

...Practice... | Photographs by Gregory Krum
By Miranda Lash

In his solo show of photographs, Gregory Krum takes us through three chapters on the nature of belief. Focusing exclusively on inanimate objects: plants, dust, tombstones, and furniture, Krum explores how things can communicate stories of human conviction and faith. “Here is to all unprovable truths,” he writes, “bravely fueled solely by belief.”

The title for his exhibition is a conscious homage to Gerhard Richter and *The Daily Practice of Painting*, Richter’s collected writings and interviews from 1962 to 1993. In Richter’s *Practice*, which Krum refers to as a kind of “bible,” Richter refused adherence to God or any ideology. Instead Richter looked to art as the uniquely human act in which we make sense of the world and “give shape” to that sense. In this way, “[art] is like the religious search for God...For belief (thinking and interpreting the present and the future) is our most important characteristic.”ⁱⁱ In his photographs Krum simultaneously explores his own beliefs (found through the act of artistic creation), and the beliefs of others, as they are expressed in objects left behind.

In his first grouping of work, Krum addresses (in his own words): “experiments, frustrations, homages, reactions, and obsessions each germane either by depiction or impetus. Ultimately: devotions to an endeavor.” Amongst the grey tones of this first cluster, the phrase “I Chose to Climb” calls out from a tombstone epitaph. Located at Zermatt, at the base of the Matterhorn, the carved words speak to one man’s indomitable dedication to reach the top. The enormity of his task before the alp transitions to Krum’s photographs of a seemingly galactic landscape of stars. These stars are deceitful, however, and relate to Krum’s belief that “you shouldn’t trust that the picture is about what is being photographed.” Humbly nodding to the star field drawings of Vija Celmins, his photographs of dust and sand from his bedroom twinkle into a dark expanse. Playing with scale, they remind us that the word “infinitesimal” – the definition of tiny and small – ultimately has its root in the infinite, or the incomprehensible. The last pair of images in this group, taken with the photographer’s blackberry phone, contains intimate still lifes imbued with a ghostly sense of significance. Krum’s *Cherifa Tree*, like his mountainside tombstone, alludes to beliefs held unto peril and death. *Cherifa* (also known as *Anima Bakalia*) was the Moroccan lover and housekeeper of the novelist and playwright Jane Bowles. Recalling their relationship, writer and composer Paul Bowles (Jane’s husband) recalled how *Cherifa* used charms (and perhaps poison) to control her lover. According to Bowles, *Cherifa* placed a talisman of blood and pubic hair under a “spy plant,” asking the plant to “talk to Jane and tell her that I’m in charge here.”ⁱⁱⁱ Jane Bowles never relinquished her commitment to *Cherifa*, and even upon her death, *Cherifa* insisted the plant not be moved.

In his second cluster of images, Krum turns to quiet moments in homes. Silent yet subtly symbolic, his domestic still lifes reveal telling choices in possessions and lifestyles. In *Beside* (Anonymous), the title gently points us to a selection of books along the shelves and table, related to art, design, and Alcoholics Anonymous. Krum explains that he is interested in “interiors that explore objects as containers of meaning, and the extent to which all manmade objects are an act of communication.”

Citing photographers Zoe Leonard and Shannon Ebner as artistic influences, Krum follows Roland Barthes’s dictum that “use never does anything but shelter meaning.”ⁱⁱⁱⁱ His careful attention to objects and their placement is no accident. As a former director of the New York design shop Moss for five years, and current director of retail at The Shop at the Cooper-Hewitt, National Design Museum, the scrutiny and contemplation of objects has been an ongoing part of Krum’s professional practice. In his photographs, he delves into the narratives behind even seemingly casually placed things: a hat resting on a chair back, a plate of tangerine peels. Versed in the tradition of Dutch old master paintings, he playfully cites the tradition of the *vanitas*, the reliable portrait of mortality, with his diminutive bleached skull resting on the mantle. Achievements of human creativity (the Memphis style light-stand by Ettore Sottsass) are contrasted with the inevitable decay of all things man-made and otherwise, symbolized in his bright orange rinds. Krum’s own belief in the importance of the creative act is highlighted in *Cork Board*, a montage of one individual’s personal inspirations spread across a bulletin board.

Krum's third group of images takes viewers to a different culture entirely. From his travels through Bali, Indonesia, Krum chose twenty-four photographs of devotional offerings, each image pinned to the wall in a grid format. These offerings contain flowers, laboriously arranged by Balinese in degradable trays of coconut leaves. Presented on a daily basis in locations as varied as doorways, streets, under trees, and in bodies of water, these offerings provide a means to show gratitude to the spirits. Krum echoes the rhythm of this ritual in the repetition of this isolated motif in his photographs. He interprets these objects as conveying a visual language of their own, as each kind of gift, whether it is flowers, rice, soy sauce, or mints, contains a specific meaning. He compares these offerings' colors to that of the Abstract Expressionist painters, relating their composition on the ground to the gestures of Wilhelm de Kooning and Jackson Pollock.

In 1982 Richter famously asserted, "Art is the highest form of hope."^{iv} In doing so he simultaneously proclaimed his optimism for the power of art, and reiterated the necessity of faith to artistic practice. Krum considers this exhibition about "things that become true only if you believe in them," referring as much to his own art-making as to the delicate Balinese offerings, or his interior inhabitants' sense of taste. Though his photographs do not directly depict any individual, a tapestry of human beliefs is made palpable through their material traces.

Miranda Lash is the curator of modern and contemporary art for the New Orleans Museum of Art. She received her B.A. from Harvard University and her M.A. in Art History from Williams College, where she was named a Clark Fellow.

- ⁱ Gerhard Richter, *The Daily Practice of Painting: Writings 1962-1993*, ed. Hans-Ulrich Obrist, trans. David Britt (Cambridge: MIT Press with Anthony d'Offay Gallery, London, 1995), 10, 12.
- ⁱⁱ Gena Dagal Caponi, ed., *Conversations with Paul Bowles* (Jackson, Mississippi: University Press of Mississippi, 1993).
- ⁱⁱⁱ Roland Barthes, *The Eiffel Tower and Other Mythologies*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1979).
- ^{iv} Richter, *Daily Practice of Painting*, 100.