

Chic to Chic

'Photography From
the Beginning'
Robert Miller Gallery
41 East 57th Street
Through February 8

Though its ailing owner remains nominally in charge, losing two high-profile staffers, director John Chelm and photo czar Howard Read, early last fall dealt a serious blow to the image and authority of the Robert Miller Gallery. But image repair is in full effect these days, at least in the photo department. Miller's new department head, Olivier Renaud-Clément, formerly a partner in Wooster Gardens and a private dealer, has organized a celebration of the gallery's 20th year in the photo biz that's clearly designed to cement the credibility of the new regime.

As splashy as it is serious, the show continues Read's tradition of ultrachic connoisseurship (the stable of photographers and important photo estates, as well as the extensive historical holdings, are nearly all his holdovers) while sharing it up with spectacular material from two European galleries. The result is an eccentric but instructive crash course in both curatorial taste and photographic excellence.

Balancing his own survey with self-contained shows chosen by gallerists Alain Pavlot (Paris) and Rudolf Kicken (Cologne and Berlin) from their own inventories, Renaud-Clément orchestrates an exhibition of almost operatic range and ambition. The show's 178 photographs—from a shimmering 1845 daguerreo-type to a pair of spanking-new, computer-generated interior views by Craig Kalpakjian—aren't exactly reliable as history, but nearly all the medium's masters are in the house, along with a substantial number of brilliant oddballs and unknowns. And the salon-style installation is full of smart juxtapositions, like Pavlot's pairing of Brassai and Brancusi, where a firework's spiraling corkscrew echoes the glowing *Endless Column* as if in a dream. I'm planning to move in for the duration.

—VINCE ALETTI