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PHOTOGRAPHY REVIEW

# An eye-opening Danforth biennial

By **Mark Feeney** Globe Staff, September 21, 2013, 6:00 p.m.



Among the works at Danforth Art is Virginia Mallon's "Out on the Salt – 2."

FRAMINGHAM — A biennial is about three things — or at least it ought to be — variety, quantity, and quality. Ideally, those things are mutually self-reinforcing. This year’s “New England Photography Biennial,” at Danforth Art, does well by all three. The biennial runs through Nov. 3.

There are nearly as many approaches taken by the photographers in the show as there are photographers — 44 in all, with a total of 76 images — and some of those photographers are very good indeed. The selections were made by Francine Weiss, curator at the Photographic Resource Center at Boston University.

Anyone familiar with Stefanie Klavens’s work on vintage movie theaters knows her affinity for aging opulence. There’s more age than opulence in her “How We Live” series, but both qualities are evident — as in the two examples here, “Barber Shop” (what exactly are those antlers doing on the wall?) and “Banquet Hall” (which, actually *is* pretty opulent).

Greer Muldowney’s view of new tower blocks in Hong Kong offers a very different approach to architecture from Klavens’s. She presents the structures as looming exteriors. They’re like intimidating sculpture, but with a sense of existing in an evacuated world. In that sense, they connect with the two images from Astrid Reischwitz’s “Bedroom Project.” Those pictures communicate a sense of cool, alluring emptiness. It’s hard to imagine any heads resting on those pillows or bodies lying on those beds.

Conversely, it’s hard to imagine anyone entering the two empty rooms Samuel Quinn documents — not because they feel uninhabited (they don’t), but because there’s such a sense of purity to them (yes, even with paint peeling off the ceiling) any human presence would feel like a violation. Quinn’s “Untitled 1” wouldn’t look amiss in an

Edward Hopper show. There's also something slightly Hopperish about Yorgos Efthymiadis's "Wall." But if it's the lighting and emptiness that first catch the eye, what holds it is the large map of the United States that's drawn on the ground. What is *that* doing there?

Human artifacts, rather than human absence, is what interests Robert Moran. The lunchbox and carrying case from his "Relics" series have a wondrous dignity. For all their battered appearance, they carry the burden of time's passage with surpassing handsomeness — thanks in no small part to the loving chasteness with which Moran has photographed them. The no-less-battered refrigerator in Virginia Mallon's "Out on the Salt — 2" is a study not in dignity but incongruity. Forlorn and rusted, it stands alone on a beach, part junk, part kitchen-appliance obelisk. Actually, it might not look out of place amid the noble barrenness of K. Tyler's "Untitled: Dust Storm Near Cemetery Rd. and HWY 23." It could have fallen off of one of the flatbed trucks lumbering through the dust. Forty inches by 40 inches, Tyler's photograph has the scale to stand up to the unforgiving space it contains.

ADVERTISING

Stephen Sheffield and Christine Collins have two photographs each. Think of them as studies in contrasting attire — and contrasting effect. The man in Sheffield’s “Life Saver” and “Offspring” wears a suit and hat. Nothing unusual about that — the look is rather “Mad Men,” in fact. Except that in “Life Saver” he stands on a dock, holding a life preserver, the mistiness of the lake behind him making it look as though he’s in a dream; and in “Offspring” he stands in a forest clearing holding a diapered child. So much for normality. In contrast, the bulky white hat, veil, tunic, and gloves worn in Collins’s pictures couldn’t be ostensibly odder — only there’s nothing ostensible about it. They’re from her series “The Bee Keepers.” For all that the camera may document, it’s context that defines.

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