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Two shows use photography to give fresh slants on the world

By Robert L. Pincus ART CRITIC

People don't show up in Jem Southam's subtle color landscapes of rural England, but their presence is felt everywhere you look. The spaces in Brian Ulrich's photographs are built for people, but much of the time they are dwarfed by them.

Southam, one of England's most highly regarded photographers, is having his first West Coast solo exhibition at Joseph Bellows Gallery in La Jolla. (He has additional images in the current show at Balboa Park's Museum of Photographic Arts, “Tell Me a Story.”) His big subject is the history of places, which invariably reveal human transformations and abuses.

Ulrich, who lives and works in Chicago, is having his first museum exhibition in the La Jolla quarters of the Museum of Contemporary Art San Diego. He fixes on fabricated places: malls, big-box stores and other places in which we buy and browse.

Both shows reveal how photography can still give us fresh slants on the world, even in an era when we're bombarded by images at every turn. And in a sense, pictures like theirs are an antidote to the rapid pace that our technology driven world insists upon, because both artists establish a contemplative mood.

Southam has an acute sense of place. He was born in the southwest English city of Bristol and now lives and teaches in nearby Exeter. And he has made the landscape of this portion of England he knows best the subject of many of his pictures.
England has a strong rural tradition both in its literature and art.

Southam clearly feels connected to it, as he reveals in a winningly sweet picture like “The Pig, the Lamb and the Goat.” They pose in a lush field.

This pastoral picture is from “The Red River” series (1982-87), one of two featured in the exhibition. It addresses the history of the region, of Cornwall in particular, as much the landscape. “Nineteenth-Century Miner's Cottage, Brea,” evokes, indirectly, the industrial revolution, even as the stately composition pays homage to vernacular architecture. The house's pale walls set up an elegant contrast with its bright red window frames and door.

The newer “Upton Pyne” series looks at one rural property over seven years time. At its center is a submerged mine, and the pictured waters, alternately a muted brown or sickly green, are surely thick with industrial residue.

These “Upton Pyne” pictures offer an uneasy balance between the industrial dimension of the chosen site and their picturesque qualities. Piles of discarded building materials rest near blooming wildflowers.

The sullied beauty of the places in “Upton Pyne” is poignant. Southam has a deep affection for these locales, even if their warts are prominent. The pictures are subtle and often beautiful. Collectively, they become, in his phrase, “landscape stories.”