Rolleiflex camera as the neighborhood started gentrifying.

Inexpensive clothing shops, appliances stores and other storefront businesses that she passed every day were closing, made obsolete by brand-name outlets. Sooner, rather than later, a particular world she had taken for granted would be gone.

The awareness of change can transform vision. In her straight-ahead photographs of storefronts, an arrangement of shoes or shrink-wrapped furniture becomes a vanitas still life. A hand-painted shop sign becomes a relic. Over several photographs, we sense that an unnamed neighborhood — Ms. Leonard expanded her field work to include East Harlem, Bedford-Stuyvesant and Crown Heights — is packing up to leave. A city's material culture is doing a vanishing act.

And where is the material going? Back to a version of the world it came from. Many of the cut-rate goods sold in the Lower East Side shops originated in urban sweatshops in China and Pakistan and are eventually passed on as surplus to other poor cities in Africa and Central America.

In the wraparound grid of pictures in "Analogue" we follow recycled clothes from Brooklyn to the city of Kampala in Uganda, where they are sold as new in stores like the Money Is Life House of Garments. Corporate manufacturing shapes distribution just as it enforces uniformity of product. The good news is that the rag trade survives anyway, as circuitous in its routes and idiosyncratic in its patterns as ever.

And it is preserved in Ms. Leonard's photographs. As a series, they owe much to other, earlier artists' series: Atget's pictures of Paris, Ed Ruscha's of Los Angeles, Martha Rosler's of the Bowery. Yet they generate a mood of their own: a muted, unromantic nostalgia for ways of life that Ms. Leonard can barely know except as a recording outsider alert to the universal condition of mutability, networked like a karmic chain.

The mapping of navigational routes is the theme of the second part of the Hispanic Society exhibition, titled "Derrotero," a Spanish word for itinerary. Like the shops in "Analogue," the display is made up of utilitarian things: 15th- to 18th-century charts, hand-drawn by sailors, of the Iberian Peninsula coastline.

Selected by Ms. Leonard from the Hispanic Society's collection, the charts once traced shipping destinations for the same kinds of goods seen in her photographs. But these maps are now functionally obsolete, long since superseded in accuracy by aerial photography. They have themselves become precious goods and, ornamented with painted putti, mythological sea creatures and radiant compass roses, very beautiful ones, encased and labeled for the museum visitor's eye.

It is in the role of a visitor, specifically a tourist, that Ms. Leonard places herself and us in her show at Dia:Beacon, called "You see I am here after all." Like "Analogue" it is a series of photographs but taken by an unknown number of anonymous commercial photographers for use on picture postcards. And in this case all the pictures, nearly 4,000, are of the same subject: Niagara Falls.

For Americans of an earlier day, and maybe even now, Niagara Falls was a scenic destination, a national pilgrimage site, certainly a place to send a greeting from. And its allure is demonstrated by the mural of cards that Ms. Leonard has assembled at Dia:Beacon.

Dating from the early 20th century to just after World War II, they are grouped by types, meaning by variations in perspective: the falls seen from the American side, from the Canadian side, from above or below. Yet despite these variations and the shifts in printing and photography techniques over time, the basic image of Niagara changes very little.

So alike are images within each group that they form an unbroken horizon line. Thousands of cards placed edge to edge create a pleasantly hypnotic, quiltlike pattern of sameness with only subliminal variations, an effect not so different from some of the grouped pictures of African, American or Central American shops in "Analogue."

But literally under the Niagara images — on the reverse side of the postcards reserved for writing — lie many stories, of which we get an occasional glimpse. In some cases the sentiments are of the rote “weather beautiful — wish you were here” sort. Others seem oddly unconnected to the image, as if the writer were jotting a terse, sometimes tense afterthought that leaves a larger narrative hanging.

“You see I am here after all.” After all what? one wonders. Terrible travail? Temporary changes in plans? Resistance on the part of the “you” addressed? And who was that “you”? Who was that “I,” and where was that “here”? We’ll never know.

Four thousand pictures reassure us that change doesn’t happen. Seven handwritten words remind us it happens every minute of every day of every year. Ms. Leonard’s work suggests that art may be the only here there is: it’s real — you can feel that — and it isn’t much.

“Zoe Leonard: Derrotero” continues through April 12 at the Hispanic Society of America, Audubon Terrace, Broadway between 155th and 156th Streets, Washington Heights; (212) 926-2234, hispanicsociety.org. “You see I am here after all, 2008” continues through Sept. 7 at Dia:Beacon, 3 Beekman Street, Beacon, N.Y.; (845) 440-0100, diaart.org.