

Photographer's celebrity illusions

Exhibit captures wax museum figures on film

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Before TV, movies and computers provided Americans authentic images of celebrities and political leaders, wax museums offered them a way to bond with three-dimensional likenesses of their heroes.

Wax museums have faded in popularity, but at some heavily-touristed destinations like Niagara Falls and Fishermen's Wharf in San Francisco, they remain as kitschy monuments to the past.

When New York-based photographer Susan Wides stepped into the dark, dusty Coney Island wax museum 15 years ago, she discovered a place that could serve as a metaphor for her ideas about what was happening politically and socially in the U.S.

"I was frustrated. The Reagan revolution was in full swing. Feminists were equivalent to 'feminazis' and there was a lot of talk about welfare queens," said Wides, 43.

She visited Petaluma and downtown's Barry Singer Gallery earlier this month to talk about her approach to photography. Her work is on display at the gallery until mid-January.

In 1984, Wides decided to embark on a photo series shot entirely within wax museums, and traveled the nation looking for fresh subject material. Using her camera, she could frame a scenario and zero in on specific elements by bringing them into sharp focus or deliberately blurring them.

Wandering around the nearly-deserted Coney Island museum, Wides observed 3-D tableaux addressing American values, social biases, stereotypes and archetypes.

"I was seeing a panorama of American culture. Obsession with celebrities, voyeurism, sensationalism. Women as sex objects and victims. It had a sense of reality to it and it intrigued me," she said. "If I'd been an archaeologist from the future, I would've seen what was important to the culture."

Her photos provoke the viewer to question reality and force them to sift through facts to make sense of the picture. Usually, Wides was permitted unfettered access to the museums, but wasn't allowed to manipulate objects. Manipulation occurred, however, because of Wides' ability to create various levels of perception through photographic techniques.

For example, beloved figures, like Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers, appear lifelike until the viewer carefully investigates the picture entitled "Double Take" and starts wondering what's real and what's fake.

The same applies to what appears to be a photographic portrait of Pablo Picasso standing beside two nudes, which could either be sculpture or a



SUSAN WIDES

The work of photographer Susan Wides, including "Hidden Agenda," from 1987, is on display until Jan. 16 at Barry Singer Gallery.

painting in "Masterpiece Theatre." Is the viewer looking at a photo of Picasso, a wax representation of him, a 3-D likeness of the nudes or a painting? Wides deliberately leaves the viewer pondering.

The exhibit also includes Wides' photos from a botanical series, again disrupting what a viewer expects to see by showing a different perception of reality. She began the series while mourning the loss of a friend, who died of AIDS.

"It evolved through an interest in flowers and roses, although I was highly allergic to roses. The rose was a metaphor for Tom's life speeded up," explained Wides. "The rose was a sign mediating between nature and culture."

Using a 4x5 viewfinder camera, Wides manipulated within her camera to bring into sharpness only certain elements of her pictures of flowers. The series shows close-ups of roses beside tombstone-like markers bearing each flower's botanical name. To Wides, the names are equivalent to tiny poems, and in each frame, the words are pivotal to the overall meaning of the picture.

She uses light and dark shadows and highly-magnified close-ups to capture the precise details of thorns, petals, stems and leaves. The edges of the flower photos are blurred and enveloped in blackness.

"Flowers are an enduring expression of emotion and I spotlight the images to create a circle of black. It's as if you're looking through a microscope. The words are totally important. They're like found poetry and they help you think more meditatively about nature and culture. Using selective focus, you see some things in life are more important and other things fade away. Time goes by in a blur," she said.

A few photos from her more recent "Mobile Views" series are included in the Singer Gallery show. Wides uses her camera to make a statement about nature and the persistent impact of human culture upon it. Again using tricky focusing techniques, Wides accentuates parts of the landscape, while deliberately causing other elements of her picture to blur.

In addition to Wides' work at the Singer Gallery are photos by Arthur Tress, as part of his "Fishtank Sonata"

series. His pictures are culled from a photo-story he's created about a man on a river in a rowboat who can't catch a fish until a fish jumps in his boat and tells him how.

Tress placed in an aquarium artifacts of American culture like toy dolls, plastic animals and broken statues, creating a curious juxtaposition between the objects and the setting while assembling images for what he described as a "children's book for adults."

The fishtank served as a stage within a stage, and Tress found it more stimulating than simply placing objects on a table and shooting a still life.

"Too much control isn't good in photography. With the fishtank, there was wind, sun, reflection and mosquitoes to contend with. If I'd done it with computer art, there'd be too much to choose from, like being in a candy store," he said.

The photos of Wides and Tress are on display until Jan. 16 at Barry Singer Gallery, 11 Petaluma Blvd. North. Gallery hours are Tuesday through Saturday, 11 a.m. to 6 p.m.