

KATE WERBLE GALLERY

83 VANDAM STREET NEW YORK, NY 10013

The Herald-Sun

'Art of the moment' at CAM Gallery

Blue Greenberg

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Against a background of photographs by nationally acclaimed artist Melanie Schiff, CAM (Contemporary Art Museum) is celebrating its first two years of operation in its renovated wholesale grocery building in downtown Raleigh. The photographs cover a four-year period when the artist was traveling between Los Angeles and Chicago; they are about the places she saw, the suggestion of past presences and how light plays its magic on those sights. Kate Shafer, who has taken over as interim director, walked me through the show and talked excitedly about the artist, about the new vision for CAM and about a big show coming in October. She reminded me of the partnership between N.C. State's School of Design and the CAM Foundation. "The Foundation owns the building and joining with the School of Design gave CAM institutional and financial support and scholarly credibility," she said.

But back to the exhibit. The large gallery seems empty with its 24 framed photographs. The spaces between the images, however, afford the viewer a luxury not always available. There is an insistence on slowing down, of taking time to look; the promise is the special experience which accompanies prolonged contemplation.

For example, in "Clay Birds," the artist offers a dry brown landscape; a mountain in the far ground marked with bursts of bright color and the near parched ground dotted with empty shotgun shell casings. The patches of color are all about the shooters we do not see.

A photograph like this invites a slow look, otherwise you will miss the real story. Shafer insisted the artist is not making environmental statements; rather, she has come upon this place by accident and has used exquisite light to turn it into poetry.

"Hellroom" is a picture of a cavernous space awash with blood red paint and graffiti; we look out into the light. The gallery guide tells us this is a large drainage pipe; it also feels like a tunnel leading from the players' locker rooms onto a stadium field where the blood sport of soccer or football is played by modern day gladiators. Whatever this place is, people have been here and left their marks. Those marks invite us to imagine who they were and what they were doing in such a place.

In "Towers," three giant cypresses jut far into the sky. Like the stone spires of a great cathedral, these mark the spiritual in nature. "Blood Bank" is an eerie waterscape, leading our eyes to a fallen tree delicately settled on the bank like two severed skinny legs spattered with blood. Without the trained eye of the artist would we have seen the mystery, the beauty, the hidden message?

"Water Birth" struck a chord, perhaps because I am always worrying about my house plants when going on vacation. The artist has chosen an attic bathroom bathed in pink from a skylight. A healthy plant sits in a glamorous tub. A closer look shows a dead plant on the floor and a makeshift shower attached to the slanted ceiling. This city dweller holds on to a bit of nature while off on an extended stay.

The space between the images at an exhibition has much to say about the art; this is the perfect example.

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Shafer said CAM runs as a true partnership and it works well because the facility is small enough for the partners to talk to each other all the time. The Foundation handles membership and fundraising, and the School of Design is in charge of education programs and the exhibitions. There is a huge education program, especially for high school students. In the summer there are studio spaces and a design camp. The building acts as an active community center. Shafer said, "We like to think we work from the bottom up. We engage visitors in order to get feedback from the general public."

When I complained to Shafer that most of their shows seem to be more design-oriented than "fine arts," she said, "I get just the reverse from the folks at the Design School who tell me the art here is too wedded to the 'fine arts.'"

We talked about Schiff's photographs and her philosophy and then the conversation turned to a big show scheduled to open in October. "It's all about mapping," Shafer said, "but the art does not look like maps." She continued, telling me it will be a group show with about 17 artists and it is about recording information. "I have always been interested in order and organization," she said. "Collecting, recording and owning give us our culture."

The centerpiece of the show will be a Maya Lin sculpture, "Blue Lake Pass." For those who do not know, Lin designed the Vietnam Memorial in Washington, D.C.

I also spoke with Marjorie Hodges, Director of Contemporary Art Foundation, and she said they are actively encouraging other nonprofit organizations to use the building for seminars or meetings; it all has to do with more outreach and a desire to be a community-based art place. She added, "CAM is a non-collecting institution, so the emphasis is on cutting edge exhibitions."

Hodges works for the Foundation; Shafer works for the School of Design. According to Shafer, this makes the organization, "Super strong."

I hope the sharing will continue to work, because the promise of "art of the moment" is what we all want to see.

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