WHERE ART MEETS COMICS

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ARTnews

Chinese Artists: The Next Generation
Playing with the Cubists: Decoding Léger’s Portraits
Ruth Gruber
International Center of Photography

How did a nice Jewish girl from Brooklyn end up in the Soviet gulag in 1935? The short answer is, she was on a fellowship, studying women under Communism, Fascism, and democracy.

Obviously it wasn’t a typical assignment for students of any gender, but Ruth Gruber (who turned 100 in September) had a way of doing things that people—especially women—just didn’t do.

The daughter of Russian immigrants documented some of the world’s most inaccessible places, from the Arctic frontier to the interiors of prison ships where Holocaust survivors were held in limbo. Her heartbreaking images of refugees, widely credited with influencing policy on Holocaust victims, have been shown regularly in Jewish museums. But this miniretrospective, her first exhibition in a mainstream venue, was long overdue.

At the time considered the world’s youngest Ph.D., Gruber received her doctorate at age 20 from the University of Cologne, where she wrote her dissertation on Virginia Woolf. Persuasive and well connected, she gained unprecedented access to the Soviet Arctic to pursue her research. She launched her journalistic career when she sent her secret interviews with Gulag prisoners to the New York Herald Tribune.

Using vintage photographs, new prints from half-century-old color negatives, and documents showing how Gruber herself became part of the story, curator Maya Benton follows the photographer’s path to Alaska, where she shot her famous image of an Eklutna woman reading an issue of Life magazine with Ted Williams on the cover. In 1944, when the U.S. government sent Gruber to steward 1,000 mostly Jewish refugees on a navy ship sailing from Italy, she documented that too, as well as the refugees’ internment in upstate New York. From Palestine, when Britain sent the passengers on the doomed ship Exodus 1947 back to Europe on prison ships, she caught up with them in Port-de-Bouc, France, producing the evocative, empathetic, and information-packed photos that were her trademark.

The show ends in Ethiopia, where Gruber’s mission was to document the lives of the Jews, convince them to leave, and facilitate their immigration. These eloquent pictures show how her careers as photographer, author, diplomat, and advocate for the dispossessed were vividly intertwined.

—Robin Gembalest

‘Otherworldly’
Museum of Arts and Design

The mini-dioramas and photographs in this show, aptly subtitled ‘Optical Delusions and Small Realities’ and assembled by MAD’s chief curator David McFadden, were often as interesting for the questions they raised about art and perception as they were in and of themselves.

More than miniature representations of realistic universes, they were, at their best, translations of what the eye and mind may or may not see—not so much painstakingly reproduced for their audiences as for their creators, who might be surprised at the results. Often the work in process reveals the final work and, like characters in a novel, takes over the psychology and guides the narrative.

There was no escaping nostalgic associations—dollhouses, museum dioramas, and make-believe—and the will to create not necessarily a room but a world of one’s own.

But what were we really seeing? Most of these works consisted of photographs of dioramas or even of dioramas based on manipulated and collaged photos.

Here were Joe Fig’s compulsively and literally re-created artists’ studios that Fig sees as a way to internalize his subjects’ environments and the creative processes. Elsewhere, Charles Simonds’s surrealistic landscapes in clay, “Dwellings” for an “imaginary civilization of ‘Little People’,” resembled pre-Columbian universes suspended in space. And Tracey Snelling’s cinematic and novelistic constructions provided a noriish glimpse into illuminated houses and shops.

Gregory Euclide’s held within what hung open and made to lie without escape (2011) was a standout for complexity—a landscape that spills from the art container into the gallery. It doesn’t simply create a parallel reality; it links art and nature, the real and the imagined, and the produced and the reproduced, showing that there is no single reality.

Among the most powerful works were Lori Nix’s constructed destructions. Bred on disaster movies, Nix makes dioramas in her studio, photographs them, and often discards the sculpture. The camera provides the perspective of the spectators and, in doing so, brings them into the drama they perceive.

Fears and preoccupations are spelled out and miniaturized in Amy Bennett’s narrative constructions, like Waiting Room (2010) and Examination Room (2011), where she, and we, gain control through fictionalization.

Meanwhile, touchingly anachronistic was Liliana Porter’s AbEx-evoking floor installation, with memorabilia sprawled out tightly and passionately.

—Barbara A. MacAdam