

Spoon-fed Photos

It must be good if it's Cleveland, right?

BY DAN TRANBERG

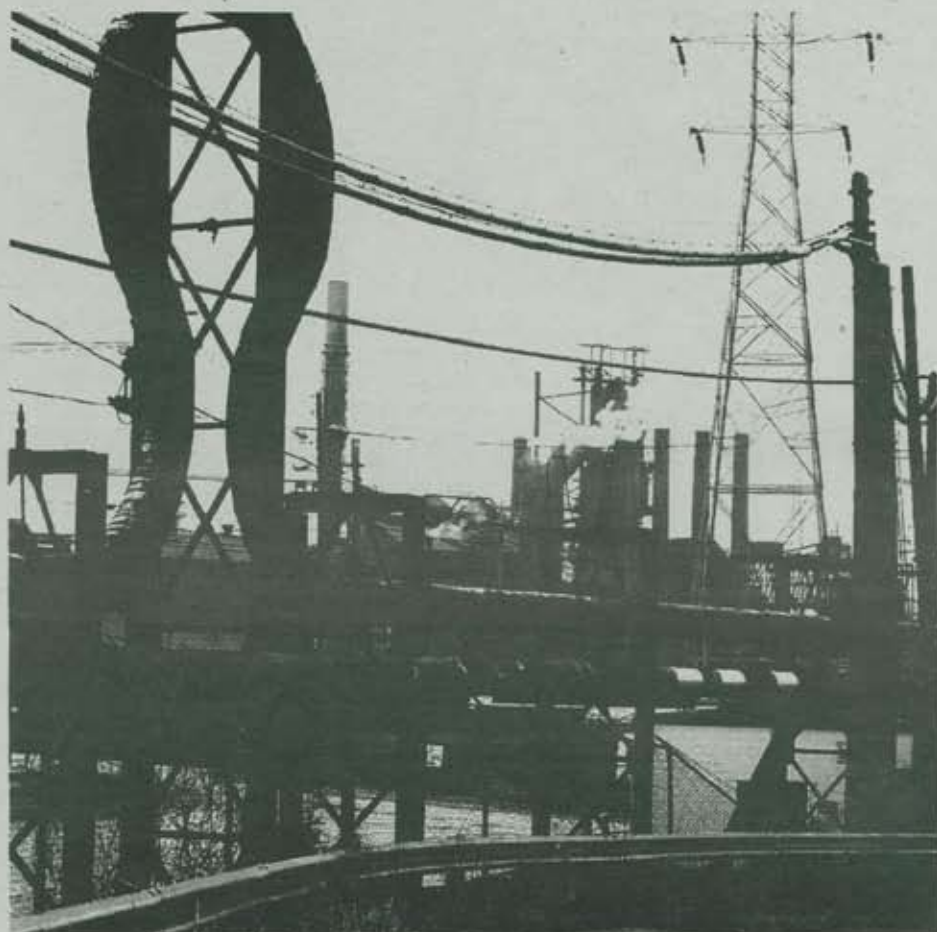
Is it good art or is it just about Cleveland? A show of recently produced color photographs by artist Jeff Brouws, currently on view at the Cleveland Museum of Art, raises the issue of the museum's tendency to assemble shows in order to appeal to a broad local audience. The photographs were created as part of a series (in progress over a period of four years) that the artist calls the *American Cities Project*. The series includes images of Las Vegas, Gary, Buffalo and Detroit, as well as Cleveland. But the current show presents only those of Cleveland, sending a message that locally recognizable images are more accessible and appealing than the true scope of the artist's work. It presumes that museum visitors are more interested in Cleveland than they are in contemporary art.

A few similar curatorial decisions have been made by the museum in recent years. Its acquisition of a painting by American expatriate painter R.B. Kitaj, depicting a baseball player in a Cleveland Indian's uniform, is a good example. It's a horrible painting, not at all characteristic of the artist's work. Kitaj was born in Cleveland but moved to London in the 1960s, where he invented a school of painting called the London School. Fortunately the museum has another, much finer Kitaj in its collection as well. But the painting of the baseball player was obviously acquired because of its hometown subject matter — not a good reason to add a bad painting by a great painter to a relatively small collection of contemporary works.

If the idea is that local visitors want to see art about Cleveland, why not favor Cleveland artists? The work of Cleveland Institute of Art graduate Lissa Bockrath, for example, deals with themes similar to those in Brouws' work but in a far more engaging and original way. Bockrath takes photographs of the city then paints over them to create an expressive tension between the city's most disparate elements. The resulting images are wildly colorful and aggressively energized.

Brouws' work is comparatively conservative and dull. His photographs use simplistic and predictable juxtapositions of industrial and residential, new and old, crowded and barren. And unlike Bockrath, Brouws tends to just leave it at that. As one disgruntled viewer said while viewing Brouws' work: "This is what I see everyday."

Tom Hinson, the museum's curator of contemporary art and photography, sees Brouws' photographs differently: "With a sense of optimism, he presents efforts at revitalization in the city's industrial



Been there, seen it. *Power Lines/LTV Steel Cleveland, Ohio (1995)* by Jeff Brouws.

from 1995 resembles many of the photographs of the American Precisionists, who looked at industrial structures with awe. Brouws is reported to have described himself, upon arriving in Cleveland for the first time in 1995, as "awestruck." Based on his work, it doesn't seem that he was awestruck by "efforts at revitalization," but rather by the sheer boldness the city's gritty imagery. Nowhere in his work will you find an image of Key Tower or Jacobs Field. When new buildings do appear, they are cheap-looking housing developments surrounded by inner-city wastelands. Optimism isn't part of the picture.

Other of Brouws' images capture conventionally unappealing scenes in a simple deadpan style. *Burnt Building, Euclid Avenue, East Cleveland, Ohio* could be mistaken for a snapshot intended to accompany an insurance claim. It shows a portion of a boarded-up brick building with signs of smoke damage. Crisply focused and straightforwardly composed, it offers no signs of either optimism or pessimism; it simply

scene. But there are no signs of the former occupants, and frankly, the image offers no reasons for why the house shouldn't be demolished. The mention of a gated community in the title seems like a vague attempt at making a statement. But what is the artist really saying? Is a gated community in place of ugly housing a good thing or bad?

Like the last show of contemporary photographs mounted at the museum, *Contemporary Dutch Still-Lives*, the Brouws show tries too hard to anticipate the viewers' response to the work. One of the two Dutch photographers featured in that show was Jan van Leeuwen, whose primary focus is self-portraiture. But the photographs selected for that exhibition were limited to his still-lives in order to be aligned with the concurrent exhibition *Still Life Paintings from the Netherlands*. Similarly, Brouws' work has been chiseled down to fit a limited idea of what viewers are able to process.

Rather than creating shows appealing to the most obvious interests of the public, it would be nice to see the museum un