A Sneak Preview

This section offers you a sneak preview of an article coming up in the next issue. This review will be published in the May/June 2009 issue.

Natura

John Pfahl’s work is a tireless investigation of our perceptions, encompassing a variety of approaches but always with a keen awareness of the interaction of vision, images, and nature. His series “Permutations on the Picturesque” (1993-99) challenged the pixel’s view of the landscape at a time when digital photography was just breaking through the soil, while his series “Picture Windows” (1978-81) framed the way we likely spend the most time seeing nature: gazing through panes of glass.

An instructor at the Rochester Institute of Technology from 1968 through 1985, Pfahl presided over the development of hundreds of imagemakers. Co-curated by Pfahl and Rochester Institute of Technology’s Therese Mulligan, this exhibition is the latest installment in Rochester Contemporary Art Center’s “Maker/Mentor” series and features Pfahl’s work alongside that of fifteen former students, many of whom are now teachers themselves. Nonetheless, their works bear the indelible influence of Pfahl and his fascination with the intersection of images and nature.

A selection of tall, narrow prints from Pfahl’s current “Scrolls” series (2006) sets the tone of the exhibition. His latest landscape alterations feature vistas digitally stretched to a shape resembling long, vertical Asian scrolls. In the process, elements of the scene are lengthened, taking on new shapes and associations. In twilight in the wilderness (adirondacks) (2006), an elongated cloud pours down through the blue sky, oddly exhibiting a visual heft not seen in the diminutive and distant mountain range. Reeds in the placid swamp of autumn lagoon, braddock bay (2007) have the plasticity of pulled taffy when seen individually; when tightly packed, these wispy strands of grass read as rock solid. In Pfahl’s hands, images of jagged peaks and scarlet sunsets scenes commonly offered as simple celebrations of seeing become a challenge to our methods of perception.

The work of Pfahl’s former students is a diverse lot that strongly declares its independent vision in a voice accented by the dialect of the teacher. Stances run the gamut: nature as a sanctuary, a slaughterhouse, a mystery, an oddity. The process of curious looking permeates the show, including commentary on the challenges of using the photographic machine to record the organic world. Grey Crawford’s prints of flowers
Afterimage: Sneak Preview

http://www.vsw.org/afterimage/peak.html

and foliage are confections of hardened-sugar syrup, full of brush, squint-inducing color. Circular, lens-like shapes fall through his Blossoms #2 (2008) and Blossoms #5 (2008), focusing or blurring what lies beyond. Like Pfahl's "Scrrolls," Crawford reworks a worn photographic cliché: the close-up of the pretty flower into a think piece on tools and processes. Following this thread, Jeannie Pietro's work presents head-and-shoulder shots of birds as if viewed through a sailor's collapsing scope. The round images float in a black square, reminding us that image technology centralizes the natural, circular view of the lens into more aesthetically traditional squares and rectangles.

Nature has long attracted collectors; two selections address the spoils of those likely to ignore the naturalist adage "Take Nothing but a Picture." Alida Fish's series "From The Cabinet of Curiosities" (2007) shows us aquatic life whose non-waterless existence is devoted to amusing visitors to someone's Wunderkammer. Both the sea creatures and the photographs are beautiful objects; you'll become engrossed in the hand sponge texture of Helmi Fish (2008) as rendered in the smooth, creamy grays of Fish's flawless intaglio. Silvia Lizama's work features marine dwellers that have become kitsch, are mounted to walls, or weigh down papers on a desk. Lizama hand-colors her gelatin silver prints a method that generally ranges from distracting to worse. But her use of coral, seaweed, and other maritime hues are amazingly subtle, inspiring a double take upon realizing they are not, in fact, color photographs.

Mystery pervades Richard Gray's work in both form and content. Heavy shadows surround unfocused human figures illuminated by chartreuse light. Two images feature gosses implying vitality, two others show hunched figures appearing weak or ill. The pattern of a cell culture spreads across the image, tweaking a latent hypochondriacal anxiety. Our scientific investigations can reveal so much, but cannot assuage our fear. A perfect circle of small dots encompasses each image, reminiscent of both a clock and a Petri dish. Ultimately, each portends our inevitable end at the hands of time or disease.

The end comes with less existential angst but far more violence for the animals of Forrest McMullin's photographs. His abstract compositions of what we shrug off as "roadkill" those creatures who bear the toll of our sprawling expansion into wild territory focus on small sections of the fallen animal. There is emotion here; seeing the crimson drops of life beading up on a deer's coat will drain a viewer, but these abstracted formal compositions regrettably emphasize geometry over context. One is left craving a wider view.

Slavish adherence to preconceived photographic rules is the antithesis of Pfahl, and the same can be said of his students' work. Allison Rossiter creates camera-less photographs, employing light to draw an image. The results have lines similar in width and gesture to finger-smeared paint. Three of her light drawings of horses are on view; their hasty, but confident, execution brings to mind cave drawings and belies the same sense of wonder prehistoric artists must have felt encountering a majestic animal. Bizarre digital collages of animals enact dramatic tableaus are actually spreads from Never Cry Wool (2005) and Henny Penny (2000), two of the many children's books Jane Wattenberg has authored. A wild-eyed wolf menacingly repels a passel of geese, chickens, and other birds while the Parthenon looms in the background: a wacky cousin of the Rembrandt and Ramus myth. Another piece features fluffy lambs falling from the sky into the gaping mouth of a sharp-toothed wolf. In the background, a brown dog sporting a bowler hat looks on in disbelief. As do I.

A few of Pfahl's pupils present more photographically classic natural vistas. Marilyn Bridges's rich monochromatic studies of sand dunes, craggy rocks, and glistening seawater don't push any envelopes, but are a confident nod to Ansel Adams and Edward Weston. Steve Mosch presents an immense panorama of a bamboo forest, the purplish fringing of the highlights somewhat diminishing the print's oomph. Of these more traditional views, Stuart Rome's images of thickets of tangled branches offer the most to think about. Dense foliage fills the frame, blocking our entrance. His prints offer a litmus of one's own attitudes toward nature: is this an opportunity to engage, to work with nature so that we may move forward and further explore? Or do you see a tangled mess to be forgotten in favor of a nicely paved path?

Judy Natal's works are five separate images a large rectangular photo above and four small circular images below, all printed on a single sheet. From her "Future Parks" series (2007), the selection on view documents the creation of the Springs Preserve, a 140-acre cultural and historical park in Las Vegas. The larger images glimpse bits of the site's transition to a tourist draw; the smaller photos, featuring birds, lizards, and other desert critters, serve as reminders of nature's displacement.

Nature is largely an innocuous, indifferent place but given the proper presentation, it can take on a menacing air. Paul Lange's three prints send us on a pantikled sprint through a garden of well-groomed trees. The sun is high and ahead of us, and its light is etched on the paper in sharp, stunning lines. The bucklif trees are dark...
figures casting long shadows in an attempt to block our passage. This is a sentient nature of our imagination, the same one whose vines reach out to grab us as we pass through the woods on an ink-black night. Dean Chamberlain’s photos were made on just such a night in just such a forest, only Chamberlain brought a lighting kit. His Yellow Falling (1998) finds us in a clearing with a small, illuminated tree. Its leaves flutter to the ground, pooling before us like molten metal, dripping from an overflowing forge. The effect is eerie and unsettling, like that of trespass; we wait for a woodland spirit to reveal itself and judge our fate.

A triptych depicting a single scene, Barbara Bosworth’s Paul with Mourning Dove (2005) is an elegant, contemplative, and effortlessly gorgeous statement on the odd relationship of contemporary humans in nature. Paul is an ordinary man, dressed in a blue windbreaker, one leg of his khaki cargo pants caught in his boot. He stands in a gravel road, surrounded by lush green foliage as the small, gentle dove rests on a hand held close to his chest. The entire scene is so still and calm that I was immediately struck with the notion: it’s a stuffed bird. Why think such a thing? It was my own pessimistic skepticism that led me to suspect contrivance. I simply could not believe that this contemporary man, part of a civilization whose relation to nature chooses consumption over reverence, could experience such a transcendent moment of oneness with nature. It is partly this disbelief and the hope for its opposite that drives Pfahl and his former students as they continue to probe for clues, revelations, and better questions on how we interact with the natural world.

Luke Strosnider is an artist and writer currently based in Rochester, New York. For more of his words, images, and projects visit www.lukestro.png

Click HERE to subscribe.