Quite Possibly Unreal

Reality and Fiction Collide in Fantastical Mexican Imagery

by Gary Tischler

In the compulsively fascinating exhibition “Possible Worlds: Photography and Fiction in Mexican Contemporary Art,” now at the Art Museum of the Americas, there’s an indescribable amount of high intellectual lifting going on, breathtaking the stunning photographic work of a number of Mexican artists—but at times weighing down images that look ready to take flight into the wider reaches of your dreams.

The exhibit was done in collaboration with the Mexican Cultural Institute in Washington, which is hosting its own massive photography show based on the National Geographic Society’s archives (see story on page 54)—offering an interesting contrast between the National Geographic images that document Mexico’s evolution and the otherworldly images conjured by the country’s artists.

Curator Maricel Agüilera of the Museum of Modern Art in Mexico City has obviously given a lot of serious thought to the idea of photography as an artistic vehicle for creating alternative worlds: “possible worlds,” where fiction and reality collide and erupt in ideas about what lies behind and beyond our everyday surroundings. Here, that collision has sprang a series of photographs by nine Mexican artists who, in addition to their own visions and photographic skills, tap film, literature, fashion, science fiction, electronic music and other contemporary influences to create surreal worlds that speak to the possibility of the unknown.

“I looked at many photographs and works, and artists, and I wanted to explore the idea of photography as emerging from its prison of what you call documentary traditions—that it deals in reality, that it documents and shows the world as it is. Agüilera explained. “These photographers have clearly moved beyond that. They try to show worlds that exist and come from the human mind, not the real world.”

Agüilera, in the exhibition’s wall text, has cited quotes, epigrammatic selections and references that are often provocative and sometimes improbable—a maze of words by philosophers, scientists and poets to complement the artwork on display. It’s an interesting selection of supportive ideas by a literary cast of characters, from Roland Barthes, the Frenchman who influenced schools of theory including deconstruction and postmodernism, to the great 20th-century Polish poet of resistance and hope, Wislawa Szymborska.

Reading the quotes, you’re moved, especially by this one from Herbert: “An important part of contemporary art declares itself a panoply of chaos, gesticulates on the void or sees itself the story of its continued soul.” This observation, found in the “Apocalypse” section of the exhibit, comes from a man who experienced the invasion and occupation of his country by two of the most oppressive, violent political forces ever imagined. Nazism and Soviet totalitarian communism.

Yet deep thoughts aside, many of the works hardly need words to express their visceral impact, which sometimes isn’t so much noble as it is spiritually disturbing—the memories of dreams that aren’t easy to forget, barren postapocalyptic landscapes, and contemporary postfiction obsessions like creepy little sci-fi creatures.

These nine contemporary artists—Mauricio Alejandro, Ricardo Almán, Laura Berto, Alex Dorfman, Daniela Esquivel, Rubén García, Maria Nava, Fernando Montiel and Daniella Siqueiros—conjure spellbinding visions, eerie nightmares, strange hallucinations and abstractions but still very human realities.

The notion though that photography is primarily a tool of realism and documentation seems to be a somewhat false one from the get-go. Today’s photographers are hardly radical or new. Fiction is created the minute we click, crop and frame what

From top, Maurice Alejo’s “Bullet,” Daniela Esquivel’s “La top,” and Kema Nava’s “Café de la Espana” are among the surreal digital prints by nine contemporary artists in “Possible Worlds: Photography and Fiction in Mexican Contemporary Art,” now at the Art Museum of the Americas.

appeals to our vision. To create fictional photography is just another step forward in the process, entering the swinging doors in and out of dreams.

Gustavo Alejo and Alex Dorfman are clearly both con temporary artists, making the ordinary threatening, fantastical and illusionary—where a living room becomes a circus, sofa-closet scenes, a ghostly white sheet floats over the kitchen. Meanwhile, Kema Nava tracks a girl in a barren landscape with an equally barren, naked sheep behind her clung to her back, looking like an alien backpack.

I particularly liked Daniella Siqueiros’s visions of groups of people, vaguely human and very amaranthine, intriguing them like a marched company of improved dancers.

Daniela Esquivel’s works almost encapsulate the exhibition, and evoke nothing less than memories of personal dreams. In her exquisitely arranged posed and constructed photographs—that look nothing less than Vanitas fashion shoots of the conceptual kind—a family happily picnics against the specter of a mushroom cloud in the distance just before it-insonerates their superficially pleasant landscape. The people in the photographer’s photograph—filled with lush colors and happy consumers—are like waves when they’re not entirely in the frame.

Dreams, and nightmares have of course changed. When the baby boomers were young, the vision of mushroom clouds was a constant fear. No more so than during the Cuban missile crisis, when all-out nuclear war was a very real possibility it never happened, but we continued to dream the imagery. Today’s images though have turned the least-salient cloud into something chic, like a preserving handle, yet another necessity.

We may no longer think of atomic monsters stomping out entire cities, but we still enjoy imagining more than a few for some reason. Threaty vampires and live-stick werewolves never go out of style. Nor do these possible worlds, or the possibility of the surreal where what’s “real” is in the mind of the beholder.

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