



## VISUAL ARTS

## A revealing look

### Artistic photos give us an avenue of self-exploration

By Robert L. Pincus

ART CRITIC

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When it comes to landscapes, photography just might be the medium that dupes us best. It can convince a lot of viewers that the scene captured with a camera simply transcribes a place, much like the court reporter setting down the words uttered in a courtroom.

If only it were that easy and straightforward. The successful landscape always needs an inspired sense of artifice and a keen eye for composition.

As the distinguished photographer Robert Adams wrote, "If landscape art were only reportage, it would amount to an ingredient for science, which it is not."

The challenge is to document a place and transcend it, to make a picture more than a record of some bit of terrain.

The sites in David Fokos' black-and-white images, the subject of a solo show at the Museum of Photographic Arts, are readily identifiable. He pictures a fragment of beach under a full moon, field and forest under a crescent moon, a jetty reaching out to sea and posts emerging from still waters near a shoreline.

The best of the photographs in "David Fokos: Borrowed Time," such as "Jetty, Oak Bluffs, MA" (1991) and "Two Rocks, Study #2, Chilmark, MA" (1995), create a powerfully tranquil atmosphere. The surface of the water is so smooth it resembles stone. The jetty, in the first of these images, seems to dissolve as it recedes into the distance. Two large rocks, in the second, resemble sculptural forms.

Oak Bluffs and Chilmark are both on Martha's Vineyard. Though Fokos has lived in San Diego for a decade, he is from New England and clearly still feels a deep attachment to its landscape.

In his photography, he combines old and new technology. The large-format camera Fokos uses is 80 years old, but he favors light jet prints and makes subtle use of digital manipulation in his compositions.

All of the photographs are elegantly printed. A few, like "New Moon, Chilmark, MA" (2002), are merely pleasant, picturesque scenes. But most convey an intense appreciation for moon and water, rock and vegetation. Creating these pictures is evidently part of a meditative process for the artist and they are likely to put you in a similarly pleasurable state.

### The big picture

Fokos' pictures coax you to look within as much as look at them. The museum's curator, Carol McCusker, asks viewers to do the same while viewing 20 recent additions to its collection. This is the dominant theme of the wall text she offers along with the exhibition "Recent Gifts: For Eye and Mind."

"Beyond their material value," she writes, "the greater gift is that these images allow us to chart a terrain within ourselves."

In other words, pictures can expand our sense of self and of the world, both near and far. A tall order, to be sure, but many of these selections are equal

### DATEBOOK

**"David Fokos: Borrowed Time," a solo exhibition, and "Recent Gifts: For Eye and Mind," additions to the permanent collection**

*Through Nov. 7 ("David Fokos"); through Nov. 14 ("Recent Gifts")*  
 Museum of Photographic Arts, Balboa Park; \$6; \$4, students, seniors and military; free to children under 12; (619) 238-7559 or [www.mopa.org](http://www.mopa.org)

to this claim.

Roman Vishniac's evocative "Entrance to the Krakow Ghetto," taken in the late 1930s, asks us to journey back to a part of this Polish city where the Nazis forced Jews to live and die en masse. The shadowy black and white picture features a man in silhouette, strolling down a narrow lane between aged buildings. The moment is peaceful, but it can't help but evoke the horrific fate of the place.

History, far closer to home, surfaces in Christopher Landis' picture of a failed real estate development, "Marina Mobile Estates, Desert Shores, Salton Sea, California" (1998). What remains are crumbling foundations and tattered cactus.

A similar sense of progress gone awry is at the core of Terry Falke's color landscape "Stub End, Trona Line, CA" (2002). The railroad tracks simply stop, and train cars, sitting in the distance, look stranded.

A Southern California landscape of a different kind fascinated French photographer Stéphane Couturier in "Olympic Parkway #1, San Diego, CA" (2001). This was one of several pictures he made while serving as an artist-in-residence at UCSD and like most of his photography, it focuses on industrialized scenes of a massive sort.

Couturier, working from a high vantage point, depicts hills that are being leveled and stripped of vegetation. Only a forlorn patch of shrubbery survives. The parkway cuts a stark line through the picture and tall, newly planted palm trees look less like landscaping than a curious attempt to replace the plant life that has been stripped away. It's transformation of the landscape on a grand scale.

People make notable appearances, too, in "Recent Gifts": a robust Russian cook in a 1930 image by Mark Markov-Grinberg; striking women in Laura McPhee's lush color portraits of Sri Lankan tea pluckers, dating from 1990; and a striking ensemble of Indian faces and costumes captured by Frederic M. Roberts in "Gau Ghat" (2003).

This exhibition speaks to the continuing vitality of MoPA's collection. Past and present, single faces and crowds, tranquil places and noisy ones – they're all present. How you experience this vibrant spectrum of sights, McCusker suggests, depends on how much of yourself you want to bring to these pictures.

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■ Robert L. Pincus: (619) 293-1831; [robert.pincus@uniontrib.com](mailto:robert.pincus@uniontrib.com)

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