

# CURRENT

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**FOTO FANTASIES**

**FOTOSEPTIEMBRE'S  
NEW VISIONS / PG 31**

# MIXING METAPHORS

**Fotoseptiembre offerings ignite the Instituto Cultural de Mexico**

SCOTT ANDREWS

“Mixed Metaphors,” a suite of seven exhibits curated by Fotoseptiembre’s founder and director Michael Mehl, presents elaborately constructed works by photographers from Switzerland, Mexico, the U.S., and Taiwan. Susan Burnstine uses simple handmade cameras to capture dark dreamscapes; Gabriel Figueroa Flores blends images sourced from diverse locales to fabricate towers of fantasy; subverting the mundane are the images of Christian Lichtenberg, whose apparent found scenes contain subtle impossibilities. And though the physical and imaginative geographies on view are wide-ranging, a singular message is delivered: the camera is a brush, another tool in the artist’s kit. The desire to present an objective reality is of interest only to the propagandist. Or perhaps not.

Alex Gertschen and Felix Meier, based in Lucerne, Switzerland, have been making images as Alex & Felix for 12 years. With backgrounds in goldsmithing and hairdressing and graphic design, they bring a handwork ethic to their image making, which is reflected in their current series, *13 Queens*. Following the tenets of tableau photography, they create intricate sets of improbable scenes, then record them without the use of post-production changes. Though the 13 Queens are fantastical ladies — each bedecked with the hieratic emblems of her rule — the artists’ presentation of a “real,” un-doctored image

## Mixed Metaphors

Free  
10am-6pm Tue-Fri,  
11am-6pm Sat,  
11am-5pm Sun  
Instituto Cultural de México  
600 Hemisfair Park  
(210) 227-0123  
saculturamexico.org



From left: Lori Nix, *Library*; Gabriel Figueroa Flores, *Torre Foliada*; Shen, Chao-Liang, *Yunlin County, Taiwan*.

might seem to embrace an impulse akin to street photography and the “capture the moment” notion popularized by Cartier-Bresson. But the seeming transparency in the technique of Alex & Felix turns the real on its head. Queen Tin (see this week’s cover) sprouts flippers from her head; sardine and caviar tins surmount dangling fish lures and a cameo portrait. Queen Happy, festooned with egg cartons, bags of pills, and a tiara sporting plastic gears, seems sad. While we might guess she comments on the false promises of Big Pharma, the presence of toast epaulets on the bare shoulders of her sister Queen Spoon remain inexplicable. These are, then, unknowable symbols — a personal codex. The photographs may be conventional, but the made world they depict, certainly not.

Lori Nix, born in rural Norton, Kansas, considers herself a “faux landscape photographer.” Her series *The City* is, like the works of Alex & Felix, photographic images of constructed scenes. Similar to the interiors of Thomas Demand, they are records of miniature sets. But

unlike Demand’s prosaic surrounds, the world Nix envisions is post-apocalyptic: trees sprout within abandoned libraries, a church has become a storeroom for old signage. The classic columns of an art museum hold up walls empty of all but a few paintings. Everyone is missing, minutes or years ago. But in the midst of dystopia, hope seems to stir — for the vegetable world, if not for us. A banana tree erupts in a ruined shopping mall, ferns invade a vacuum showroom. Many of the fixtures in the scenes picture icons of mid-century modernism, a shrewd warning against nostalgia.

A sort of nostalgia is seen darkly in *Absence of Being*, black and white photographs taken in New York, Chicago, and Los Angeles by Susan Burnstine of Chicago, now based in L.A. These cityscapes recall early works by Stieglitz and Steichen, and would appear nicely as small photogravures. Printed in the standard four-foot size of the “Mixed Metaphor” shows, they are best seen from a distance. And they are imbued with the far-away — more hazy memories of early photography than attempts to recapture a bygone era, the comparison gives way to



a closer truth — recollected dream space, glimpses from the night world touched briefly before they disappear.

From Mexico City, veteran photographer Gabriel Figueroa Flores has travelled the world to capture iconic images of stone and stonework, then blended his finds. The result is the personal vision of *Lugares Prometidos*. Not attempting to fool the viewer, his composites expose rough edges of Photoshop cuttings, but his improbable constructs present strange symmetries, make concrete the missing edifices of legend. A ziggurat recalls Bruegel the Elder’s painting of the Tower of Babel, but made balanced, complete. Mayan walls are backdrop to the ruins of an Asian (perhaps) city. Huge roosters top other towers in a fortress awaiting siege. Like the other shows in the collection, this is story-making stuff, but the viewer is compelled to provide her own words.

Slightly off to the side from the other works is *Stage*, images by Shen Chao-Liang of Taiwan. Taken in his home country, the photographs of stage trucks

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present what appears to be a portable carnival. Bizarre walls of garish lights are used as backdrops for a variety of pageantry, from corporate celebratory dinners to political rallies. They are modern progeny of the red-enameled and gilt-carved pagodas and public buildings of classic Chinese architecture, an Asian rococo. But look again, and see the wrapped bottles awaiting the crowd, and off to the side, a lone worker or two preparing the gala. Though the scene seems to present updated, electrified memories of a vanished continent, there is tension in the moment, waiting for the quickly approaching future.

On the top floor galleries two shows by Swiss artists are hung facing each other: *Heimatland* by young photographers Ursula Sprecher and Julian Salinas, and *Commedia Dell’Arte* by Christen Lichtenberg. A generation older than the duo, Lichtenberg has traveled through what was Eastern Europe to document memories of two empires: vanished Soviet rule and resurgent Catholicism. Statues of military heroes are wrapped in plastic, as if waiting removal, but in accompanying scenes a crucifix and a human body are seen also covered up. Close horizons and centered compositions recall classic paintings, reinforced by repeated depictions of altars. But parts are out of whack, pieces of the composition fit formally but have been enlarged or shrunk to conform to the plan. What appears at a glance to be celebratory is wryly critical work not bereft of the humor of trying experience.

Sprecher and Salinas also take on expectations with a bit of wit, focusing their lens at Switzerland and its noted blend of natural and manmade balance. They attack the stories of experience with a gentle, but sharp, tug at the hem of convention’s garment: an idyllic mountain scene is interrupted by two hikers, rolling hills are sliced by a line of parked cars, and almost out of crop — a couple kissing. White glacier walls are attacked not by a rugged climber, but a lone walker who seems quite out of his element. Their targets are many, ranging from candid tourist photography to professional tourism-orientated photo spreads. But these are just the obvious topics, the joke is foremost a private one. If you get it, good. If not, find something in the picture to look at. The caveat of all seven exhibits might be: Be generous to the works, bring something to the show. If you do, you’ll offer generosity to yourself. **C**

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