

Charles Johnstone

*Thirty-four Basketball Courts*

January 21 – February 25, 2011

Joseph Bellows Gallery is pleased to present *Charles Johnstone: Thirty-four Basketball Courts*. The exhibition will be on view from January 21 - February 25, 2011. An opening reception with the artist will be held on January 21 (5 – 8 pm).

Even before seeing these photographs, one has a pretty good sense of what they are like. We expect them to be swift and noisy and gritty. Players charging down court, spinning past each other on their way to the basket. The swish of a chain net, or a resonant clang as the ball strikes the rim. More than likely there is a lot of swearing. But these aren't those pictures. To our surprise, Charles Johnstone's basketball courts are quiet, stately, and often graceful.

The photographs Johnstone makes are straightforward and precise. Much of this can be traced to the artists who first inspired his work - he takes his cues from the American photographers of the 1960s and 1970s, whose reserved approach reshaped how we saw the urban landscape. The title of this book is itself a nod towards an earlier homage to another great use of inner-city asphalt - Edward Ruscha's *Thirtyfour Parking Lots*. This slim volume, published in 1967, catalogued acres of empty lots in mechanical style - aerial photographs that would not look out of place in the annual report of a commercial real estate firm. Yet while the serial approach that he admires in Ruscha still holds appeal, and Johnstone has gone to great lengths to make his scenes equally free of people - not just on the court, but even pedestrians who might amble unawares into the frame - their similarities end very quickly. As carefully structured as his photographs are, Johnstone's images project none of the wry sarcasm or the ironic critique of his western mentors. He is, at the end of the day, a sensualist, and his photographs of New York are an affectionate record of the city that Johnstone has called home his entire life.

It is true that some of these photographs tempt us with an imagined game. It is hard not to see a schoolyard, with its bright four-squares, full of children. Autumn leaves dot another court, each like a mark left by an unseen ball as it was dribbled to the hole, the hidden choreography of the last game played. But ultimately, these are reflective and intimate pictures. This is due in part to Johnstone's use of the square frame, whose even borders tightly contain each image, as well as to the regular placement of the tripod, set in the same location for each exposure, just beyond the arc. A comfortable familiarity quickly emerges, and we think we know what to expect from one photograph to the next. Yet there are surprises to be found within the boundaries he has set. Looking again, the backboards begin to appear like marvelous, floating rectangles that seem to hover within the frame. Those painted solid - black or blue or white - are like the missing piece of a puzzle, waiting to be retrieved from where it has fallen under the coffee table and then snapped into place to complete the picture. Others are steel and mesh, but in their utilitarian design they offer small windows into the world beyond that peeks through their checkerboard lattice.

It doesn't take long to recognize that ultimately these photographs aren't really about basketball courts at all, but about the city that surrounds them. Within their self-imposed framework, these photographs deliver a wealth of observation. Rows of windows climbing the façade of an apartment building, each the repeated echo of the backboard below. The busy, arching branches of winter trees tracing across the frame, set against the immobile geometry of the key and the three point line. Shadows dappling the court, giving us the hint of what lies just beyond the edge of the image. Brick and glass and concrete, surfaces and textures that are part of the invisible background as we make our daily rounds, emerging here as part of the vital grid of the city.

Perhaps most important is Johnstone's thoughtful and practiced use of color - something far more easily said than done - to bring a subtle but luminous glow to his images. There is an astonishing transparency to these photographs, and the very real presence of the warm afternoon light when they were made. These photographs are nothing like our expectations, and in their place we find a rich and layered world, as seen from center court.

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For more information please contact:

[info@josephbellows.com](mailto:info@josephbellows.com)