

## FOTOSEPTIEMBRE Week 2: Depth of field

by Sarah Fisch



"Bubbles" by Sharon Milford.

courtesy photos



Aaagh! The onslaught of photographic images that engulfs San Antonio each September is upon us again! Now in its 13th year, FOTOSEPTIEMBRE USA has attached itself to gallery and museum walls all across our city, and hardly a local art venue is safe from the extravaganza.

It's hard to talk about photography. It's beset with slippery artistic criteria, rapid technological advances blurring the line between straight-ahead documentation and tricky digital manipulation, and complicated by its omnipresence. Photography as art is sometimes sharpened and sometimes dulled by its common use in all manner of advertisement, and by the fact that most of us have at least some experience in wielding a camera. Photography is at once profoundly democratic and the tool of crass commercialism, a thing of beauty whose endless potential originality is already often hampered by tired ideas.

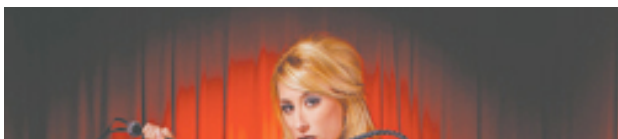
A damned fine place to get a look at all of these contradictions in action is at the Instituto Cultural de México at HemisFair Park, where for free you can see four very diverse exhibitions. "Premios del Salón de la Fotografía de Nuevo León" is perhaps the strongest, and casts in bright light the diversity and vigor of the ongoing Mexican contemporary-art renaissance.

Standout Nuevo León artists include Fernando Cervantes, whose digital chromographic color prints, "Oculto I al VI," from his series *La Memoria de la Forma/ The Memory of the Form*, depict eerie animalistic forms which are in fact utilitarian objects wrapped and shrouded in plastic sheeting, newsprint, or plastic shopping bags. In "Oculto II," a pair of curved standpipes cocooned in plastic evoke bandaged flamingoes, while a blocky form in "Oculto VI" (a gas meter, perhaps?) suggests a blindfolded prisoner from another disturbing set of photos, those taken in Abu Ghraib. His work is playful, confident, and terrifying.

Juan Rodrigo Llaguno's series of three large-scale color



"Oculto IV," part of "Premios del Salón de la Fotografía de Nuevo León," by Fernando Cervantes.



silver-gelatin prints of the composer Philip Glass manage to escape the confines of celebrity portraiture and confront us with the man's haunted eyes, his weary expression of resignation, the eloquent history of his hands.

And Carlos Flores's spectacular installation of text and snapshots, entitled "Verás Que Quieres Ver/ You'll See What You Want to See," functions both as photo art and poem; across each color plate — of young hipster dudes holding aloft copies of a newspaper emblazoned "Coffee Times," or a puppy escaping from a cardboard box, a smiling monk, a pair of feet, a mountain range — there appears a sort of artistic slogan, such as "Cree en el misterio" ("Believe in mystery"), "Entrega todo a través de su obra" ("Give everything through your work"), and "Observa al ser humano y su relación con el eterno" ("Observe the human being and its relation to the eternal.") The overall effect is joyous, lovely, and genuinely encouraging, like a cross between the Brazilian song "Águas de Março" and Rilke's *Letters to a Young Poet*.

Speaking of young poets, elsewhere in the Instituto hangs a group show of student photographers from San Antonio College, curated by Rebecca Dietz. Among the gems are Kelly Walls' black-and-white pinhole images "Cityscape on St. Mary's" and "Sign on Laredo," which seize familiar aspects of San Anto and warp them into dream visions born of the technical particularities of pinhole-camera technique and a poet's rigorous eye. Fernando Andrade's portrait of a beautiful sleeping girl half-lit by a staticky TV has a mesmerizing, offhand sexuality. And Sharon Milford's series of four black-and-white abstract prints are a marvel, suggesting in one image a windblown field of wheat or rustling hair, in another a transfixing scatter of tree limbs, while in the others, refracted, sequin-like flickers of light recall both disco bling and mysterious glowing creatures from oceanic depths.

But here's some Rilkean advice to young photogs in general: No more doll heads, OK? Doll bits were already tired when Courtney Love celebrated them in song, and that was back in 1994! It's called a trope, which in artistic terms means a turn of phrase, a shorthand — a cliché. Remember 2001's *Ghost World*? Remember the pretentious, self-indulgent short film Ileana Douglas's art-teacher character made? Chock full of dollies! Doll parts are the go-to readymade of every coffeehouse artiste, and y'all can do, and do do, better than that.

Upstairs at the Instituto, where the air conditioning was seemingly off, one encounters "Mini-Series," a group show of international artists curated by Michael Mehl, the visionary behind FOTOSEPTIEMBRE. Here the emphasis





An entry in Marcelo Isarrualde's "Stiletto" series.

seems to be on erotica of the doll-head school, sad to say. My take on this is surely, admittedly, subjective — a guy in a Hawaiian shirt seemed absolutely transported by Marcelo Isarrualde's color print series "Stiletto," which depicts *Maxim*-ready models in various stages of undress (corsets, fishnets, tattoos, etc.) posing before David Lynchian red drapery. For Suicide Girls-era softcore porn, "Stiletto" is pretty slick. As contemporary art, though, it left this viewer feeling like the bored kids in Illeana Douglas's summer-school class. It's a shame, too, because there's some stronger showings, such as Natalie Doust's series "Frozen In Time," which have real power to provoke.

Provocative indeed are the rapturous and moving printed stills of master cinematographer Gabriel Figueroa, whose *Centenario* show can be seen on the Instituto's ground floor. Captured images from 20th-century cinematic masterworks such as Buñuel's *Los Olvidados*, Fernandez's *La Perla*, and Huston's *Night of the Iguana* evoke real and lasting *pasión*. Like the best photographs, they must be seen to be believed. •

## FOTOSEPTIEMBRE

### FOTOSEPTIEMBRE at the Instituto

10am-6pm Tue-Fri, 11am-5pm Sat & Sun

Through Oct 26

Free

Instituto Cultural De Mexico

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