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Exposing The Flip Side Of Switzerland:
A Surreal Eye Focuses on the Swiss

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PHOTOGRAPHY VIEW / by Vicky Goldberg

SWITZERLAND IS A COUNTRY designed by God for the maintenance and upkeep of calenders and picture postcards. Haeving been a neutral nation since the early 16th century, today it prodigally dispenses chocolates, army knives, cheeses full of holes, and chirruping clocks. The little republic of snow and yodels and numbered accounts is beautiful, staid, quaint and blissfully peaceful.

Well, maybe.

Michael von Graffenried, a Swiss photographer whose second show in this country is at the Witkin Gallery (415 West Broadway) through Aug. 23, has a rather different outlook on his native land. First of all, he finds it amusing. Also, though he is evidently fond of his compatriots and looks kindly on many of their foibles, he can't help noticing that the country is full of guns, rats, counterterrorism measures, beggars and signs of progress that no one seems to have assimilated. There isn't a good snowy mountain in this entire exhibition, but heaps of rue, a way smile or two, and extensive evidence that the heart of Switzerland no longer beats solely beneath hand-embroidered blouses and bankers' suits.

To beginn with the guns : in four of the first six color photographs, men walk about with rifles. One is a soldier on the street, watched with fascination by a passing toddler and his mother, one a cemetery watchman wearing a Walkman ans he makes his rounds. The third is a civilian out for Sunday outing, the fourth another ordinary citizen walking down the street a fex steps in front of a brass band.

And there are others. Men with pistoles subdue another man during counterterrorisme training. A line of soldiers in camouflage plods within a few feet of a farmer who stolidly pitches hay without turning to watch. "The Rat Hunter of Bern" comes up out of a sewer smiling triumphantly and holding aloft his rifle in one hand and a dead rat in the other. The N.R.A. would eat his heart out.

John McPhee once explained these bistling guns, in his book "Place de la Concorde Suisse." Swiss men serve in the Army for 30 years, retraining regularly; 10 percent of the population is in military service. They stay armed in order to prevent a war and erect monuments to generals who manage not to fight. Citizens keep their guns at home so they can mobilize fast - 600,000 aussault rifles in broom closets and cupboards. According to Mr. Mcphee, "Communist Swiss soldiers keep rifles and machine guns at home. It is said that this is not dangerous for political purposes; it is dangerous only for the wife."

In Mr. von Graffenried's viewfinder, peace in Switzerland seems to be slightly rattled. An Army tank demonstrates ist might by crunching up an automobile. A policeman wipes egg off his face after being effectively targeted. A man in carnival costume, sporting the mask of some fantasy insect with huge green eyes, walks past a wall where graffiti say, "We Do It Our Way!" and "Dreck!"

Like an engineering inspector from Oz, Mr. von Graffenried finds evidence everywhere that the infrastructure of daily life in Switzerland is built of unlikely materials. Swiss photographers have been known to be highly skeptical, usually of other cultures. Rene Burri's photographs of NASA's enterprises are majestically improbable, spooky and forlorn. The first coherent photographic statement on disaffection in America was made by the Swiss-born Robert Frank in the late 1950's.

Mr. von Graffenried has none of the rawness or angst of Robert Frank and no pioneering style, but merely a good eye (which is, after all, quite a lot). In an era when disaffection has already become a popular stance, he commands a perfectly fine and serviceable reporter's or street photographer's style. But form is not the major issue; content is all. He works fast with a 35mm camera, photographs in both color and black and white (the latter with high contrasts and a certain degree of graininess), and thrives on the inconsistencies life throws in his direction.

His alertness to the humor available in the daily round of things – a doorman lugging a mammoth cutout of a woman in a bikini, a fireman who urinates on a fire rather than using a hose – places him in the tradition of Robert Doisneau and Elliott Erwitt, the two men who first gave funny photographs a decent reputation. Humor has not been highly regarded in photography or other arts until recently; it was considered suitable mainly for low art like cartoons and illustrations made to please the masses. Pop Art began to redefine the terms of respectability in the 1960's, in part by making substantial paintings of what are referred to as the comics, and visual artists of the 70's and 80's found humor a useful adjunct to social commentary. Mr. von Graffenried doesn't pretend to be a high artist, but those who do have made it perfectly possible to take him and others like him seriously.

His own social commentary depends in part on the mild surrealism that permeates modern life as haves collide with have-nots and "progress" with tradition. The camera is peculiarly suited to memorializing the routine meetings of umbrellas and sewing machines on dissecting tables in the 20th century, for these encounters are often fleeting and become especially pungent when stopped in their tracks and separated from the distracting flow of life. What is required of the photographer is an eye for incongruity; fast, fast reaction times; and an intuitive sense of framing.

Switzerland, like many another country, is beset by progress. Moves have been made to restrict foreign purchases of land as development grows out of hand. The opportunities for visual disjunction are rife. Mr. Von Graffenried finds a one-legged beggar sitting before an as for postal checking accounts that says "It's good to have one." In another picture, a horse-drawn carriage tries to cross a road, but the horse rears up because its way is blocked by solar-

powered racing cars. A cow in a dairy gazes out at us across the computers that regulate ist life.

Many Americans think of Switzerland as orson Welles did in "The Third Man": "In Italy for 30 years under the Borgias, they had warfare, terror, murder, bloodshed - but they produced Michelangelo, Leonardo da Vinci and the Renaissance. In Switzerland they have brotherly love, 500 years of democracy and peace, and what did they produce? The cockoo clock." But if the Swiss lagged behind the Renaissance, the modern world has obviously caught up with them. In two books, mr. Von Graffenried has documented Swiss drug abusers, poorly treated immigrants, half-nude female boxers, and toxic wastes, as well as children under treatment for cancer, happy nudists colonies, and army camaraderie.

The real international style today is not an artistic movement but civilization and ist discontents, which tend to look much the same in most places. The chief differences between the country in these pictures and many another we've seen more often is that the nation in these photographs is a little bit funnier and a lot better armed.