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Print

Art

Shadow puppets and water music

by Sarah Fisch



courtesy

"Water and Weight #165" by Kenda North, on view at UTSA Satellite Space.

Thankfully, there are no artist or curatorial statements in evidence at the UTSA Satellite Space's alluring and immersive FOTOSEPTIEMBRE show, "Figure and Illusion: Photography by Susan kae Grant and Kenda North." The images are eloquent without resorting to textual explanations — there's lots of thinking room here, with space for fantasy as well as analysis. Grant and North are a good bet to show together, too; while their arsenals of visual gestures differ, their preoccupations interact in surprisingly complementary ways, addressing sexuality and gender, the material and the mystical, myth and symbol.

Grant, whose series of large-scale black-and-white photos is called *Night Journey*, employs a sort of shadow-projection technique that evokes the shifting iconography of the subconscious. Silhouetted figures of men, women, babies, devils, and dogs engage in balletic pantomimes amid filigrees of twining ivy and the stark outlines of chairs or cradles, and are often slightly warped at the picture planes' edges, as though the scenes might flash forward or backwards in time. I was reminded both of Kara Walker's exuberant silhouette installations and the nightmarish beauty of black-and-white films like *Night of the Hunter*, in which children are stalked through a stylized natural landscape by a spectral Robert Mitchum on horseback.

Images such as "These Hands Listening," in which a baby floats free of its rising cradle into a gorgeously menacing canopy of tree branches just out of the reach of its wailing mother, or "Sex is Interrupted," in which cat-shadows prowl under an old-fashion bedframe while a horned

demon brandishes a terrifying tail (or is it a phallus?), engross, spook, and bewitch. It's impossible to place these characters in any particular period, though the spectacular "There is an Understanding," in which a veiled bride dances with a man with a rabbit's head, seems to point to Victorian conventions. Cinematic, mythic, and deeply irrational in the best way, Grant's work delivers both sensual pleasure and visceral punch.

North's collection, titled *Water and Weight*, explores the body — his, hers, and ours — as a kinetic agent upon which water acts as an elemental partner, an equalizing force. All but one of her arresting color giclee prints depict headless bodies in varying states of flow, weightlessness, and cover-up. Interestingly, as in Grant's

dreamy images, nary a clearly shot face is to be seen. This physical anonymity becomes iconic against the unapologetic, chlorinated blue of a manmade pool's water, which serves as continuous backdrop, and alludes to a sort of earthly heaven. Maybe it's with the recent Beijing Olympics that all bodies in water have taken on an erotic charge; in any case, the timing of this show couldn't be better. I've got water on the brain. North's gorgeous semi-nudes, as in "Water and Weight #165," where a woman's torso is swathed in a lacy white crochet throw that acts as an improvised gown, or the male figure caught in a diaphanous dark net in "Water and Weight #176," are beautiful because they recall pleasurable sensations of weightlessness. In "Water and Weight #139," a man in full suit and tie (though, humorously, sans shirt), seems to clutch a Bible, hinting at the grim power of corporate or religious institutions to control pleasure. But our bodies, North seems to say, know better.

FOTOSEPTIEMBRE

Figure and Illusion

Noon-6pm Fri-Sun

Through Sep 21

UTSA Satellite Space

115 Blue Star

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