



LORI NIX, *Clock Tower*, Chromogenic print,
76.2 x 101.6 cm, 2005

COVER

LISA STINNER, from the series *vague terrain*,
Munich (hose), Digital Chromogenic print,
76.2 x 101.6 cm, 2005

RIGHT

LISA STINNER, from the series *vague terrain*,
Winnipeg (doorway), Digital Chromogenic print,
76.2 x 101.6 cm, 2005



LORI NIX Lori Nix's constructed environments form the basis of her photographs. Cardboard, plaster and paint are employed to create highly detailed dioramas that once photographed, blur the line between truth and illusion. Her photographs toy with romantic notions of landscape with lush, rich color and theatrical lighting, magnifying a sense of isolation and melancholy. Nix has exhibited extensively at reputable institutions such as the California Museum of Photography, Riverside, CA, White Columns in New York City, and the Houston Center for Photography in Houston, TX and the George Eastman House in Rochester, NY. Lori Nix has received several awards, grants and residencies in the US.

LISA STINNER Since graduating from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago with a Master of Fine Arts Degree in Photography, Stinner's work has also been featured in several exhibitions, locally, nationally and internationally among them a solo exhibition at PLATFORM Gallery, Winnipeg. She has received numerous grants and scholarships, and most recently was awarded a Visual Arts grant from the Manitoba Arts Council. Her work has been written about in *Border Crossings* magazine, the exhibition monograph *vague terrain* published by PLATFORM gallery, the *Winnipeg Free Press* and *Warehouse*, a journal of the Faculty of Architecture, University of Manitoba. Stinner's photographs have also been highlighted in several juried publications including *Carte Blanche* (2006) and *Flash Forward* (2006, 2007). Stinner obtained her Bachelor of Fine Arts Degree from the University of Manitoba where she has been teaching photography as a sessional instructor.



LORI NIX LISA STINNER

Theatre of Illusion

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GALLERY 44 CENTRE FOR CONTEMPORARY PHOTOGRAPHY
401 Richmond Street West, Suite 120
Toronto, Ontario M5V 3A8

TEL 416.979.3941 FAX 416.979.1695
info@gallery44.org
www.gallery44.org

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Theatre of Illusion

By Barbara Gilbert

PHOTOGRAPHY IS NO LONGER the faithful representation of reality it was once thought to be. Photographs today resemble a hall of mirrors, each one distorting reality more than the last. Which mirror/photograph reveals the truth? None, actually, and this is what makes the subject of the ‘real’ such hotly contested ground. Conversely, this is why photography is the ideal tool to subvert our concept of reality.

Lori Nix and Lisa Stinner photograph staged settings, using the diorama model as a starting point. Their message can be understood as *Don't accept things passively; don't believe everything you see, hear, or read; think for yourself.*

The diorama figures prominently in photographic history, and in fact could be considered photography's ancestor. Louis Daguerre, one of the pioneers of photography and inventor of the daguerreotype, created large-scale dioramas in Paris and London. Trained as an architect and stage designer, he created enormous “illusion theatres” of famous places, composed of large (22 by 14 metre) paintings with astonishing light effects. It was the use of the camera obscura that led him to experiment with and eventually discover ways of fixing the latent image.

Closer to home, 19th Century Montréal photographer William Notman was famous for elaborately staging portraits. He created hunting and skating scenes in his studio, complete with painted backdrops, costumes, art direction, and special effects.

Today, dioramas are understood somewhat differently than they were in Daguerre's time, and are most often found in natural history museums to display artifacts. They are used as a didactic tool, intended to represent a concept and to educate, generally in a factual or historic manner. However, dioramas also function in much the same ways as fiction or theatre. For example, no one believes the mannequin is a caveman, or that the painted wall is a cave, but we briefly suspend our disbelief in order to grasp the larger meaning conveyed by the display.



LORI NIX, *Majestic*, Chromogenic print, 101.6 x 139.7 cm, 2005

Lori Nix builds sets resembling architectural maquettes, with an unquestionable eeriness to them. *Natural History* (2005) is an image of a natural history museum in ruins. We find ourselves looking at a large diorama of a destroyed museum, containing multiple mini-dioramas within it. The diorama of the Antarctic on the left side of the image is fascinating because it has crumbled to reveal the landscape outside the museum. We cannot deny we are looking at a staged set, which is only visible through the cracks and collapsed walls of the fictional ‘museum’. The imagined ‘outdoors’ is framed by the ‘Antarctic,’ where one of the taxidermied penguins is making an escape. This is the kind of mental trip Nix sends us on without a map. What are we really looking at? Nix created an Antarctic diorama, placed within a destroyed museum, and that museum is set in an artificial landscape: a set within a set, within a set. The whole scene is then photographed, further distancing us from the aura of an original moment of creation. She could have displayed the sculptural sets as works of art in their own right. Instead she uses photography as the final presentation, rendering the whole scene more illusive.

Nix's tableaux are reminiscent of Quebec photographer Holly King's work, whose built sets and large photographs entice the viewer with what appear to be gorgeous landscapes, but are in fact small tabletop constructions of paper, paint, light, wire, and clay. Like King, Nix pulls us in with the appearance of a straight documentary image, only to delight us all the more when we realize that we're looking at a constructed scene.

The mall and the trade show are contemporary life size capitalist versions of the diorama, placing products or services in a context of beauty, sophistication, and seduction. Their sole purpose is to arouse desire in the viewer to consume. In these commercial contexts, the viewer is less interested in truth and realism

than in fantasy and illusion. These are the tools of conspicuous consumption. The intent is to catapult the viewer (or, rather, consumer) to a place that does not invite reasoned thinking, creating a fantasy that desires its fulfillment.

Lisa Stinner photographs empty spaces, or so it appears at first glance. She visits trade shows in the early morning hours, as they are being installed or torn down. The lack of any human presence in her images gives them an eerie coldness, begging the question: What disaster struck here? Where did everyone go?

Stinner's images reveal the staging of consumerism, stripped and left bare. Her photo-realistic approach gives the surface appearance of a photographed document, further accentuating a disingenuous quality. In *Minneapolis (doorway)* (2005), we see a false wall, two-by-fours still leaning against it, with a doorway revealing a fake kitchen with cabinetry and hardwood floors. At the back of this kitchen is another doorway leading to yet another doorway, which directs us to empty black space. It is unclear whether this set is being built or torn down. Is the kitchen the intended display, or is it merely the backdrop for another product? The doorways leading nowhere are a potent metaphor in this photograph. They shift the original intent of persuasion and beguile to a subversive revelation of the trappings of seduction.

Does Stinner photograph the illusion created by the diorama, or the actual construction? The planks leaning against the wall, the sander still plugged in and left on the floor, reveal the effort behind the trade show's intended illusion. But then, lovely pictorial details pull us back in. The receding doorways and the convex mirror in the corner quote art historical references such as Vermeer's domestic scenes with multiple receding doorways, and Van Eyck's famous *Arnolfini Wedding* portrait, where the convex mirror reveals the artist's presence. Stinner's absence from the mirror, however, suggests that she is indeed interested in the illusion.

Lori Nix and Lisa Stinner comment on the use of so-called realistic representation within the economy of high capitalism. Nix creates her own small worlds that challenge our concept of the ‘real’, while Stinner takes pictures of already existing constructions. It seems that making these images is a way for them to comprehend their world, because “making” is a way of thinking and understanding. Nix and Stinner appear concerned about the world they live in, and the role of interpretation. Their use of the tools of capitalist media to make their point is appropriate, if tongue-in-cheek.

Their works can be approached from several standpoints as cultural reflections of the juggernaut of conspicuous consumption. The absence of people and the theatrical atmosphere allow for imagined scenarios to enter the viewer's mind. Lisa Stinner and Lori Nix's work can be read as documents of their time, using the language of realism to critique the current *zeitgeist* of consumerism. Nix and Stinner make use of theatrical conventions, but by the same token reveal the props behind the illusion. Photography's perceived relationship to reality makes it the ideal medium for the subversion of reality, creating a theatre of illusions. ■