

First rate 'Phenomena' group show at Epsten Gallery offers varied world views

BY DANA SELF - SPECIAL TO THE STAR

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Mary Wessel creates her luminous color prints by manipulating liquids on light-sensitive photographic paper. This "Untitled" Type-C print from her 2013 "Worldscape" series is part of the "Phenomena" group show at the Epsten Gallery MARYWESSEL / FROM THE ARTIST

The curatorial premise of "Phenomena," a group show at the Epsten Gallery, is that there are a lot of ways to visually present our world, because our experiences are mediated by multiple technologies.

Curator Heather Lustfeldt writes, "Altered landscapes, constructed environments, de-contextualized imagery and evocative abstractions correlate to present new ways of seeing and understanding our world."

Basically, it's a photography show, and a good one.

Jon Scott Anderson and Raissa Venables alter the landscape to expand it. Venables reconstructs photographic images by digitally cutting them up and reconfiguring them. They resemble the original environment she photographed, but the space, while recognizable, is fractured.

Venables' "Icy Orchard," one of the most fantastical images in the exhibition, is a re-engineered snow-covered tree that is perhaps a better mutation of itself.

Anderson's large-scale images, "Book of grass #1" and "Book of branches #2," literally get down in the weeds, as opposed to Venables' more global view of her environment. Anderson has taken multiple images of brown/yellow grass, branches, pinecones, etc., and then seamlessly reconstructed them to create a fluid image. The result is a romantic, almost utopian re-presentation of a small, but valuable moment in time measured out in blades of grass or pine needles.

Paul Anthony Smith goes big with his picotage technique of degrading the photographic surface in "Untitled (Jamaican Hotel)." He hangs the substantive, pock-marked image from a wire, where it emanates a sickly sweet scent. The abandoned hotel he photographs is being reclaimed by the thick, surrounding flora. Smith's picotage is so dense as to leave the image pliable as fabric, underlining the inherent fragility of the built environment.

Dan Frueh also examines decay. The elegant "Prairie Fire" is an almost microscopic image of rusted and paint-chipped sheet metal, which reads as an abstract image. Frueh and Smith highlight the beauty of entropy, while suggesting the problematic environmental issues surrounding decay.

Timothy Amundson's installation "Habitat for Humanity," with photos printed on pillows that sit atop two Ikea "Lack" tables, suggests his concern for how commerce negatively imposes itself on nature. Amundson connects imagery of invasive species of flora found around Turkey Creek, a watershed being re-engineered by the Army Corps of Engineers, to the enormous Ikea building in Merriam. Amundson's work is a somewhat thin visual comment on the frequently addressed relationship between industry and nature.

Mary Wessel and Kati Toivanen share a formalist love of image making, in which photographic process has equivalency with the final image.

Wessel creates her luminous color prints by manipulating liquids on light-sensitive photographic paper. Her two untitled works from the "Worldscapes" series are liquidy dreamscapes painted with colored light. The sophisticated neon pink, orange, blue and green color washes that interact dynamically across the composition emerge from abstract painting's ever-changing nature.

Toivanen's digitally composed video, "Transformations: Images in Motion#4," is a continuous loop of psychedelic colors, shapes and oddities that fade in and out of each other. Her careful articulation of each transition allows these seamless changes to feel organic and yet completely otherworldly, despite the fact that she often photographically manipulates common things like flower petals, or gel.

Michael Pointer's gelatin silver monotype print, "Fallen," in which an enigmatic male nude floats in a haze, suggests 19th-century Spiritualism, as if this figure is communicating to us from the murky afterlife. The image is anomalous in this exhibition. Rather than focus on the environment he can see, Pointer's photograph looks inward to find the far more elusive world inside our heads and beyond our mortal coil.

ON EXHIBIT

"Phenomena: The Material Image" continues at the Epsten Gallery at Village Shalom, 5500 W. 123rd St. (at Nall Avenue), Overland Park, through Jan. 11. Hours are 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. Tuesday-Friday; 1 to 4 p.m. Sunday and by appointment. For more information, 913-266-8414 or www.epstengallery.org.