

Thinking globally, acting locally

The High's showcase of *New Photography* is a large-scale smash

BY FELICIA FEASTER <<http://atlanta.creativeloafing.com/gyrobase/Results?author=oid%3A6>>

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New Photography

Through Oct. 1. High Museum of Art, 1280 Peachtree St. Tues.-Wed., 10 a.m.-5 p.m.; Thurs., 10 a.m.-8 p.m.; Fri.-Sat., 10 a.m.-5 p.m.; Sun., noon-5 p.m. \$10-\$15; free for members and children under age 6. 404-733-4444. www.high.org <<http://www.high.org/>> .

Regional photography fans who may have grown unaccustomed to seeing vital, smart contemporary photography at the High will gape, marvel, perhaps even ask a nearby guard to pinch them when they see the elegant and thought-provoking show of work in *New Photography*.

The exhibition features a symmetrical arrangement of four: two nationally known artists, Taryn Simon and Sze Tsung Leong, and two Atlanta-based photographers, Angela West and Ruth Dusseault.

At first glance, the juxtaposition might seem arbitrary, composed in a neat parallel with two bigger names, and two lesser-known ones. But the exhibition, organized by the High's relatively new photography curator, Julian Cox, builds its case for their connections slowly and surely, beginning with rooms dedicated to Simon's grave portraits of 2004 tsunami survivors.

Simon's work focuses on large-scale forces impacting on or embodied by individuals, a theme addressed in the other component of "Nonfiction" devoted to Simon's timely subject of the Middle East.

Despite wall text declaring Simon's "un-editorialized information," the work runs contrary to the questionable notion that photography can record an unvarnished, objective truth. Simon is a photographer defined by her choices, by what she excludes and includes in the frame, and an orchestration of people and setting for dramatic effect. Her decisiveness is evident in her effort to convey the Middle East's philosophical and gender extremes by shooting a Beirut "Divorcée" dressed in black lace underwear beneath a bare light bulb, like a *Flashdance*-era Jennifer Beals. This brazenly outfitted woman, set on "all systems go," is juxtaposed with her spiritual "off" switch: a Muslim religious leader draped in such an abundance of robes and head wear, his barely visible face seems a paltry concession to humanity amid the many layers of repression Simon conveys via wardrobe and curtained backdrop.

Though Simon often can work far afield, it is her closer-to-home work that proves the most powerful. In "The Innocents," Simon photographs men who were imprisoned for a crime, only to be later found innocent, largely because of mistaken identity.

With their dramatic lighting, rich, noirish coffee- and nicotine-stained ambiance, and echoes of confinement via walls and windows, her portraits have the vivid, immersive quality of film, articulating the dramatic burden of false imprisonment.

While Simon's work fetishizes individual experience, fellow New York-based artist Sze Tsung Leong's photographs of a rapidly gentrifying China largely are scrubbed clean of people, the better to illustrate the massive social changes wrought in architecture. While architecture is a force supposedly designed to accommodate people, it's often diametrically opposed to them.

Despite his reliance on inanimate architecture, Leong's marvelously methodic work can induce intense feelings of awe and pity at the cruel erasure and coldness of this social overhaul. You can see it illustrated in the plucky, doomed, ancient buildings representative of a peasant class that stand sentinel-like in the middle of wildfire, encroaching construction of the towering office buildings and apartment complexes that represent the new middle class.

At its heart, the work asserts the impermanence and fragility of our own humanity. It also renders on a large scale what Atlanta artist Ruth Dusseault's studies of the construction of the massive mixed-use development Atlantic Station renders on a smaller one.

But more than social or political upheaval, Dusseault's documentary project is interested in matters of form and process involved in Atlantic Station's construction. The work has a certain architectural chilliness not unlike the process it records, and it is often difficult to divine what Dusseault means to say about this cataclysm she documents. Some of the best work is, instead, out of character, and indulges a degree of wry humor that has been less visible in the artist's previous work but suggests a fertile new strain.

The American desire to both obliterate and then revisit the past in absurd theme-park form is examined in Dusseault's richly observant "Horse-drawn Caisson Delivering Peace and Justice" image of two neoclassical sculptures imported to adorn this manufactured small town. While the caisson drivers stand with hands over their hearts, clearly listening to the Pledge of Allegiance, the bevy of Hispanic or Latino workers pausing from their construction of the faux-city's apartment buildings sit or stand oblivious to the content of the ceremony below. One group sanctifies their role, the other merely pauses from getting down to business.

There is something to be said in the delicate coda that Dusseault's humor and Angela West's tenderness offer -- an addendum to issues that can seem alienating in their enormity.

West is especially useful in that regard, offering some sense of wistful hope in her connection to landscape and people. Her photographs of the verdant landscape of her hometown, Dahlenega, linger to an obsessive degree on an intimate, frankly sentimental, child's-eye view of landscape. In West's "Back Home," "place" is marked, not by road or signage, but by a familiar bush or tree. Her work cuts succinctly to the heart of our emotional investment in the physical world.

And so, the parallels between these four photographers are not so much between the little fish in a big pond and the big fish in a small pond.

In fact, all four photographers deal with haunted landscapes -- places that are imprinted with deeper, personal meaning despite efforts to alter them whether through faulty memory or architectural erasure. The artists attempt to make the past active, to give meaning to what appears neutral and objective and make their content live via the photographer's human touch.