

THE ELUSIVE SURROUNDING



THE ELUSIVE SURROUNDING

by Al Miner

Through diverse media, the nine artists of The Elusive Surrounding dare to describe a place that usually defies explanation. Allowing them to navigate our trip through semi-consciousness, we are shown the world that exists somewhere between sunset and sunrise, memory and experience, reality and fantasy.



HIDENORI ISHII's hypnotic paintings partner formal elements with familiar natural forms to gently lull us into visual slumber. Kidney shapes serve as a point of departure on our trip from the physical plane through the looking glass. At once pools and organs, they are painted in Ishii's signature palette of arctic teals, seafoams, and ice blues. Their slick, super flat surfaces sometimes sprout sugar crystals, pebbles, and saplings, evidencing Ishii's interest in environmental sustainability. Filling one panel of *T(h)ree Po(o)l* and growing from a dripping, intestinal river, a simplified lotus blossom unfurls before us to reveal a mysterious center. Baby pink rays radiate from a dark oculus, which serves as a portal to another world. Our eye is seduced into this iris containing a still, midnight sky over a calm, blue sea. Ishii's dream-

scapes are beautiful yet foreign, leaving us with a slightly uneasy feeling that many of these artists also capture.

The images we are bombarded with during our waking hours come back to haunt us in dreamland. These regurgitated visual sound bites in the form of appropriated imagery inform the work of Lorna Bieber, Karl Connolly, and Dennis Farber.

Like an image archaeologist, **LORNA BIEBER** excavates books and magazines, unearthing fragments of social memory. She then alters and assembles these disparate parts, cutting, collaging, photocopying, photographing, and finally dramatically enlarging her paper creations into fuzzy portrayals of memory itself. In *Pack*, the artist takes an otherwise mundane image à la National Geographic and, with her characteristic graininess, imbues it with a psychic weight that forces us to linger. The way the dogs have been severed from their larger surroundings, the way paper and puddles of diffuse light perplex us. Like hieroglyphics, we are at once acquainted with the symbols, but are at a loss to translate them. With a type of alchemy, she has turned photos with no original artistic intent into subtly haunting works. We freeze before them, hoping to hold on to the image long enough to figure it out before it dissolves into a misty memory.



The atrocities of the nightly news inform the paintings of Irish artist **KARL CONNOLLY**. With the technique of a renaissance master, he mixes beauty with disaster and serenity with emergency while capturing the numbing effect of information saturation. In *Ocean with 2 Cars*, the shells of two vehicles engulfed in flames share the canvas with a picture-in-a-picture portal that reveals a small painting of the ocean. The photorealistic scene of peaceful cerulean surf seems perfectly at home in its unlikely surroundings. The ocean's blues contrast against the fire's warm tones, and the loose brushwork of the flames emphasize the impeccable detail of the undulating tides. Upon reflection, we realize how much we are used to pop-up ads as this unlikely coupling did not raise a red flag upon initial view. The seascape further removes us from the scene, possibly signaling that we have left the earthly plane of the highway and are preparing to float through the window into serenity, or at least a deeper part of our subconscious.



Unlike people in the waking world, those who populate our nights remain beyond our grasp. Borrowing from such readily available online sources as Google images, **DENNIS FARBER**'s altered historical portraits emit a ghostly glow. In *Untitled*, a group of such people huddles together in the center of a vacant composition, but these are not the warm photos of our grandparents' attic albums. The faces have been burned out, leaving white-hot absences where we expect smiles. Despite being expressionless, they transmit a tangible sadness. The artist's use of neon pinks, yellows, and greens encircling the faces pulls the figures forward from the void. It is as if he has taken a photograph of a seemingly empty room and discovered beings unseen by the naked eye. Trapped in a silent purgatory, Farber's characters have enticed us with nostalgia and with what we assumed to be hidden smiles. Without the tell-tale cues of expression, we are unable to read their intentions, still they are somehow able to return our gaze. Suddenly, the figures turn combative and we regret trusting them so readily.



Deeper into our minds, our personal memories eclipse those of popular media. Kriste Steinke and Richard Edson mine the collective consciousness of American childhood, unveiling a darkness that lies just beneath the candy-coated surface of presumed innocence.

The young players in **KRISTA STEINKE**'s digital c-prints and videos aren't joking around. *Sheep were in the Meadow* consists of an old-fashioned console television topped with a bud vase, a crumpled book, and an eerily empty picture frame. Everything is

painted a disturbingly stark white. Like Dorothy entering Oz, the colorless setting gives way to a technicolor video with a lullaby score reminiscent of a classic Disney fairy tale. Imitating the look of Super 8 film, the artist continues to charm us with familiarity, but soon after she draws us in, creepiness bubbles to the surface. Children frolic in a lush backyard wearing sheep masks. This motif is also present in her photos in which children's faces are obscured by those of rabbits and pigs. These muzzles, which seem to have staged a hostile take-over of the purity they disguise, look back at us aggressively, challenging us to admit that childhood fables always have a dark side, and that without warning, dreams can turn into nightmares.

While Steinke's pieces unveil childhood's sinister side, **RICHARD EDSON's** highlight its enigmas. With a macro lens, Edson photographs toys, revealing their otherwise unrecognized drama. The artist's method leaves all but the antiseptically gloved hand of a caped humanoid out of focus in *Mystery Man* and makes what is obviously a figurine seem larger than life. The toys may have come to life in Edson's *Nutcracker Fantasy*, but imbuing them with humanity complicates things. Do we sympathize with this character or should we be scared? Is he the hero or the villain? He could be asking for assistance, longing for a hug, or reaching out to strangle us. While breathing life into his subjects, Edson's lens also exaggerates their plastic composition. Imperfections in the material itself and artificial colors flooding the background remind us that this is fiction. All children dream of their toys coming to life at night. For Richard Edson, the morning never quite arrives.



In the depths of the netherworld, we finally become aware of the space around us. The works of Christopher Saah, Don Cook, and Mary Temple examine that atmosphere, showing us the confines of our psychology.

Resembling neglected film sets or miniature dioramas, the scenes in **CHRISTOPHER SAAH's** vignettted color photos are heavy with the sadness of abandonment. Like a filmmaker, Saah asks us to suspend disbelief when we enter his landscapes. What at first look like long shots (single takes with an extended duration) are not what they appear. *Untitled 04v (for Antonioni)* is one such piece. The slightly grainy image hints of 35 mm and the location itself could be from one of many films. There is, however, a suspicious air to this place. As it turns out, the works are digitally manipulated. Saah spent four years photographing Arizona and Baltimore, MD, later seamlessly melding the results in Photoshop to create this mysterious location. The mind's tendency to blend memories into a composite view of the past is well represented here. The artist's ability to alter our experience of time, create anticipation without as much as the hint of life on camera, and ability to manipulate our faith into believing his spaces are "real," make Christopher Saah a savvy cinematographer of the still image.



If dreams could explain themselves to us, they might well do so in verse. **DON COOK**'s explorations into the architecture of the written word carry us within eyeshot of the mind's epicenter. He systematically breaks down the poems of Emily Dickinson, then translates them, building structures that give form to her ethereal musings. Dickinson's unusual structure is the basis of a formula in which each element relates to the placement of a wall in the maquettes the artist builds and then depicts in paintings and photographs. Cook found the visual metaphors of the poet's aesthetic resulted in distinctly modernist houses in the style of Neutra. Having embellished them with the symbols of luxury such as cars and swimming pools, they seem even more enticing yet remain impenetrable. Dickinson, a known recluse, often wrote of the mind as a physical space and of longing for a place out of her reach. Cook is an obsessive voyeur, hovering in the antechamber of the innermost recesses of the mind, yearning, like Dickinson, to enter a space that evades us.



Zooming in further, we finally find ourselves inside the architecture of Wonderland. **MARY TEMPLE** depicts light in three dimensions. Single pieces of cut paper are the raw material for her "Paper Rooms" series. Unfurling boxes, these hung pieces have angled walls with delicately cut out windows and floors bearing the traces of sunlight filtering in through them, yet there is no actual light in Temple's forms. The tree branch shadow patterns have no foundation in waking reality. These enigmatic shapes are whispers in the otherwise deafening silence of the ghost world. Temple has given form to memory, alluding to a landscape lost somewhere in the recesses of the mind. Although we sense the sun beginning to rise in Temple's interiors and feel its warmth on the back of our closed eyelids as light streams into our dark unconsciousness, the promise of breaking slumber's spell proves false. Without doors, we are lost again, never able to reach the light at the end of the proverbial tunnel or conversely, to wake up.

Putting their fingers on what eludes the rest of us and mapping the terrain of the places our own eyes cannot see, these artists provide graphic insight into a world that defies the laws of logic. They encourage viewers to take a second look and subtly remind us that sometimes being lost does not necessitate being found.

THE ELUSIVE SURROUNDING

April 30 - May 31, 2008

Lorna Bieber
Karl Connolly
Don Cook
Richard Edson
Dennis Farber

Hidenori Ishii
Christopher Saah
Krista Steinke
Mary Temple

Al Miner b. 1977, NY, NY

Washington, DC based Al Miner is the Curatorial Assistant and Assistant to the Chief Curator and Acting Director at the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Smithsonian Institution. His most recent project, a major sculpture commission by conceptual artist Dan Graham, will open in May 2008. Independent curatorial pursuits include a 2007 writing residency at Maryland Art Place in Baltimore, MD.

Miner holds an MFA in painting and mixed media from Queens College, CUNY (2000) and a post-graduate certificate in museum studies from the George Washington University (2006).



C. GRIMALDIS GALLERY
523 N. Charles Street. Baltimore, MD. 21201
www.cgrimaldisgallery.com. 410.539.1080