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Clifford Ross's "Mountain XIII" (2006).
Courtesy of Sonnabend Gallery

The Telling Nature of Photography

'Ecotopia' Frames a Wondrous but Wounded Environment

NEW YORK -- Almost alone among art forms, photographs can trick us into taking them for real. Even though most photos don't try for such full-blown deception, the fact that they *could* fool us lurks behind their universal, ever-present magic.

That magic is on view, in a huge variety, in "Ecotopia," the International Center of Photography's second triennial of lens-based images, which includes photographs, videos and films as well as pictures stored on the Web. I don't think I've ever seen another 40-artist show with so many impressive images and so few obvious false steps. (If you can't get to Manhattan, you can see much of the show on the ICP Web site, <http://www.icp.org/>.)

It doesn't hurt that the topic of this edition of the ICP triennial is the environment and humanity's place in it. Given the grim news we hear *about* the state we're reducing the planet to, almost any attempt to make us know, think and feel about our globe can seem worthwhile. A medium that can stand in *for* the world is the perfect medium for talking about it.

Some of the images in "Ecotopia" are straightforward. They bear witness.

Slide shows at the ICP explore Texaco's pollution of the Ecuadoran Amazon, the poaching of endangered wildlife to make the traditional medicines of Asia and global industry's effect on arctic climate, which may soon turn the Inupiaq of Shishmaref, Alaska, into the first global-warming refugees. (Once, there would at least have been the chugging of a slide projector to keep us company as such grim images flit by; new digital technologies leave us drowning in mournful silence.)

The Web can be similarly informative, while leaving us to choose the information we want to see and the order we see it in. Kim Stringfellow, from San Diego, presents a Web site (<http://www.greetingsfromsaltonsea.com/>) containing page after page of images and data on the ecological debacle of the man-made, 400-square-mile Salton Sea in California. It was formed in 1905 when a major irrigation project went awry and has recently become an oversalted drainage tub.

Other photos leave real information far behind, playing on our gullibility -- or with our knowledge that, at any minute, we could be taken for a ride. Finnish artist Harri Kallio Photoshops fake dodos back onto the island of Mauritius in the Indian Ocean, where they went extinct more than 300 years ago. Vietnam-born An-My Le makes straightforward documents of fake realities. She photographs landscapes in the deserts of California that have been tweaked by the U.S. military to simulate Iraq and Afghanistan.

Videos range from deluxe nature imagery to the crude "animal-cam" videos of Sam Easterson. That Los Angeles artist mounts a tiny wireless camera on creatures, from wolves to armadillos, and lets us glimpse Earth from non-human points of view.

The world is an amazing place, full of sorrows, glories and peculiarities. Photography, as the medium that seems to come most closely into contact with all that, has an ability to carry information that puts it at the forefront of contemporary culture. Traditional painting and sculpture are so much *not* a part of daily life today that they risk staying shut up in the airtight box of "art." Photography always has the option of keeping one foot firmly in reality, no matter how far it sometimes wanders with the other.



Clifford Ross's "Mountain XIII" (2006). (Courtesy of Sonnabend Gallery)

grain or visible pixels: You can see the details of a snowcap many miles off as well as every leaf on every tree across the lake from you. (Eat your heart out, Frederick Church.) Since Ross presents a clichéd nature scene, his picture stops being about the thing it shows -- already too well known -- and comes to be most striking for its sheer ability to show it. By making the tell-tale signs of photographic artifice almost disappear, that is, he's in fact drawing attention to the medium's status as hard-won illusion.

Clifford Ross

"Mountain XIII" (2006, above)

Proud of your brand-new, 10-megapixel digital camera? How about an 11-foot-wide digital print that yields something like 1,000 megapixels -- a giga-pixel -- worth of resolution? Come as close as you want to Ross's romantic image of Mount Sopris in Colorado, and there's no point at which the tiniest of tiny leaves breaks down into film



Thomas Ruff's "jpeg bo02" (2004). (Courtesy of David Zwirner, New York)

representation of man-made destruction in Iraq. Fractured image becomes metaphor for fractured world -- from which there's no backing off.

Thomas Ruff

"jpeg bo02" (2004)

Up close, this absurdly pixelated photograph, found lurking on the Web and then enlarged to eight feet wide, looks as though it might have been built from one-inch colored squares of crisply cut colored card stock. Rather than blurred, Ruff's print seems preternaturally exact in its geometric ordering. It's only as you back up from the work that it becomes, first, an out-of-focus image of some scene and then, as you struggle to get far enough away, an increasingly precise



A still from Sam Easterson's "Armadillo-Cam," (2000), part of his "Animal Vegetable Video" series. (Courtesy of Daniel Cooney Fine Art)

topsy-turvy, ramblin' kind of life. And Armadillos keep to

Sam Easterson

A still from "Armadillo-Cam" (2000)

For his series "Animal Vegetable Video," Easterson mounted tiny wireless cameras onto living beings of every shape and size, to let us see the world not through their eyes -- since to really see like an armadillo you'd need an armadillo brain as well -- but as though our human eyes were mounted beside theirs. In this art, we ride shotgun to all kinds of beasts. Life as a cow turns out to be a thoroughly social affair: Show up with a camera mounted on your head and your fellow bovine steps right up and licks it. A tumbleweed, on the other hand, turns out to lead a suitably lonely, topsy-turvy, ramblin' kind of life. And Armadillos keep to themselves, and their noses to the ground.

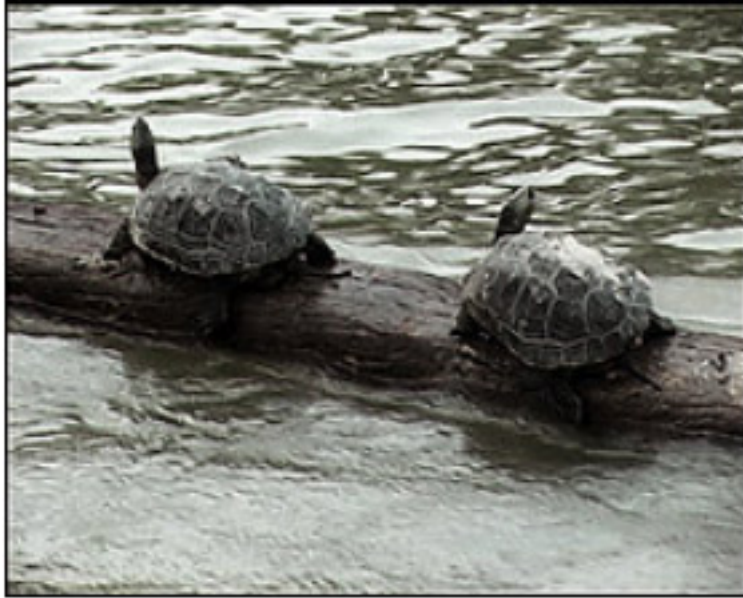


A video still from Catherine Chalmers's "Safari" (2006). (Courtesy of the artist)

Catherine Chalmers

A still from "Safari" (2006)

A seven-minute video by Catherine Chalmers gives us a cockroach's view of jungle life, with some of the most stunning images of crawling things you'll ever see. Spider catches fly; stick insects come to life to run away from rain. It's not real nature imagery (Chalmers constructs her jungle in the studio) but that's all for the better: It means the piece has links to the constructed imagery of great still lifes, as well as to a stunning, naive nature film like "Microcosmos."



A video still from Jennifer Allora and Guillermo Calzadilla's "Amphibious (Login-Logout)" (2005).
(Courtesy of the artists)

Allora and Calzadilla

A still from "Amphibious (Login-Logout)" (2005)

One of the most effective works in the triennial is by the Puerto Rican team of Jennifer Allora and Guillermo Calzadilla, well known in art-world circles. This six-minute video simply follows a day in the life of six tortoises as they float on a log down China's Pearl River. They wake up to a riverside filled with children playing and small-time cottage industry, but by evening they're surrounded by the bright lights of urban factories. We watch these ancient creatures watching us, as we mess up the world all of us share. It's hard not to think that tortoises may yet outlive the human race.



Mitch Epstein's "Amos Coal Power Plant, Raymond, West Virginia" (2004). (Black River Productions, Ltd.)

Mitch Epstein

"Amos Power Plant, Raymond, West Virginia" (2004)

This photograph is from an Epstein series called "American Power." The quaint-as-quaint bungalows don't even have a picket fence to break the harmony among them. That's left to the looming cooling towers of a power plant. They remind the humans living below, as this photo reminds us, that American ideals of space, concord and the Good Life are based on an unlimited appetite for energy. In combining crisp foreground and mellow distance, Epstein uses photographic slight of hand to craft an idyll for our time.



Simon Starling
"One Ton, II" (2005)

The five exquisite, identical platinum prints that make up Starling's "One Ton, II" required one ton of raw platinum ore to produce the few grams of precious metal in them. They depict the strip mine in South Africa that supplied that ore. In Starling's photos, to say that form depends on content clearly understates the case. Their precise beauty could not exist without precisely the ugliness they show.

Simon Starling's "One Ton, II" (2005)(Courtesy of the Modern Institute)

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