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Sense of place

October 18, 2007

by **Susanne Forestieri**

Two photo exhibits reimagine the desert around us



"Neon Desert," by Atsuko Parker.

Artists are feeling the need to come to terms with Las Vegas, an adult playland, protean metropolis and town on the edge of Armageddon. Where do they find inspiration in this harsh huckster heaven with a sleazy history and little in the way of high culture? Two photographic exhibitions give a surprising answer.

James Cho contemplates "the massive scale of continual transformation" that characterizes Las Vegas. His digital

images capture the visual hum of a "desert-city" under construction, where highways, overpasses, tunnels and power stations are the same colors as the sand and distant mountains. The almost complete absence of people in his images gives one an uncanny feeling, like seeing the ruins of an ancient civilization being reclaimed by the desert. These images—projected every few seconds onto a large screen—have been manipulated to oscillate (the visual hum); when each image disappears, a ghostly after-image replaces it, creating an effect central to the conception of the piece. What at first seems like a paean to permanence is actually a elegy for the ephemeral nature of all things.

Atsuko Parker finds Las Vegas a monument to America's "collective fantasy." Parker's digital photos juxtapose incongruous elements, and in some she achieves a kind of lyrical existentialism, in others a sly humor. Typically, she combines images of Las Vegas glitz with desert flora. "Fugue" superimposes a scene of desert wildflowers onto Las Vegas' ubiquitous floral-patterned carpeting. The blurring of the carpet image becomes a visual corollary for the dingy, buzzing slot machines. Parker is not immune to the lure of neon and uses it to evoke different moods. In "Neon Desert," the blur of headlights on a lonely stretch of desert highway is juxtaposed with a streaming red neon sign—beacons of light in the darkness, so different in mood: the latter seductive, the former poignant, and each paradoxically evoking a feeling of intense loneliness. Parker can also be wickedly funny about a serious issue. In "Just Add Water," billboards are filled with images of sparkling water, a sly reminder of life's essentials amid the hype and hoopla.

Hype and hoopla characterized the campaign to entice tourists to Las Vegas after World War II. Foremost among the attractions were gambling emporiums, showgirls and a chance to view the spectacular above-ground nuclear tests. News

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Bureau photographers documented it all. *Vintage Point* exhibition organizers Brian Alvarez and Diane Bush invited local artists and News Bureau photographers to dip into this reservoir of photographs and reinterpret them. They proceeded to cut and paste, superimpose, rephotograph and manipulate them to achieve their visions.

James Stanford's "Miss Atom Bomb Wallpaper" uses the iconic image, flipped and mirrored multiple times, to creates a pattern as beautiful as a Moorish mosaic. Serendipitously, ordinary clouds, back-to-back, form mushroom clouds; and mirror images of sand create the illusion of reflection. Voilà, she's walking on water.

Stanford has been a spiritual seeker for many years, creating geometric designs like mandalas that assist meditation.

Fred Sigman is another kind of seeker; he has been traveling all his life, but has lived on and off in Las Vegas since 1968. He remembers gazing over the mountains on the edge of town as a boy, and his fascination with the "edge of towns" and "neglected and rejected landscapes" has continued. Concealing his passion in a deadpan style of photography, his photo composites "Bombs in the Backyard" and "Yuk Yuk Flats, Nevada" feature his own photos of a trash-strewn backyard and scrub-covered desert. To make them as unromantic as possible, he photographed in the early afternoon, when there is little shadow, and chose a generic, blocky font style for the titles. Smaller vintage photographs from the above-ground testing era complete the composites but require some explanation to see how they relate to Sigman's photos. (The backyard faces Nellis Air Force Base, where nuclear bombs are kept, and "Yuk Yuk Flats" is a nod to the puerile humor of News Bureau photographers.)

It's not surprisingly that these artists are inspired in different ways; what is surprising is how large the desert looms in the imagination of these urban dwellers. Maybe we all have an atavistic need for roots in the land, a powerful need to connect to place.

Meta-Morph: Digital Works by James Cho and Atsuko Parker

Through December 23, Reed Whipple Cultural Center
821 Las Vegas Blvd. N., 229-1012

Vintage Point

Through October 31, Contemporary Arts Collective
101 East Charleston Blvd. (in the Arts Factory), 382-3886

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