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Wagner Works Make Lasting Impression

by Kenneth Baker
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Some years ago, Catherine Wagner began to explore a format implicit in photography: the typological survey.

An arresting recent example appears in "New Work: Photography and Sculpture" at the Stephen Wirtz Gallery.

"Reparations Typology I" (2008) consists of nine images of customized splints made to support recovery from hand and forearm injuries such as Wagner herself once experienced.

Wagner shot each one under soft, even light against a featureless black ground. We know the devices' true scale from their function, but the photographs somehow suspend it.

The objects thus bring to mind the context-bereft oddities discovered in some Surrealist photographs. As the ensemble's title affirms, Wagner also has in mind, as the Surrealists of the 1920s frequently did, the unremarked signatures of war and its aftermath in the everyday social landscape.

The visual impact and formal elegance of Wagner's images underscore the most disquieting and obvious thing about them: We do not know what the absence of the splints' wearers signifies.

It might evoke the liberty of complete recovery, as the objects' trophylike quality encourages, or death, as the enveloping blackness insinuates.

Either way, Wagner has shifted the aesthetics of product photography into a psychological key seldom attained before.

