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THE DAILY

• **Arts**
Wednesday,
August 01, 2007

Looking vs. seeing

Viewfinder challenges its audience to consider the deliberate choices that go into composing a seemingly amateur shot

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By Christian Nelson

Since the late 1980s, photographer Uta Barth has made art out of the act of looking. Citing vision as her primary subject matter, Barth takes blurry, off-center pictures of mundane objects and landscapes hoping to emphasize the cognitive processes at work within the viewer.

“They were compilations of images about looking and being looked at, surveillance and interrogation images that rendered vision as invasive,” Barth said of her work in a February 2006 Deutsche Bank Art magazine interview.

“The patterns made it hard to focus and created visceral optical effects. I wanted you to become self-conscious of the activity of looking.”

And where better to feel self-conscious about the act of looking than an art museum? Viewfinder, a new exhibit at the Henry Art Gallery, invites the viewer to go one step further and enter the minds of photographers and artists like Barth, who must take many factors into consideration when composing a shot.

Photographs, paintings, videos and other artistic media are divided into six groupings — “Frame,” “Focus,” “Exposure,” “Parallax,” “Cameraless” and “Voyeur” — in an effort to isolate a particular visual element or technique.

Amir Zaki’s “Untitled (Winter Pool 32)” shows how an unusual framing can turn an ordinarily inviting pool into a looming, sentient being intent on swallowing up the viewer.

Information:

Viewfinder will be on display at the Henry Art Gallery through Dec. 30.

Barth’s contribution to the exhibit, “Untitled (98.5)” is part of the “Focus” group. (It appears that truly great art is too free-spirited to be burdened with the weight of a name.) A series of three blurry, frame-less shots of a distant forest, which even the most obsessive compulsive of amateur photographers would readily delete from their digital camera, “Untitled (98.5)” provides a breath of fresh air from the glossy, ultra-detailed tripe that National Geographic has managed for years to pass off as awe-inspiring.

Much of the information provided is basic, Photography 101-caliber content. However, it does provide a useful context for analyzing the work on display. And how else is one to take away anything of value from Roy McMakin’s “A Child’s Angel Food Cake,” which shows a cake tin and underlying surface from six different angles?

Much more thought provoking and, indeed, provocative in general, is Josiah McElheny’s “An Historical Anecdote about Fashion,” a collection of blown glass pieces which were ostensibly created in the legendary Venini workshop during the 1950s. According to an introduction provided by McElheny, the young glassblowers took a great interest in the cutting-edge fashion worn by their boss’s beautiful French wife and soon began numbing out

multi-colored beads that stimulate the pattern-recognition modules in viewers' brains. Sergio Prego's "Cowboy Inertia Creeps" is a stop-action video created from a series of still photographs that shows the staggered progress a passed-out man makes while being dragged by an unseen force along the curbs and cement barriers of a dreary city.

Overall, the execution of Viewfinder doesn't seem to do the concept justice. One is compelled to believe that there must be more and better examples available to illustrate the given terminology. At the very least, more information on individual works would help to ensure that patrons don't look without seeing, passing through the Henry's halls in a ghost-like blur.

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