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Mirror, Mirror

The world is represented and subverted in "Staging Reality."

by Robin Rice



Staging Reality: Photography from the West Collection at SEI Rosenwald-Wolf Gallery, University of the Arts, 333 S. Broad St., continued across the street

in Hamilton Hall lobby, 320 S. Broad St., 215-717-6480.

"Staging Reality," the Rosenwald-Wolf Gallery's post-apocalyptic show of work by 25 international photographers, isn't exactly about the real tinsel under the fake tinsel immortalized by Samuel Goldwyn. It's less heartwarming than tinsel and yet it exercises a real (if that adjective retains any usefulness in this context) fascination. Organized by Lee Stoetzel from work in the West Collection at SEI, a unique corporate art collection in King of Prussia, this show tells us: "Reality can be faked," as well as, "Artifice is today's reality."

By joining the concept of photo-fabricated reality (illusions as commonplace and potentially as hokey as people posing with their heads protruding into a painted sideshow scene) with the documentation of the functional fabricated environments we inhabit, Stoetzel homes in on a widespread and underanalyzed motif in today's art. In spite of much talk and art-making about it, our environment is not natural. Almost everything that we see and hear and touch is constructed. The juicy, cozy, pungent, abrasive, visceral aura of our shared humanity is deliberately, perhaps wisely, obscured by devices as common as clothing and as crass as those cardboard scented trees hanging in taxicabs.

The first photograph one encounters in the Rosenwald-Wolf Gallery is a mural -- maybe 10 feet by 15 feet-- ink-jet printed on vinyl and mounted on a curved wall. Abstractly, Christoph Draeger's red-accented rollicking composition reminds one of a peasant festival painted by Brueghel, as in Pieter the Elder. But the party's over in Catastrophe #2. The panorama of collapsed girders and crumpled machinery against a dust-clouded sky might seem an obvious reference to the events of 9/11, but this picture was made in 1999 as part of a decade-long series. And it is completely staged in miniature. Close examination reveals subtle anomalies in scale. Impressive but not charming; not amusing. Nevertheless, this

catastrophe has a kind of beauty which is easier to acknowledge because there are no fake dead bodies among the twisted human artifacts. They are literally wrecked toys.

A different wasteland photographed by Joachim Koester, *Beechey Island #2*, exists on the earth, not a tabletop. The flat blue and gray landscape scattered with fragments of weathered wood gives way to icy water bordering a horizon of ice-basted hills. This is an ecological disaster perpetrated by humans in conjunction with nature. In a more poetic vein, Didier Massard's *Cliffs*, apparently constructed of cork, overlook an obviously false but alluring glittering sea.

Lois Renner's *Gerüst (Scaffolding)* is convincing as a white-on-white antiseptic storage area for artists' canvases, until you spot the enormous Bic-type cigarette lighter on the floor. The photograph is art but the art in the photograph is not. Oliver Boberg's *Unterführung (Underpass)* is even more convincing in its evocation of a slightly grubby deserted ramp in some soulless urban nook. The sense of order and delicacy in textures effectively blinds most viewers to the fact that a red-and-white striped barrier is a soda straw. Does the play element in deciphering works like this also blind us to their accuracy in representing contemporary civilization?

Among all the disasters, sterile buildings, and carefully controlled nature in the large exhibition, only eight people are depicted. Four tiny ones can be spotted in Walter Niedermayr's expansive diptych of an airport in Iceland (*Courchevel I*). In Gabriel Orozco's *Vestidos Flotando (Floating Clothing)* four people chat in chairs under a white tent and clotheslines strung with brightly colored children's clothes that catch the sunlight. Dusty eroded tree roots twine below. Pleasing as this genre scene is, it seems out of tune with works like Vicky Sambunaris' windowless *Untitled (Blue Building)* in New Jersey flanked by three sapling trees and three fire plugs, something you might expect from David Lynch or, perhaps, David Graham.

The surreality of a life-sized close-up is exploited in Orit Raff's *Untitled (Freezer)*, desperately in need of defrosting. The quirky human touch in Tim Davis' *Q-Z*, with aging manila file folders, also life-sized, is evident in Tokihiro Sato's long nighttime exposure of a glass building filled with flashlight scribbles.

It's axiomatic that art is a mirror. Just as a comb-over draws attention to baldness, advertising and polemical art often unintentionally reveal their makers' weaknesses. The photographs in "Staging Reality" are not polemical (though it's intriguing to remember that they were borrowed from a corporate art collection), but many depict worlds of chaos or emptiness. Nevertheless, each is visually elegant, suggesting potential richness, magic and even playfulness in the most dehumanized, built environment. This is a provocative mirror.

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