



Tina Freeman: 20130819_Iceland_204, 2016. Archival pigment print, 37 x 55 inches.

Beauty and Isolation

BY KATHY RODRIGUEZ

SurREAL:
TINA FREEMAN,
KENNY MORRISON,
IRBY PACE
CHUCK RAMIREZ
Octavia Art Gallery
New Orleans, LA.

“REAL” SEEMS A hard concept to trust in recent days. It has been repeatedly remarked that this past year has presented a more continuous streak of unbelievable events than before in near memory. Despite seeming surreal – above reality, and manifesting the fantastic and the subconscious – the events of this year are real, and signs of divergent realities that have somehow coexisted in the same span of time and the same space. They are personal, political, global, journalistic, cultural, of the living and the dead, and interwoven in a complex net of emotional reaction and rational thought.

This opening paragraph seems broad and generalized, but there are concrete examples of the real/unreal present in an exhibition of dig-

ital photographs mounted for PhotoNOLA, the annual festival of photography in the city, at Octavia Gallery. The title, “SurREAL,” indicates emphasis on the actual presence of unbelievable parts of the images, which may appear new to the imagination of the viewer. Images by Tina Freeman, Irby Pace, Kenny Morrison, and Chuck Ramirez fill the walls of the airy rooms of the gallery. They show considerations of space, whether flattened or consciously expanded, which explore the traditional three-dimensional illusion in the two-dimensional plane of the documentary photograph; and the seams in documented reality, pieced together like a patchwork of experiences – much like recent events have seemed.

Freeman is a well-known local photographer whose work has found international renown, with nods and purchases in collections in Italy, Paris, and the United Kingdom. Much of her work has focused on Louisiana; she is a native of New Orleans, and the deeply rooted associations natives to the area have with the landscape is strongly prevalent in her work. However, a trip to Antarctica in 2011 resulted in photographs that showed the comparatively surreal quality of this ice-encrusted landscape to the lush, swampy greenery and brown-ery of Southeast Louisiana. The Antarctic



Tina Freeman: *20130819 Iceland 241*, 2016. Archival pigment print, 20 x 30 inches.

photographs evince the pinks and blues of polar climates, spiked with monumental ice formations and crumbling icebergs and glaciers, paired with the deep blacks and grayed whites familiar from German Romantic landscape painting.

The series inspired return trips to the arctic, including the images of Icelandic landscapes featured in the exhibition at Octavia. The photos are titled with dates, numbers, and location, suggesting a strict documentary nature in the work. The images are flattened, aerial views of points within landscapes, where water turns to ice, or green pools meet carved shores. The overall palette is more akin to that of her native landscape. While they are straight images of northern landscapes, Freeman has abstracted the scene by vantage point and cropping, recalling the photographs of Edward Burtynsky. Freeman's sense of color and her ecological ardor are highly personal, reflective of her experience as a photographer in Louisiana – her images formally differ from stark contrasts within Burtynsky's photographs, but share similar strategies and intent.

An activist or at least moralistic angle is apparent in the arrangement of five of the photographs on the wall nearest the front door. They are composed in a cycle, not unlike the way Thomas Cole arranged the five paintings of "The Course of the Empire" series, which cautions against unwitting attempts to control and rule the landscape. Freeman's painterly sense of formal composition and color depart from Cole's strict naturalistic representation. The

emphasis on the changing landscape forms the conceptual basis of each series, and Freeman's emphasis of the central image, which depicts a nearly symmetrical image of balanced forms taken from water and land, mimics the balanced arrangement in Cole's central panel, *The Consummation of the Empire*. Both artists have admitted interest in the change of landscape, though Freeman's concerns are turned more toward rising sea levels, according to a brief statement on her website.

Freeman's abstract treatment of space pairs well with photographs by Irby Pace, whose "work explores void spaces inhabited by disconcerting yet beautiful puffs of smoke," according to the press release for the show. These recall the water vapor clouds made indoors and captured in photographs and video by Berndnaut Smilde. Like Freeman, Pace's strong sense of color in composition brings visual delight to the photographs. They are also entrancing by the unreal presence of the bright pink, yellow, ultramarine, and orange puffs in verdant landscapes. Pace asserts in his artist statement that he makes the clouds within the landscapes to "fill the void" left by unacknowledged negative space, which can be read to represent "everything that is lacking in human experience." Both landscape and ephemeral smoke exist as physical presences, documented within the space of the photograph.

In reality, smoke dissipates and diffuses into the landscape. Though it appears to disappear, its tiny particles have forever altered the air and the "figures" around it. The physical body



Irby Pace: *Terra Firma*, 2014. Archival inkjet print, 20 x 30 inches.

of the cloud in the photograph belies its swift temporal existence, but also its material presence and effects. Freezing the smoke within this frame shows the force of its push against the surrounding air, filling the negative void with physical presence forever.

Its presence, and essentially toxic coloration – some of the most gorgeous colors in “nature” are to be found at Superfund sites – also suggest a tension between the smoke ball and the life of the greenery around it (another quality in Burtynsky’s palette). Though Pace may be attempting to emphasize the void between leaves in many of the photographs, the most evocative image is *Terra Firma*, where the presence of smoke over a railway track pictured in one-point perspective contrasts with the vast emptiness of the landscape – once filled, perhaps, with more diverse life. The bright yellow presence of smoke, in far less proportion to the landscape than in other images, says that the life of flora may go in just as tiny a puff, with just as much speed as the smoke’s dissipation.

Smoky, cloudy colors fill the skies depicted in Morrison’s photographs, which turn into twisters in cinematic backgrounds, suggesting the analog practice of matte painting in films against digitally edited foregrounds. This cinematic quality is shared in the photographs of Gregory Crewdson, whose stage sets make unreal, surreal scenes between scenes of unknown narratives. According to press, the photographs are inspired by the work of painter John Brosio, whose series on tornados also pictures lone figures against sublime skies, filled with churning clouds headed towards the front of the picture plane. Brosio’s low horizon lines and shadowy palette follow a direct lineage from 19th century Romantic painting. The economic compositions are limited to foreground, middle ground, and background, with sparsely populated landscapes that are sometimes inhabited by anomalous creatures. The economy of the paint and composition contrasts the bigness of the forms within the picture plane, like the work of Mark Tansey, whose paintings

also mistrust the real.

Brosio’s paintings are all finished to the same degree of resolution, though they employ atmospheric perspective. Morrison’s photographs are markedly different in the degree of definition among planes. The more pixelated backgrounds in Morrison’s photos may be an homage to atmospheric perspective in painting, but disparate shadows and sharpness in the layers toward the foreground of the image create a strong disconnect from back to front. Though distracting as a matter of craft, this must be read as intentional. In the context of the show, it is precisely this disjoining of the layers of the image that creates the effect of real/unreal – the “real” photographic foreground, usually a figure taken before a green screen, plays against the “unreal” (or obviously faked) background – making a montage of parts that must be read together in the flattened space of the resultant photograph. Real/unreal join as surreal in the images.

Ramirez’s work dates within the decade of the mid 90s to the late 2000s, when digital printing and photography were rapidly becoming more and more honed. Pixelated edges and traces of outer frames from digitally collaged photos are markers of the progress this technology has made in the decade since. However, they are also the index of the artist’s presence within the image. Today they can be read as easily fixable problems, but within the context of their making, they are evidence of the construction of the photograph – and its falseness.

Images of dyed food and drink isolated against white backgrounds create conversations about the nutritional value of the edibles. Located in a void, like Pace’s clouds, they communicate more by their toxic colors and sickly textures than their perceived sugary, sweet, and tantalizing tastes. Portraits of pastel colored bags in the “Euro Bags” series waver in white space, again recalling Pace’s clouds, filling negative space with their airy bod-



Chuck Ramirez: *Black Heart (Candy Tray Series)*, 2002 / 2011. Pigment ink print on watercolor paper, 48 x 48 inches.



Kenny Morrison: *Storm #1*, 2015. Archival pigment print, 50" high.

ies. Their diaphanous forms both occupy space but carry nothingness, much like any discarded plastic.

Candy Tray: Black Heart, an image of an empty candy box, pockmarked with the black voids of eaten chocolates, informs the insubstantial nutrition of the food items included in the images in the show, as well as the insatiable desire to consume what the candy symbolizes: love, lust, sweetness, and sensual yet vapid deliciousness. The reality of the desire is short-lived compared to the reality of its consumption, suggesting the fleeting and unreal endorphin rush of addictive practices.

The photographs in the show share a similar scale and

sparseness, despite changing palettes and subject matter. They all evoke a sense of desolation and aloneness, even in the beauty they try to capture. The quietness of an arctic landscape, or a lonesome and temporal puff of smoke, speak of the same isolation of a figure in a storm, and a bag floating in the wind. That aloneness, while a very real feeling, is something that is also unreal. Imposed isolation leads to a lack of communication, and the images also seem to beg for empathy. Reflecting on the last year, this is one of the most important human conditions to remember – the capacity to feel with others, which is truly real and necessary. □