

PHOTOGRAPHY REVIEW

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In matters of their perspective

Photographers serve realities differently

By Mark Feeney, Globe Staff | August 3, 2010

CONCORD — Part of what makes a painting a painting, regardless of whether it's abstract or representational, is that when we see it we know it doesn't present a slice of objective reality. Part of what makes a photograph a photograph, regardless of whether Walker Evans took it or a 6-year-old with a cellphone, is that we do assume it presents a slice of objective reality.

"Seeing Is Believing," which runs at the Concord Art Association through Aug. 12, wonders what happens when we don't necessarily recognize a photograph as a photograph or when a photographer chooses subject matter that can turn reality and artifice inside out.

The show consists of the work of nine photographers. In the case of Cynthia Greig's work and Pamela Ellis Hawkes's, it's reading that's believing. Without explanatory texts, you'd swear Greig's "Representation" series are drawings and Hawkes's "Surrogate Reality" series are etchings. Greig takes everyday objects (books, stacked cups), paints them white, outlines them in charcoal, photographs them on color film, and prints the results. Hawkes arranges drawings or prints with three-dimensional objects on a table against a dark background. The pictures have a visual lushness that contrasts with the parched, Minimalist look of Greig's work.

John Chervinsky uses dark backgrounds, too, for his quite-marvelous "Experiments in Perspective" series. These works are like mathematical equations made manifest, jokes that have theorems for punch lines. Placing a pair of blackboards at right angles to each other, he uses chalk lines and various common objects (a clock, a glass and pitcher, a light bulb) to create Euclidean still lifes that are at once elegant, austere, and playful.

Chervinsky wants us to see abstract reasoning. Jim Dow wants to alert us to the vagaries of space. He captures a Fenway Park that's deserted and defiantly horizontal. The latter condition is much more striking than the absence of fans or players. After all, don't we usually think of Fenway in vertical terms: light towers, the arc of a home run, the Green Monster's height? Flatness is the defining characteristic of "Sign" and "Political Poster of Evita Peron, Buenos Aires." Combining delicate, faded colors with the absence of depth, they could be Pompeian wall paintings. Conversely, "World's Largest Holstein Cow, Near Salem, ND" (fiberglass, not flesh and blood) and "Red Apple Café, US 59 and 200, Mahomen, MN" are all about depth.

Yeats asked how can we know the dancer from the dance. Andy Freeberg, in his "Guardians" series, wonders how we can tell museum guard from museum art. The stillness of who sits in the chair can rival the stillness of what hangs on the wall. Or so it would seem in the Russian museums where Freeberg shot his very attractive color photographs. The attendant in "Statues of Antonius Pius, Youth and Caryatid, State Hermitage Museum" is herself a kind of living statue. Only the fact she's in color, as opposed to marmoreal white, indicates her flesh-and-blood status.

The question of art and life also concerns Christopher Sims, albeit in a very different way. His "Theater of War" photographs show mock Iraqi and Afghan villages built as training facilities in the United States. Sims's simple,

straightforward approach allows the issue of art vs. reality to speak for itself.

Dave Jordano and Oscar Palacio also look at military environments. Jordano's photographs of an abandoned Air Force base in Illinois have a vivid, very nearly unreal color. They show emptied rooms, littered with debris, their walls covered (or, rather, uncovered) with candy-bar-thick swatches of peeling paint. The sense of decay is so lush as to seem almost exhilarating. The gallery notes speak of the images as illustrating the decline of US power. Well, OK, sure, why not — but that seems like a bit of unnecessary heavy lifting. Seen just as arresting images of amazing spaces, Jordano's pictures work just fine. The contrast between martial past and mundane present defines Palacio's "History Re-Visited" series. There are three images from it here, all showing Gettysburg: the mouth of a cannon, a broken-down rail fence, and what looks to be a concrete tree stump. None is dilapidated, like Jordano's rooms (not even the fence). Yet neither does any have a sense of grandeur and mystery.

For Thomas Birtwistle, seeing is examining. He takes an amusingly clinical approach to a very nonclinical subject, fairs in Maine. The produce in "Tomatoes, Union Fair," he presents as if they were so many yellow and red jewels on white plastic trays (the poor man's dark velvet). The ribbon-winning fruits and vegetables in "Exhibition Hall, Piscataquis Valley Fair" each get their own cubby in an open-sided cabinet. They could be scientific specimens on display. Except that, thanks to the way Birtwistle has shot them, scientific specimens don't look this colorful or tasty.

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