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Frank Gohlke's "Gwinn Estate, Bratenahl; View North."

visual arts: Picture Shows

*Fact versus fiction—
and is there a difference?*

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It once had the power to steal your soul. It was later given the character of irrefutable evidence—the truth in visual form. But a photograph is not reality. This idea is at least 30 years old, yet the perception that a photograph is “proof” persists in the public mind: a fire fed by the media. A photograph is simply an

image from a specific time and place, framed, lit, angled and “caught” by the eye behind the camera. Like crime, photographs can be spontaneous acts of passion—or premeditated and carefully planned.

At first glance, the two photography exhibitions on view at the Museum of Contemporary Art (Picture Show: James Casebere; through February 2) and the Cleveland Museum of Art (A City Seen; through January 26) would seem to have little in common.

New York artist James Casebere creates tabletop models of buildings and rooms made of paper, Styrofoam and plaster. Then he meticulously lights and shoots them, eventually blowing them up to human scale. They are wholly fictional places that look eerily real. Controlled from beginning to end by the artist, they exist as possible places, as though remembered in a dream.

The dozen photographers in A City Seen, however, were commissioned by

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A City Seen: Photos from The George Gund Foundation

the Gund Foundation to shoot images of the “real” Cleveland, from roots, rocks and trees to the faces of people working and playing; from its hidden neighborhoods to its grand, crumbling infrastructure. These would appear to be documentary: a varied view of Cleveland, a visual record of its body and people. Yet these images often look “unreal”—shots taken from high vantage points above the Cuyahoga River, scenes that are blurred on purpose, images shot through the guts of a machine.

There is as much artifice and construction in *A City Seen* as in the stirring scenes of James Casebere. It underscores the notion that truth is stranger than fiction.

Casebere’s work is influenced by architecture, film noir and sculpture. He was one of several photographers in the 1970s who turned away from the existing world to create fictions of their own. Casebere’s first constructions were obviously “fake”; the dimensions were flat and the images simplistic. They functioned more as a commentary on photography.

Later came his “prison” and “asylum” series, several of which are included in the show at MOCA. They are haunting, monochromatic images that raise more questions than they answer. Are these rooms—unfurnished but for a slab of a bed—prison cells? Or are they cells for monastic contemplation? Or rooms to shut away the insane? The sole light source is a high, barred window that provides light, but no view. The windows are round or framed in a gothic arch; the ambiance is strongly medieval. In one scene, the round window looks like a gigantic full moon.

These are spaces of quiet terror, where the minds of monks, criminals and psychotics do their solitary work. The variations of gray, the filtered light and the ambiguity only heighten the

power of such images. And it raises the question: What kind of society built such spaces?

Casebere’s constructed images link into historical, mythical and social consciousness, as do the images in *A City Seen*. The photographs of Lee Friedlander purport to reveal the city at work: the people who bake bread, fix machines, check IV bottles—the nuts and bolts of the city. But this is the gritty, manufacturing myth of Cleveland, and the people depicted are in service to machines, which hold their own power. These men and women are not individuals, but archetypes, the working-class heroes.



Lee Friedlander – “People Working”

If the machines are holy in Friedlander’s work, the palaces of culture in Linda Butler’s photographs are even holier. These are the images the Cleveland cheerleaders want to show the world: sweeping marble staircases, stately parlors, box seats at the theater, and the gleaming back of a suit of armor. Cold, precise images, they are wholly devoid of the organic messiness of life. It’s as if no one ever sat in those seats or stepped on the marble: an idealized Cleveland, with all the ambience of a mausoleum.

Of the photographers included in *A*

City Seen, only Frank Gohlke and Douglas Lucak picture Cleveland as a constructed landscape—whether made by God, man or machine. Lucak’s glowing, imprecise images of modest houses, chain-link fences, overgrown rosebushes and water towers were made with homemade pinhole cameras (oatmeal boxes, film canisters) that eschew the minute details and aim for the general shape of things. Raised in and fascinated by the inner city, Lucak captures the essence of neighborhoods. This isn’t Cleveland, but how it feels to be in Cleveland. They are the most altered images in *A City Seen*, as well as the most beautiful.

Gohlke turned his back on the city grid and trained his eye on Lake Erie, our own wine-dark sea. His images of the ever-changing waters of Erie reveal Cleveland and its inhabitants to be perched on the edge of something great and powerful—which city planners turned their backs on. The horizon line suggests infinity, the mist and fog evoke an aura of mystery and the movement of the water holds unconscious power.

Water is an agent of chaos in Casebere’s latest work, making its debut at MOCA. After constructing his hallways, staircases and doorways, he floods them with water. Treated with dye and resin to create shadows, patterns and textures that are quite luscious and dreamy, the water is a subconscious entrance to these possible stories. Because the viewer stands at a point where the water has rushed in, one seems able to wade right into these scenes.

Interestingly, Casebere considers his work socially conscious. By reconstructing certain styles of architecture and “ruining” them with water, he comments on architecture’s relevance. The undertow, he seems to say, is always there to pull one under.