

Interior Worlds, Exterior Visions

Karen Haas and Arlette Kayafas were pleased to find themselves co-jurors for the 2007 New England Photography Biennial at the Danforth. Haas's curatorial position at the MFA's Lane Collection and Kayafas's years as a collector and gallerist had brought them together on occasion, and it was a pleasant confirmation to find their tastes so complementary. "There were people we could teach each other about," clarifies Haas, but there were few submissions that sparked disagreement. Over the course of sorting through some 600 images from 150 applicants, the two women became so involved in the show that they both planned to return for the installation. "We want to make sure that each work gets the best showcase possible," says Haas.

Of course, they also wanted to see the work in person before the show because they had worked with slides and digital imagery, a necessary challenge for jurors in a show so full of new talent and unfamiliar work.

"It's always nice to see a consistency of vision," explained Haas when asked about their criteria. "[Looking at five works] you want to see, if not a series, at least a common thread that runs through them all." Adds Kayafas, "We tried to achieve a nice balance of black and white with color." Although, she adds, "we couldn't often tell if we were seeing digital prints [or more traditional techniques]." Kayafas admits a preference for darkroom-produced prints, saying that whenever she saw a strong black-and-white image, she'd say, "tell me that's a gelatin silver print." Many more interiors and landscapes were submitted than nudes or portraits. Haas admits she was also interested in works with a sense of humor.

The jurors' experience with photography made the choice of two artists for purchase prizes easy. Rania Matar's crisp, informative images of Muslim women in veils tap into our current fascination with Islamic culture. There's a casual, documentary directness to her compositions, like stills from a movie. Her pictures of children playing in ruins in



Rania Matar, *Juggling, Southern Lebanon*, archival inkjet print, 22 x 33", 2006. Courtesy of the artist, Danforth Museum of Art.

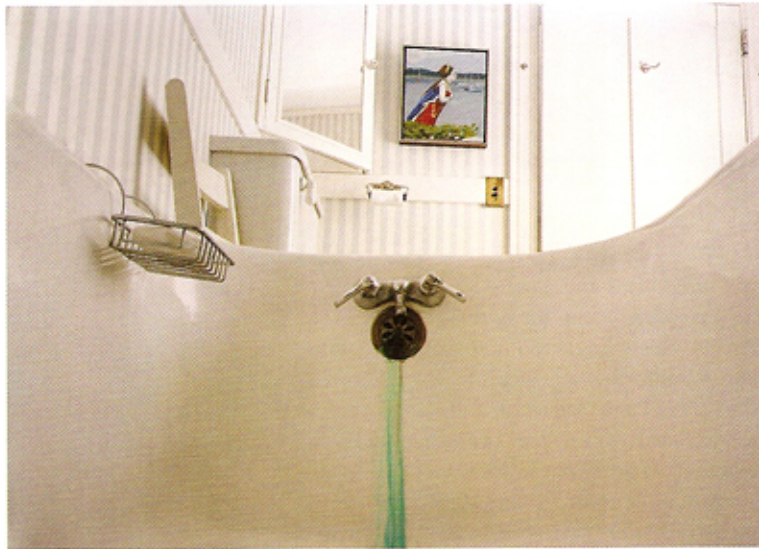
Lebanon, and women sharing photos, speak both to the universality of family life and the inevitable blending of cultures that goes on even between warring factions. Haas was reminded of the "decisive moment" of Henri

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Cartier-Bresson—that one snapshot that speaks volumes. What grabbed her attention here was the sense of hope, even in a bleak setting, in a mother's face as she observes her child.

Lissa Rivera is the other prizewinner, and her images of ornate and stately hallways were taken in the buildings of several local private schools. These boldly decorated corridors speak of the pathways of power, to the idea of education being one of the accepted ways Americans can improve their personal status. The pink walls and black-and-white checkered marble floors in *Corridor* serve as elegant counterpoint to the hanging portraits of significant figures, perhaps past headmasters, rendered in formal old-school style. The whole scene reads as a stage set meant to serve as an example of opportunity in the land of democracy and conformity.

Several other photographers' work focused more on subject matter than technique. Among them were Nancy Scull's industrial environments of manmade structures that blot out the



Left: Mariliana Arvelo, *Self-portrait #8*, C-print, 2007. Courtesy of the artist, Danforth Museum of Art. Right: Robert Knight, *Bonni (#1)*, Royalston, MA, archival inkjet print on Plexiglas, 31 x 39", 2007. Courtesy of the artist, Danforth Museum of Art.

natural world—or they would if they were more pristine. Her functional architecture is past its prime, showing the effects of weather and time. *Blast Furnace Stacks* recall the orderly celebrations of industry of the precisionist movement and Charles Sheeler, but in Scull's hands, those industrial dreams have aged and tarnished. Though still sturdy and massive, the pipes and conduits she depicts are marred by peeling paint and an air of neglect.

Katherine Gulla's *Arboretum* series abstracts nature rather than the built environment. Creatively printed on clear sheets of Plexiglas, which are offset from the wall, these images capture the shadowy tracery of tree branches, while removing them completely from the trees. The lacey images become impressions of absence, beautifully insubstantial in their enhanced abstract patterns. There's a blurry lack of focus that suggests these shadows are ghostly remnants of some more solid, vanished world. Gallery lights play through the transparent planes, creating even more shadows, a receding tracery that never will re-solidify.

Erik Gould's deadpan *Twenty Sparkling Shacks*, *Downtown Providence* focuses attention on aspects of the urban landscape most of us ignore. These tiny parking lot booths are temporary spaces for attendants to observe and transact business. They look like comical miniature houses, built economically with only the minimal degree of shelter needed to

get the job done. Some made out of brick, with working doors and solid windows, are a bit more ambitious, but even in their variations, they evince a utilitarian functional sameness.

Robert Knight's color photos give private perspectives on unusual worlds. In one, we peer up and out at a bathroom from inside an empty bathtub. In another, we survey the headboard from atop a Hollywood bed, stranded in a symmetrical and eerily white-toned bedroom that might be someone's idea of comfort. There's something quite strange about the translucent wall behind the bed

holding two elaborate sconces, everything shimmering in crystalline austerity.

The humorous counterpoint Haas mentioned emerges in the work of Deborah Bohnert, whose amusing figurative collages cast herself as a rather wary paper doll complete with various outfits ready to be cut out and tried on. *Shopping Queen Debbie* has purchased an array of mismatched accessories, while *Trendy and Bendy Debbie* seems ready for a night on the town (despite her lack of anatomically correct features under the paper clothes).

In the end, Kayafas's main worry was what to do with such an abundance of new talent. "Our schools are doing an excellent job," was the conclusion she drew, perusing the majority of applications from recent graduates. But she lamented the paucity of venues awaiting them.

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Lissa Rivera, *Corridor*, Philips Academy, Andover, Private Education, C-print, 22 x 22", 2005. Courtesy of the artist, Danforth Museum of Art.