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Skewed Perspectives

For Real's images paint a bleak, white picture

FOR REAL

Wood Street Galleries, Downtown
Through December 31
412.471.5605

By Leslie Hoffman

Writers such as Thomas Pynchon, Don DeLillo, Manuel Puig and Margaret Atwood did it. Alfred Hitchcock did it when he slyly appeared in each of his films, and post-modern writers often call attention to the fact that someone is controlling their works of fiction when they pop in for a second and say, "Toodle-oo, I'm here! This is what I think!" Writers like David Foster Wallace and Dave Eggers pop in and out of their books all the time.

And now Wood Street Galleries has comprised an exhibit, *For Real*, that features five artists who question what is "real" and what is "not," displaying self-reflective pieces that scream the fact they are indeed constructs questioning the verity of "reality."

In Patricia Piccinini's four photographs that complete *Science Story*, she builds a world with two lab researchers and their fleshy new baby, a synthetically created animal that resembles a cross between a salamander and a platypus. The photographs are meant to seem "real," just like everything in the exhibit, but they are obviously posed and manipulated. In *Science Story: Thesis and Conclusions*, the woman in a white lab coat records information, the man in a white lab coat stiffly spaces out and the strange baby animal sleeps in an incubator. They occupy a room that mimics an operating room or a lab, down to the drawers labeled "small animal handling rags."

But just when viewers might be tricked into believing the image is real, two more figures make a subtle entrance, reflected in the silvery sheen of a mirrored operating room light. Possibly the photographer, possibly the people helping out with the shoot, it's not a mistake that these casually clad people are standing on the brink of reality. The complete control that the artist exercises over these planned pictures suggests that she includes these new characters to remind viewers that everything we see is a construct and is not in fact real.

Timothy Hutchings' amazing video, *The Arsenal at Danzig and Other Views*, was the inspiration for the exhibit. The video looks like old films made by an overzealous tourist traipsing about Europe. But the landmarks are no longer there. All of the places to which the video's voyager -- the artist himself -- travels were destroyed during World War II. The film is quite good; Hutchings has almost seamlessly inserted himself into the first half of the 20th century, but has smartly left behind tags to remind audiences that he's fooling them. In one scene, he abruptly disappears from the foreground; in another, his cutout

remains behind seconds longer than his background; and in other scenes, effects like water and wind rustling through trees fall short of the expectations of the third dimension.

On the third floor of the gallery space, Margi Geerlinks presents a disturbing collection of bizarre photographs in her series *Crafting Humanity*. She comments on the control that humans exercise over their offspring with *Untitled 2* and her two *Gepetto* photos. In *Untitled 2*, a blond woman mindlessly knits the hefty body of her new daughter out of peach-colored thread. The toes of the child look like "real" toes, but the waist of the kid look like a new sweater. It's creepy.

But in an even creepier turn, Gepetto "sews" the body of his new puppet boy out of pink and beige thread in *Gepetto I* and *Gepetto II*. More *Silence of the Lambs* than *Pinocchio*, the lifeless body of the boy that undergoes the sterile sewing machine's needle is strange as hell; those susceptible to senseless nightmares need not view these images.

While all of these artists might question the future of humanity, one of the strangest elements of their exploration is the lack of color. No one in the exhibit -- especially Piccinini and Geerlinks -- uses a color darker than Crayola's "flesh" crayon, which got a new name in the 1960s to recognize that not everyone has the same color of flesh. Will everyone in the future be pale? Perhaps it's not fair to criticize this specific collection of artists for the preponderance of Aryan types in this exhibit -- it could be they're commenting on what society views as the norm. But it could also be they've been influenced by the saturation of lily-white celebrities and media personalities in pop culture, a construct with which we're all familiar.

The continual presence of media -- radio, television, film, magazines and advertising -- in our lives is another reason people living in the 21st century aren't so flustered by reminders that someone else is responsible for shaping the realities they're consuming. For this reason, the questions raised in *For Real* may not be new and exotic enough for an audience constantly bombarded by information.

Two other artists featured in the exhibit, Amir Zaki and Euan Macdonald, contribute a different element of perception to the exhibit with their strange photographs and videos that are slightly less apocalyptic than the other pieces in the show. Photographer Zaki confounds audiences with his strangely titled, dark, disconcerting pictures of Los Angeles rooftops and blacktops. Macdonald presents elements from the quirky ordinary with his odd videos such as *Hammock* and *Two Planes*, in which something is just a bit off. In the latter, for instance, the two synchronized aircrafts look slightly different from each other until it's revealed they're connected to each other like mating dragonflies, a subtle trick of the eye configured by Macdonald.

For Real does a decent job of questioning what is authentic and what is manipulated, but in today's highly processed world where people's senses are continually bombarded with controlled images, the exhibit might not be real enough. It might not be big enough, fast enough or clever enough to meet the demands we've created for ourselves. This fault might not have anything to do with the artists, but rather be the product of our own expectations raised by fictionalized ideas that our culture has propagated.

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