

Reality with a personal mark

Photos tinted by commentary

By Kyle MacMillan
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Social Landscape," the latest offering at Gallery Sink, is aptly titled. Rather than straightforward portraits, these photographs tend to focus on the interactions of groups of people, hence the notion of "social." And even if only one person is pictured, the context, or "landscape," inevitably intervenes in an important way.

And those landscapes vary radically from a swank Edwardian party at the Frick Museum on the Upper East Side of Manhattan to an African-American church in Brooklyn to a street corner at 14th Avenue and Broadway in Denver.

More than 70 black-and-white and color images are included in this soon-to-end exhibition by photographers ranging from such nationally known figures as Larry Fink and Thomas Roma to up-and-comer Suzie S. Lee to Denver local Joel Dallenbach.

Virtually all the 14 participants are very involved in the pressing vanguard issues of contemporary photography, including provocative dialogues between documentation and commentary and photojournalism and fine art.

These photographers seek to frankly convey reality. Little has been romanticized, dressed up or glossed over. Even when depicting the socializing elites of New York, Fink undercuts the glamour with a pointed sense of the vulnerable humanity common to everyone, rich or poor.

But the reality in these images is almost never disengaged or strictly objective. Even the man-on-the-street work of Roma and Dallenbach is layered with tell-tale sociological and psychological undercurrents.

Most of the other photographers intervene even further. While still interested in conveying a truthful reality, it is nonetheless a reality filtered through their distinctive sensibility and aesthetic.

One of the places where this clash of the worlds of documentation and commentary most vividly can be seen is in the ambiguous and often uneasy intersection of what is posed and what is not.

An untitled black-and-white image, for example, from New York photographer Susan Lipper's acclaimed 1994 book "Grapevine," in which she not uncritically examines the rural underclass of West Virginia, shows three overweight people getting out a car.

But there is nothing spontaneous about the moment. All three figures, including one still resting on the car seat with the door open,



Marla Sweeney's stark yet simple portraits, including this one titled 'Justine,' are among the many photographers' images showing through Jan. 14 at Gallery Sink, 2301 W. 30th Ave.

are looking at the camera, and a group of fish on a line have been carefully posed in the front.

These are obviously real people returning from a real errand. But that reality is mitigated by Lipper's influence in how she posed these people and how she intervened to make sure it had the look she wanted.

Even more elaborate intervention can be seen in "Going Out" (2000), a good example of the rich color photographs by Beth Yarnelle Edwards of San Carlos, Calif., depicting the suburban middle class of suburban San Francisco.

In this image, three young women are in an unremarkable bedroom obviously preparing to go out — one sitting on the bed polishing her toenails, another standing in the back looking at herself in the mirror and a third in the foreground fiddling with a portable CD player.

These are presumably real girls in one of their bedrooms. But the scene, however realistic it feels, has been staged to such a point that the placement of the girls gives the image a beautiful triangular composition that would make a Renaissance painter proud.

Fink of Bangor, Pa., acknowledges and even makes a point of this perceptual conflict in one of his striking black-and-white party images titled "George Plimpton, Jared Paul Stern and Cameron Richardson, Fashion Shoot, Elaine's, NYC" (1999).

In the foreground, a man bends over to playfully kiss the neck of a woman, both seemingly oblivious to the photographer. Meanwhile, in the middle ground, a man

Sharp images

- **What:** Photography exhibition, 'Social Landscapes'
- **Where:** Gallery Sink, 2301 W. 30th Ave.
- **When:** Through Jan. 14; 1-5 p.m., Thursdays through Sundays
- **Admission:** Free; 303-455-0185 or www.galleriesink.com

looks right at the camera and by extension the viewer.

It is just one of the many currents that flow through Fink's complex images, which show a contemporary approach to the subject matter but at the same time possess a historic flavor that perhaps derives from the arty, almost anachronistic interplay of shadow and light.

Also worth noting are the selections by Marla Sweeney of Kerhonkson, N.Y., which seem quite basic when compared to some of the other pieces. Most are simple, even stark portraits of one person, but they carry a surprising and lasting emotional punch.

Most of this power is derived from the subtle manipulation of settings and props, as in "Cathy With Knife" (2001), which shows a nondescript older woman sitting on the back deck of a house. It would be innocuous and forgettable if not for the knife lying disquietingly next to her.

Overall, this is another worthy installment in the quality themed installations that have become a staple at Gallery Sink.