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ART

ART REVIEW: "State of the City"

By Rebecca Rafferty On Aug. 6th, 2008

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Cities are complicated beasts. Like a macrocosm of an individual person, they are simultaneously full of hope, fear, violence, beauty, decay - you name it. Rochester Contemporary is currently showing a group exhibition of artists whose thoughtful work examines our strange relationship with the urban landscape: the actual flux, and the variations in perceiving the appearance and the soul of a place.

In our enthusiasm for rapidly developing technologies and conveniences, few of us ponder what the changes mean to old industries and the worlds built up around them. Toronto-based photographer Robert Burley focuses specifically on how the rise of the digital era will end that of film, and what this means for the titan Kodak plants in cities around the world. Per his artist statement, his prints of the demolition of these factories are concerned with "the disappearance of darkness," which alludes both to the soon-to-be obsolete darkroom, and the factories, where "manufacturing took place in the absence of light."

The photos include Kodak plants in Rochester, France, Canada, and Belgium. In "Implosions of Buildings 65 and 69, Kodak Park, Rochester," a rapt crowd faces away from the viewer, toward the event's horizon, and ironically, many are taking photos. The middle ground is an empty lot, providing a visually held breath and a safe distance from the implosion, where an enormous dust cloud describes the boundaries where the iconic structure stood just moments before. Burley's pictures have a general tone of "what next?" to them.

Buffalo and Beijing native Bingyi Huang also spends her time with the condemned. The artist inhabits houses awaiting demolition and meditates on poverty's brood of problems, including drug abuse, racial tension, and problematic spatial ownership. Her photos are portraits of decay, as well as her alterations to the interiors and exteriors.

The image is the same from one house to the next: broken or boarded windows, rooms exposed to the elements, depressingly overgrown lawns, and debris. But wait: Huang has made subtle alterations that nearly blend in. In "97 Jewett Street: The Shadow House," painted tree forms on one side of the house trace the shadow-path of the sun on the abandoned structure. "7 Brewster Street: The Ants House" shows a corner of ceiling where Huang has painted trails of ants and hives formed by groups of cells that evoke urban dwellings in clustered proximity, like a microcosm of the city.

When you look at this place, what do you see? What do you miss? Rochester's Jim DeLucia shares his

pale, metro-ethereal visions in his mixed-media paintings. The recurring images in his work include human figures, sliver-bladed windmills, city fragments, and mid-flight birds. DeLucia uses a simple palette of pastel with black lines, and his style is spare and fading, like the soft-focus edge of a dream.

In "Umbrella," a silhouette of a man stands under a vaguely bell-shaped dome, with a hint of building tops and sky. "Birdcage" resonates the bell-dome shapes with a bird atop, its dark twin to the left, on a wire. "Pigeon Shit" has a chalky outline of the bird, paired with topographical face contours, a trail of birds in flight, and North and South America mapped finely beneath layers of paint. Despite the shifting-fleeting tone of his work, his concept is concise: in his statement he describes his work as an "open-ended narrative about living spaces, perception, and change."

There is no mystery as to why Ryan Boatright, also of Rochester, calls his six enormous, grayscale photographs "Islands and Mountains." The three "mountain" photos each depict an empty sky interrupted at the bottom of the picture by rooftops, which I mistook at first for ancient ziggurats rising from the earth. Layers of triangular forms with shingles like bricks create the effect, and only the presence of chimneys inform us of what the structures actually are. The urban "island" photos have the same empty, silver sky, but beneath it the subtle textures frozen in pavement suggest the intricacies of an ocean surface. The "water" surrounds the thick, curved curbs of street medians, empty or with sparse vegetation: a concrete antithesis of lush tropics.

Is it adventure, madness, or both? The Avalanche Collective, a Syracuse-based performance group, specializes in bouts of grown-up make-believe. Their installation, "Expedition Base Camp," documents the exploration of a combined urban and imaginary landscape. The set is constructed of a rough plank lean-to on an island of rock salt, and beneath the boards is a TV, which runs looped cuts of their journey.

In the film, the three heavily bundled and linked-together travelers drag a red wagon ("Moby, the Mobile Projection Unit," found in the circular room behind the installation, is modified with a speaker and projector and is "used for guerilla projections and performances in urban and suburban spaces"). A shaky camera records the reality-transcending team's simulation of a slow and difficult progress through a pretend arctic landscape (we see overgrown weeds) and setting up camp on the edge of woods, all of which is set to the rush of freezing-sounding wind. On a nearby gallery wall, a print titled "Journal Entry" describes the journey in a combination of urban landscape with phrases like "cracked and overgrown floe of asphalt," and encounters with arctic animals on their imaginary expedition. I'm not opposed to performance art, and this group's ideas really interested me, but I prefer to see the actual performances: the second-hand experience made me feel a little left out of the adventure.

This provocative show brings together a variety of visual responses to the way our cultures cause shifts in urban landscape, and how we interact and deal with the complicated endings and strange newness. Oh, the complex cycle.

State of the City

Avalanche Collective, Ryan Boatright, Robert Burley, Jim DeLucia, Bingyi Huang

Through September 21

Rochester Contemporary Art Center, 137 East Ave

461-2222, rochestercontemporary.org

Wednesday-Sunday 1-5 p.m.