

STILL TALES

Nicholas Schroeder - 2012

Lewis Gallery

CLAIRE SEIDL

In the theater of Maine photography, the winter exhibit assembled at the Portland Public Library might be thought of as a kitchen drama — a show that tells the rich tales of the many and diverse voices of Maine domestic living — and it deserves to be seen by all who can afford to.

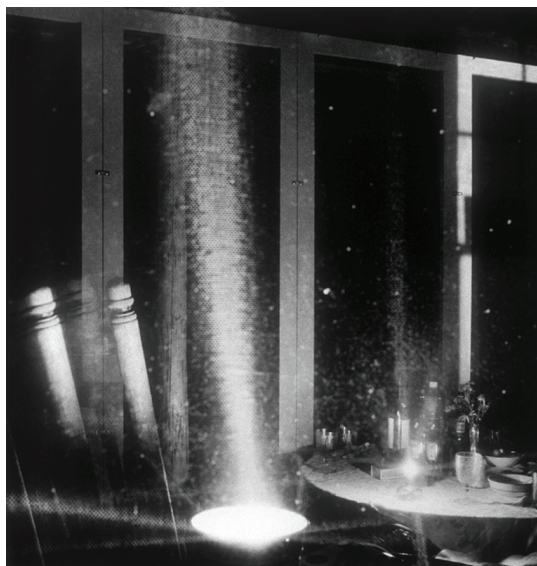
Not only are most of the 17 photographers in the Lewis Gallery successful in bringing their subjects to life, many seem to originate them as characters. Melonie Bennett's lively, anarchic photo series offers so much rich information about her father that it might appear staged. (It's not.)

The stout, lighthearted grandpa is seen in several feats of marvelous vivacity — wincing in (mock-)sword combat with a young rascal, sneaking late night chicken from the fridge — and his scenes gain considerable poignancy when seen in light of his nagging illnesses. Noah Krell's portrait of aging is more haunting. His lone contribution, "Anina at Rest," depicts the wall of a modest bedroom, where part of a vanity mirror reflects the sleeping head of an elderly woman. Affectingly, the photo presents her life by its most enduring composites: the rich, nostalgic peace of the quiet room and the mental life of Anina, no body in sight.

Each of Claire Seidl's four silver gelatin prints casts as its subject a dazzling fugue of light, telling stories of private life through attentions to human and object. Elizabeth Greenberg achieves similarly, but her fuzzy color digital prints of disarticulated living room pieces are even more memorable. Rene Braun's series of 8-by-12-inch metal prints rivals Bennett's for its bustling, unpredictable detail, but would benefit from being shown in larger dimensions. Sarah Szwakos, Thomas Birtwhistle, and Roberta Baumann offer narrative pieces through colorful everyday items, each seeming to romanticize a different quality of home — modernism, solitude, and feminine nostalgia, respectively.

Two contributions by digital montage artist Jeffrey Becton offer interesting new takes on portraiture. "Wharf House — Claudia" (33 by 50 inches, 2011) depicts a smiling woman sitting at a wooden table in a breakwater home, which Becton has digitally enhanced to reflect some peripheral decay. In "Parlor — North Haven" (33 by 43 inches, 2011), the subject is absent, but its character shows through the rustic

features of the room. Becton is one of the foremost photographers working in digital montage, and while his works here don't contain some of the more egregious unrealities of the medium, it's hard to divorce computer-generated images like these from their associations with product advertising.



PORCH, LIGHT

Two contributions by digital montage artist Jeffrey Becton offer interesting new takes on portraiture. "Wharf House — Claudia" (33 by 50 inches, 2011) depicts a smiling woman sitting at a wooden table in a breakwater home, which Becton has digitally enhanced to reflect some peripheral decay. In "Parlor — North Haven" (33 by 43 inches, 2011), the subject is absent, but its character shows through the rustic features of the room. Becton is one of the foremost photographers working in digital montage, and while his works here don't contain some of the more egregious unrealities of the medium, it's hard to divorce computer-generated images like these from their associations with product advertising.

With most artists favoring naturalness and spontaneity in their sentimental depictions of home life, the most radical departures here are the photo series that are staged. The stability and contour in Luc Demers's and Ben DeHaan's pigment inkjet prints make it clear their work has little to do with memory. Demers's 40-by-30-inch images of doorways and windows lit from the far side are energetic studies of liminal space. With much of the image plunged in darkness, Demers offers up an alien landscape, and in each, bright frames of light burst through the cracks in the entryway to bring familiar domestic patterns to the fore. DeHaan's prints stage a sort of postmodern agrarian fantasy in which a figure wears deer and goat masks and poses in elaborate ironic settings. It's a clever and engaging pun on domesticity, but can sometimes feel a little too engineered.

And where else to exhibit this but the library, the public repository of hundreds of thousands of such stories? Bruce Brown, longtime curator of the Center for Maine Contemporary Art, wisely avoided placing these photos in a traditional gallery, where the full weight of their content would be compromised. After all, the library is the best museum of social life humans have come up with yet.

claireseidl.com