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## front page: top stories

VISUAL ARTS:

### The imperfect eye

BY ELAINE WOLFF

As technology advances so does our ability to blur the lens

**N**ews stories reporting

that technological advances are being made toward a camera that sees and adjusts just like the human eye always leave me wondering about the subjectivity of our visual experience. How closely does what we see mirror the thing itself? And more importantly, how close is our image to the images held by others? One of the most fascinating aspects of photography is that it continually raises these questions, even as recent trends in technique and format push the medium closer to painting. The entry of digital photography and printing into the dialogue further complicates these questions.

September is FotoSeptiembre in San Antonio, and the SA Fotofestival, as it is alternatively styled, is underway at galleries across town, which provides ample opportunity to contemplate these and other questions. The field is so large and the potential subjects so numerous that, like the art itself, it helps to have a frame. Advances in surreal photography aside, I think the medium's strengths are still portraiture and landscape - landscape in the broad sense, conveying a sense of place. In other words, it is still a documentary medium.

Mary Ann Smothers Bruni and Jonathan Calvert, whose large-format color images hang in a two-person show at the Central Library curated by former SAMA director George Neubert, use photography to document their geographic and cultural excursions. Calvert has expeditioned to locales that will make *Adventure* and *Outside* subscribers drool: Tibet, Nepal, the Arctic and Antarctic, Patagonia. His photos are remarkable not for the artistry, which is average, but for the simple miracle that they exist. The frigid air of Mt. Everest's North Face brushes your nose with a chilly reminder that technology has been both a tool of conquest and preservation.

Calvert's images of Peruvian and Asian villagers are well-composed snapshots that convey his transitory progress across the globe as an appreciative interloper. Bruni, on the other hand, has taken an anthropological approach to her studies of religion and culture, and her images likewise seek to draw the viewer into the foreign rituals she documents. (The show's title, *Explorers and Discoverers*, smartly evokes the philosophical and moral ambiguities of both approaches.) The bulk of the work exhibited here is from a Ramadan festival and from a



Contemporary Mexican photographer Graciela Iturbide is the subject of a retrospective at Blue Star Art Space that highlights new large format prints of remote areas in the King Ranch holdings.

### Mary Ann Smothers Bruni, Jonathan Calvert: Explorers and Discoverers

9am-9pm Mon-Thu,  
9am-5pm Fri-Sat,  
11am-5pm Sun  
Through Sep 30  
Free

**Central Library**  
600 Soledad  
225-4728

### Nathalie Daoust: Tokyo Girls

10am-5pm Mon-Fri  
Through Oct 5  
Opening reception:  
6-9pm Sat, Sep 11  
Free

**ONE9ZERO6 Gallery**  
1906 S. Flores  
227-5718



09/09/2004

Passion Play performed in San Antonio, a juxtaposition meant to promote the cause of peace and understanding. The gilded robes and ecstatic, but closed, expressions of the celebrants trace our common tether to the ancient Middle East.

In the cause of voyeurism for art, Nathalie Daoust's *Tokyo Girls*, curated by Michael Mehl at Andy Benavides' ONE9ZERO6 Gallery, takes top honors. The soft-focus portraits of attractive young Asian women dressed up like classic American pin-up girls are lenticular prints that create the illusion of 3D movement. In this instance, the effect enhances the illicit feelings invoked by the combination of old-fashion aesthetics and lingerie. Presenting contemporary looking women scantily dressed or even nude is hardly titillating anymore, and Daoust's show plows fertile ground for discussing provocation, the American dream, and a host of related topics.

For the traditionalists in the crowd, Blue Star Art Space has brought a sure-fire home run to town: a "retrospective" of the work of contemporary Mexican photographer Graciela Iturbide, showcasing new prints of remote King Ranch land printed by local Alternative Ink. In the background are scores of gelatin prints drawn from the artist's stash at the Wittliff Collection of Mexican and Southwestern photography at Texas State University-San Marcos. As a local photo-grapher and fan pointed out to me, there's not much transition between the work for which Iturbide, a student of Manuel Alvarez Bravo, is known - portraits capturing ironic moments in the transition of Mexican culture from ancient and indigenous to modern and globalized - to the landscapes, which were commissioned by members of the King Ranch families. But, for spiritual vagabonds hoping for a glimpse into the soul of Mexico at the hands of a skilled photographer, the earlier gelatin prints will be plenty enticing on their own. The images range from poetry, as in the head and shoulders of a smiling woman lying on a beach, sea shells covering her eyes, to travelogue, as in the well-known portrait of an Indian woman sporting several large iguanas on her head, to the confrontational documentation of coiffed women throwing gang signs in front of a mural lauding heroes of the Mexican revolution.

Hanging in the main gallery, the large square landscapes are giclee prints with heavy brown and red tones, to the extent that they add a thick layer of atmosphere to the sparsely populated frames - almost the nostalgic tones of sepia. Among the best are rolling sand dunes sprouting the stark remains of trees (As soon as the state legislature outlaws driving on Texas' public beaches, I'm in favor of the King Ranch going ahead and donating the seaside acreage to the public trust) and a long shot of a circus leaving town.

One thing that the contrast between old and new techniques makes abundantly clear is that digital printing is another method for producing images, not a replacement for traditional development. For all the soft beauty of the landscapes, I hankered for a gelatin print, its starker contrasts and greater range of shadows.

There's tweaking and then there's tweaking. Local photographer Al Rendon, who says he initially felt ambivalence about the new photography technology, has embraced the possibilities wholesale, exhibiting a series of color prints that he scanned from negatives and manipulated with Photoshop filters. The resulting giclee prints almost create an optical illusion: is it a watercolor or a photograph? The precision of the depth of field, size ratios, and composition bespeak photography, but

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**Graciela Iturbide:  
Ojos Para Volar**

Noon-6pm Mon-Sun  
Through Oct 10  
Free

**Blue Star Art Space**  
116 Blue Star  
227-6960

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**Al Rendon:  
Colores Del Rio**

10am-6pm Mon-Sat, Sep 16-Oct 31  
Free

**Artistic Endeavors Gallery**  
La Villita, Building 25  
222-2497  
224-1848



**Nathalie Daoust employs the playful lenticular method of printing that gives her *Tokyo Girls*, on view at ONE9ZERO6, the illusion of provocative motion.**

the "fresco" and other effects he layers on the original image turn foliage and faces into softly pixelated approximations.

Rendon grew up on the downtown river, and the images themselves have a dual nature: At first glance they look ready-made for the tourist crowd, capturing the colorful reflection of table umbrellas in the river, or the streak of holiday lights below a bridge, but, on longer reflection, a soft-spoken ambivalence comes through. The water itself is the subject here, and ultimately many of the images are documentary in the best sense, allowing the subjects within the frame to tell their own unfinished story.

As for the technique, it is still waiting to be perfected, but what is really interesting is that the prints reveal the human hand pushing at the technology to achieve a desired outcome, a struggle that is mostly invisible with traditional darkroom printing. •

By **Elaine Wolff**

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