

We are well past the point where we look to photography for any verification of the actual. In fact, for decades, the assault on photography's integrity as documentation of the real has at times seemed a jihad waged by artists determined to subvert photography's evidential authority. Photography's promise of "capturing" reality, long an ambition of visual artists, is as elusive a hope as that of a paint-wielding dauber. Now, photography is simply another medium, a neutral vehicle available for endless manipulation.

It does not, however, like painting or sculpture, have the capacity to be self-generative. It is dependent upon its own process of "capturing" that which already exists in some other form. And just as painting drags its romantic past forward, so too is photography haunted by its own documentary beginnings.

For many artists, the skeletons in photography's closet are too tempting to avoid, and artists playfully pit the assumption of the real against the obvious sham of the depicted in an endless loop of tired "ironic" revelations and jokes on the gullibility of perception. But when a photographed image succeeds in creating an alternate world, it enters a new domain. The barriers to the metaphoric which are created by its dependence upon the actual drop away and the photograph stands in parallel to the world as all allegories do. The semblance of the real becomes the actual of the metaphor. This is why James Casabere's miniature empty spaces are so affecting and haunted. Their alienated intimacy invites the tender parts of the psyche to inhabit the emptiness like it would a memory theater.

Kim Keever's arresting photographs of invented landscapes produce this very same reaction. There is an otherworldliness to them which the mind subliminally registers even though the images seem familiar. The combination of recognition and dissonance induces that alertness which accompanies the tug of curiosity. What are they? Where are they?

Locating oneself in space and reconnoitering the terrain are instinctive gestures that lie close to the autonomic. We scan physical surroundings before we consciously register that we have done so. Our connection to place is primal. So, an image of a world, so like our own that the differences are hard to perceive, yet clearly unknown, startles us down to our most primitive cells.

Keever's photographs, all large-format color cibachromes, initially look like homages to Hudson River School landscapes. They depict moody peaks set against blazing skies with diaphanous clouds draping themselves around the mountains' shoulders, as in *YELLOW RIVER*, 1998, or verdant valleys in luminous color swayed between dark escarpments under a heavy blue clouded sky, *BEST OF BLUE*, 1998.

But it is impossible to locate the place from which these images were captured. The photographer, and now the viewer, seems to hover in space, omnipresent. And, in fact there is a subdued hush cast over these images as if one is hearing witness from a detached position to the earth in formation. There is no vegetation, no sign of life, only the forces of wind, rock and water. They bring to mind a comment I once read

that, "there were sunsets, mountains, and ocean shores before there were eyes to see them."

Keever's photographs have just this quality of incipience, of a world before there was life to register its image. It is a wonderful play on the concept of the documenting lens which is, after all, a surrogate eye. How can one make a visual document of that which precedes the mechanism of sight?

It is interesting to consider that Keever started as a painter of landscapes, though the few images I have seen from those early years were always depictions of land dissected, as if he wanted to peel back the layers to see what lay underneath and reveal it like a flayed frog in biology class. The urge to uncover those layers has manifested itself as a desire to recreate the very forces that produced the final image, and then freeze it in the camera's artificial eye. It is an age-old relationship, part worship, part desire to control.

Keever's methods are as intriguing as the finished images, and to show this, his "laboratory" has been recreated in a separate room of the gallery. He builds his landscapes out of plaster in a large aquarium, then with colored dyes infused into the water that make clouds, and various methods of lighting, he brings his surrogate worlds into existence.

But looking at the Chaotic jumble of hoses, clip-on lights, dye-filled plastic bottles, a spaghetti-like mass of light cords and the plaster models, it is still hard to understand how he obtains as transporting and luminous an image as *EARLY ROCKIES*, 1998, which in its golden somberness recalls Fredrich Church's great paintings of Catopaxi. Keever's images are an echo of American mythology- the touchstones of New World utopianism. Summoning them through such painstaking and deliberate a process is not a casual gesture. It reiterates a basic relationship between the form of the world and what our eye/mind knows when it sees.

The dissonance of seeing Nature's most awesome and sublime moments captured in a fish tank is jarring. But perhaps the lesson has little to do with either the methods or the clever play upon the dissembling character of perception. These are lessons we already know too well. After we get beyond the beauty and the masterfulness of Keever's rendering, we are still left with the image.

If viewers feel too clever or too alienated to believe that an image referring to the natural world can have any effect on them, then they can revel in the artist's ability to play mock mirror to the world and, by implication, mock those who would take anything given there as sacred. But I would read these images differently: as an affirmation of how we take from the world the forms that make our psychological homes within ourselves. When we encounter these images, no matter how they are achieved, they speak to us of something larger than ourselves. Something for which we are ever in search, and when we find it, we experience a form of knowing completion. After all, we are all living in a fish tank of one sort or another.

by **KIT WHITE**