

Neapolitan

Review: Simulated reality

Museum photography exhibit invites study

By DONALD MILLER, Special to the Daily News
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Photography has added so much to art: Nearly every major artist has profited from photography since it was invented in France in 1839.

The term "trompe l'oeil," French for "fool the eye" and traditionally reserved for painting closely simulating reality, should now be extended to include a curious form of photography being explored in the exhibition "Staging Reality" at the Naples Museum of Art. The works come from the West Collection, a gathering of 2,000 objects for 1,200 employees of the SEI Corp., a banking, trust and investment firm located near Philadelphia.

Little or nothing in this show is quite what it appears to be at first glance. And in a sense of fun, the museum's labels encourage viewers to study the photographs first before reading about them. The exhibition means much more this way because it invites the viewer to determine what is going on before satisfying his or her curiosity. This suggestion also means the viewer must exhibit some degree of awareness and interpretation before being told anything. These are the first steps in understanding art and lead to further connoisseurship.

"Staging Reality" offers the work of some 20 photographers from around the world who have different



Photo courtesy West Collection

Peter Garfield, "Mobile Home (Chalet)," 1999, C-Print



Photo courtesy West Collection

Lothar Baumgarten, "Verlorene Fruchte (Lost Fruits)," 1969, C-print



Photo courtesy West Collection

Kim Kever, "Eight Months," 1997, cibachrome

One of the show's strongest and largest photographs, "Mangrove," 2003, by Frenchman Didier Massard, appears to be a dense and shadowy swamp scene with a banyan sending down thick aerial roots into the water. Assuming that, the viewer will be surprised to learn this is instead a carefully and ingeniously contrived miniature scene built by hand on a table and then photographed by the artist.

Somewhat similar is Kim Keever's "Buried Dreams," color photographs of imaginary marine grottoes he builds inside aquariums, then adding water and a bright penetrating light.

Completely different in approach is Orit Raff's "Untitled (Freezer)," 1999, that looks familiar but resembles snowy tundra. Then you realize you are looking into a well-frosted refrigerator compartment that could be an Arctic wasteland. While "Mangrove" is a construction, "Freezer" is a subject that almost everyone has experienced. But both images lift the viewer's imagination from the mundane to a higher creative sensibility.

That is what is so engrossing about these works and this exhibition. There is a sense of the unknown that intrigued minds will want to fathom image by image. Almost all of the photographs give back more than what appears on their surfaces. But coming from so many different artists, the images vary in their impact.

Objects that are meant to seem of expected size but are revealed to actually be miniature subjects blown up to standard size have a limited hold on the imagination. Once the viewer marvels at several photographers' painstaking efforts in this mode, he is often left wanting more stimulation. Fortunately, it is here.

For sheer minimalist beauty there are few objects surpassing Craig Kalpakjian's "Corridor II," 1999, that he created entirely from computer software and his imagination. Its power lies in the photographer's use of shadows. They give this seemingly sterile interior its mysterious quality, as though something were about to happen. Although hung horizontally, the print can also be visualized vertically without any loss of enjoyment.

Similarly, Bill Albertini in "Whiteroom," 1997-98, offers two versions of the same chamber with different furniture. We wonder about them, see their interconnectedness and then learn from the label that both photographs have imaginary subjects: The realistic looking room and furniture do not exist, even

though the red furniture in both is strangely conjoined and fits together. That shouldn't be a surprise in an exhibition like this.

Most of the photographers are unfamiliar to me except German Lothar Baumgarten, whom I have met. He is known for his study of the Brazilian Yanomami Indians, threatened by civilization, and "The Tongue of the Cherokee," 1988, a permanent Carnegie Museum of Art installation honoring Cherokee chief Sequoia, who incredibly invented a living alphabet although he could not read English. Soon after Americans force-marched Cherokee tribes from their Georgia homelands to Oklahoma in the early 19th century, the tribes communicated by newspapers printed in the new alphabet. Baumgarten etched Sequoia's letters into a glass skylight over the Hall of Sculpture.

I found them more inspiring and emphatic than Baumgarten's early photograph of "Forlorn Fruit," 1969, at the Naples Museum. This is presumably a simple scene of odd red shapes looking like elves' caps borne on straws in a woody patch. It does in its way suggest the wonder of finding strange natural flora such as mushrooms or wildflowers but lacks the dynamism of later projects.

Vik Muniz also fools the eye a bit with two 1997 "Cloud" studies resembling a cat and a teapot. We learn they are not clouds at all but clumps of cotton wool. The odd thing is these prints look like cotton even before one knows they are not clouds. Muniz has also gone on to larger subjects such as blending Henry Clay Frick family photographs with recent photographs of people posing as though they belonged on the Frick staff, down to a cook carving potatoes and a bit of hanky-panky in the woods. Muniz is fascinated by the interplay between the original image and simulated ones.

Joseph Bartscherer searched the English countryside for a year trying to capture scenes that seem as though taken decades ago, as though one could return to the past. And in a totally opposite and explosive direction, Peter Garfield blasts his miniature houses into the air in context with actual landscapes and dwellings. But even that is not as bizarre as Todd Hido, who photographs real houses at night with a random light or two, turning the viewer into a would-be peeping Tom.

Museum director John Hallmark Neff has again brought a thought-provoking exhibition of photography to Naples. Put "Staging Reality" on your must-see list.