



INSTAGRAM POP UP SHOW

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The Harvard Crimson

"Seeing one's creative work on display in a gallery is typically a privilege reserved for professional artists. But for two weeks, the lobby of the University Place Gallery in Harvard Square gave many amateur photographers a brief moment in the limelight as part of the show "GRAM IT: Instagram Pop Up Show." This exhibit featured images taken with the popular mobile phone app Instagram, which allows users to quickly snap photos, stylize them with filters, and share them on the web. "GRAM IT," which closed Wednesday, was organized by the Cambridge Art Association. According to Erin Becker, the executive director of the Association and curator of the show, the motivating question was whether these quickly and casually snapped images can have a lasting effect on public memory. "How could we take Instagram on its own out of the box and put it on the wall?" Becker says.

The idea for this exhibit came to Becker over the summer, when she saw a photo spread that interested her in the New York Times Magazine. "They had put out a call not to professional photographers, but to New York City residents who used Instagram to take pictures of rooftop summer parties," she says. Becker and the team at the Association arranged the photos in a temporary gallery space into five rows of square prints, grouped roughly by theme. Subjects ranged from abstract, stylized forms to naturalistic landscapes and close-up shots of everyday objects. The display was also unique in that it encouraged audience participation. At a reception for the show, viewers were invited to affix heart-shaped stickers below the images they liked, intended to mimic the online phenomenon of "liking" a piece of digital content.

To arrange work into an exhibition is to make people take notice of it, and while it may be easy to brush off Instagram as a popular entertainment device, the exhibit suggests that there are reasons to take a closer look at it. As a tool for capturing images, Instagram embodies a bizarre mix of dualities. It is intimate, used to document unique moments of people's daily lives, and yet homogenizing in the way it makes every user's images look alike. Though it is cutting-edge consumer technology, it is nostalgic in the way it simulates the look of analog photos. And while the images created by Instagram exist online in perpetuity, they are ephemeral in the way they are captured and quickly forgotten by users after being shared with friends online. While the Association originally considered hiring a jurist to select works for its exhibit, it decided to keep the spirit of the activity truly open to the community and to accept all submissions for the display. Such a system is a radical departure from the selection method more commonly found in professional museums. The majority of individuals who submitted to this show were not professional photographers, although some were artists in other mediums. "We kind of spun it as, 'Become an instant artist,'" the Association assistant director Cory Shea says. The call for entries went out through flyers and online. "We kept it egalitarian," Becker says. "You get an interesting slice of the population with Instagram." The individuals who take photos and share them online are simply people who have a bit of media savvy.

Shea, who is a professional photographer herself, says that the difference between the work of amateur and professional photographers, as well as that of other kinds of visual artists, is one of concentrated intention and execution of individual techniques. "The works around us are premeditated. [The artists] thought consciously of every stroke they made," she says, gesturing at the paintings hung on the walls of the University Place Gallery. "With Instagram you capture a moment and it's more, well, 'instant,'" Shea says. In the age of accessibility, Instagram has made it possible to take photos that are artistically appealing, but its products have yet to be validated as artistic expressions in their own right, they say. For Shea and Becker, Instagram has the potential to become an accepted art form."

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