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Review: Amy Stein at Blue Sky Gallery and Catharine Stebbins at Newspace

by Chas Bowie, for The Oregonian
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Amy Stein at Blue Sky Gallery

Amy Stein's arresting photographs of wild animal encounters on manicured lawns, littered parking lots and freeway off-ramps revel in a certain ambiguity.

In an online interview from 2008, however, the Brooklyn artist notes that not everyone is a fan of the work's subtleties. "Sometimes people are downright angry," Stein said, "when they learn my 'Domesticated' photos are staged.

For the sake of preventing "viewer rage" at [Blue Sky Gallery](#) this Saturday when Stein discusses her work, let's get this out of the way now: Most of the animals munching on french fries, spying on swimming tweens and lounging at construction sites in Stein's photographs are completely fake.

To be fair, Stein has a deft artistic touch and the off-camera assistance of an uncommonly skilled taxidermist who provides the assorted creatures for the photo shoots. Based on true stories about local run-ins with the native wildlife, her photographs convey an uncanny sense of chance and candor, despite the extensive preparation involved in their making.

"Watering Hole," one of the show's most striking images, finds a prepubescent girl standing rigidly on a diving board, her eyes locked on the black bear who watches her from across the chainlink fence. Stein shot the photograph from directly behind the hulking animal, heightening the tension of the scene.

It takes a moment to realize that, should Stein have survived the inevitable mauling a live bear would have likely administered at that close range, she would still have to account for why she was hiding in the bushes, taking pictures of a swimming child when this bear happened by. It's a ludicrous scenario, to be sure, but more than that, it's a testament to Stein's nuanced craft that the image remains so believable.

A strong narrative element courses through "Domesticated," recalling the suburban fiction of authors like Raymond Carver and A.M. Homes. For instance, it's not the pair of coyotes foraging through the garbage at twilight that clinches "Trasheaters." Rather, it's the warm golden light that emanates from the bedroom window of the unseen homeowners, who remain blissfully unaware of the hungry animals just outside their door.

While Stein's exhibition clearly occupies itself with notions of civilization and untamed nature, the real theme at work here is nothing short of life and death.

It's no leap to suggest that taxidermy, which lies at the heart of Stein's photographs, is a crude method of preservation whose main objective is to stuff dead animals so that they appear wholly undead.

But if taxidermied animals represent man's lame efforts to cheat death with phony facsimiles, it's hard to argue that photographs do anything different. This was never more evident than in 19th-century memorial photography, which strove for the appearance of peaceful vitality in the face of death. Even family snapshots are feeble attempts to fend off the reaper, countless writers have contended -- smiling paper faces destined to remain forever young.

Photography and taxidermy, which click like long-lost siblings in Stein's "Domesticated," both endeavor to prevent the final curtain from closing on its subjects. What's more, the ultimate achievement of these fictions is the illusion of eternal liveliness.

Seen this way, it's understandable that some viewers are upset to realize they had believed in the falsehoods all along.

"Domesticated," Blue Sky Gallery, 122 N.W. Eighth Ave.; 503-225-0210, www.blueskygallery.org. Hour: Tuesday-Sunday noon-5 p.m., through Aug. 2. Artist talk and book signing 3 p.m. Aug. 1, 3 p.m.; free.



Catharine Stebbins at Newspace

Getting down

Silence and solitude overwhelm the low desert landscapes of Altadena, Calif., photographer Catharine Stebbins, on view at [Newspace](#). Culled from her "Certain Places" series, the square compositions offer worm's eye views of the land in soft, muted tones.

With her camera resting directly on the dry ground, Stebbins uses an evocatively shallow depth of field to render only a small slice of the photo in focus. In lesser hands, these would be little more than pretty nature pictures, but Stebbins works with a painterly sense of light and a poet's sense of space and nature.

As if to argue against the majestic landscapes of fellow Californians Ansel Adams and Carleton Watkins, Stebbins' photographs reveal very little of the land. But what she does show -- the jazzy composition of a bramble patch, the bonsailike grandeur of a palm-sized stone and the dappled quality of early morning light on a cluster of sage leaves -- are intimate spaces of profound and quiet beauty.

Newspace Center for Photography, 1632 S.E. 10th Ave.; 503-963-1935, www.newspacephoto.org. Hours: Monday-Thursday 10 a.m.-8 p.m., Friday-Sunday 10 a.m.-6 p.m., through Aug. 2.