

Can you trust what you see?

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Pulse Writer

Visiting the contemporary-photography exhibit at Mason Gross Galleries in New Brunswick can be disconcerting, even surreal.

As one becomes acquainted with a seemingly straightforward image -- a photo of a gas pump or a rest stop, for instance -- it seems to grow, change and adopt subversive elements.



Is there more than meets the eye in "Starmyri"? It's one of the pieces in "Staging Reality: Photography from the West Collection," now at Mason Gross Galleries.

Didier Massard's photo of a gargantuan tree in an undulating field drenched in a golden light at first registers as a typical landscape.

But the perspective of the photo, called "Summer Tree," is confusing. Is the tree really that humongous? The trees around it are considerably smaller. The bales of hay in the field appear to be the size of pebbles. Has the photographer manipulated the image (and the viewer) by fusing a close-up photo of the top of a tree with a landscape?

In another Massard image, "Spring Tree," what seems to be a tall, eerily lit tree could be a subterranean growth. We're not sure.

The viewer cannot arrive at a facile conclusion about any of the photos. Vik Muniz's black-and-white photos "The Snail" and "Puppy" appear to depict scudding clouds, but they also could be tufts of cotton.

It all looks familiar, legible, but these first impressions are often wrong.

The exhibit, "Staging Reality: Photography from the West Collection," is drawn from a private art collection. It is part of *Mason Gross Presents*, a year-round performing- and fine-arts series at Rutgers University. The show, running through June 13, features three rooms lined with large photographs, most of which are in color, and most of which are uninhabited.

These questions about reality and how it is represented in the show are especially interesting to consider because photography has generally been viewed as a purely technical practice -- an honest record, even -- since its introduction in 1839. It has earned a reputation as an unbiased, unfiltered representation of reality. It has credibility.

These issues of fabrication and alternate realities arise in painting (Salvador Dali's melting watches, for instance) and film (pick your special-effects sequence or any actor's air-brushed bum), yet it is wholly acceptable. What happens when the "democratic" medium of photography becomes coy, subverts expectations and manipulates its viewers?

For instance, "Mobile Home (Chalet)," by Peter Garfield, pictures a house in the sky. The photo, shot from below, also shows a slice of ground and rooted buildings below the flying bungalow.

The house looks as if it has been ripped from the jaws of the earth and hurled into the sky. Is it hurtling through space or making its way to the ground? Maybe that is not even the question: The question is, is this image even plausible? What is going on?

What is reality? This is a relevant question, of course, in an age of so-called "reality" TV.

What is authentic? What or who can we trust -- The New York Times? The Roman Catholic Church? Enron? The U.S. government?

What can we trust when we can't even believe our own eyes?

The opening reception for "Staging Reality" is from 6 to 8 p.m. June 5 at the gallery.

"Staging Reality," 10 a.m.-4 p.m. Monday-Friday, to June 13, Mason Gross Galleries, Civic Square, 33 Livingston Ave., New Brunswick. Free. (732) 932-2222, Ext. 798, or www.masongross.rutgers.edu.

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