

Art in America

INTERNATIONAL ● REVIEW

EXHIBITION REVIEWS

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Left, Luigi Ghirri: Ferrara, 1981, C-print, 9½ by 6¼ inches; far left, René Magritte's The Universe Unmasked, 1932, oil on canvas, 36¼ by 28¾ inches, on wallpaper designed by Thomas Demand; in "La Carte d'Après Nature," at Matthew Marks.

"LA CARTE D'APRÈS NATURE" MATTHEW MARKS

The fertile gap between reality and its representation is the focus of this thoughtful and ingeniously constructed group exhibition, curated by Thomas Demand. The show takes as its starting point the work of René Magritte, specifically Magritte's explorations of the disjuncture between a visual or linguistic sign and the actuality it describes. A recurring theme is nature's appearance in culture, as anything from a potted plant to a painted cloud to a cement mountain.

The exhibition (which originated at the Nouveau Musée National de Monaco) is titled after a magazine—sometimes a booklet, usually just a postcard—that Magritte produced from 1951 to 1964. In it, he presented synchronous ideas and images from disparate sources. In a similar fashion, Demand here teases out connections and resonances among artworks—including sculpture, painting, photographs and films—by 18 artists from the last 150 years.

In addition to three paintings by Magritte, the show includes a single piece by Demand himself—the wallpaper that serves as their

backdrop. This wallpaper is printed with the image of a red curtain, which at first appears to be a picture of the real thing. Like all of Demand's images, however, it is in fact a photograph of a paper model, as can be seen from the small dents and creases in the curtain's folds.

Of the remaining artists in the exhibition, a refreshing number are European and African artists whose work is underknown in this country. The most notable of these is the Italian photographer Luigi Ghirri (1943-1992), whose color photographs, while reminiscent of those by American contemporaries William Eggleston and Stephen Shore, are both less hard-boiled and more playfully conceptual.

Ghirri made a specialty of photographing places such as botanic gardens, amusement parks and tourist attractions where representations of nature collide with nature itself. Several dozen of his pictures are the sturdy underpinning of the show, and the motifs he returned to again and again—the mountain, the cloud, the palm tree; nature bounded, abstracted or displaced—are echoed in works by such artists as Tacita Dean, Rodney Graham and Sigmar Polke.

The slurring, substitution or reversal of ideas or images—the means by which

Ghirri's "impossible landscapes" (as he called them), Demand's simulated realities and Magritte's Surrealist vistas all render the everyday unfamiliar—is likewise employed in nearly every work in the exhibition. Ghanaian artist Kudjoe Agyeman creates a fantasy coffin in the shape of a refrigerator. Becky Beasley transposes the geographic coordinates of Eadweard Muybridge's famous 360-degree panorama of San Francisco onto her own photographs of Muybridge's garden in England. Saâdane Afif uses topographic model-making techniques to render a patch of ocean.

The disorienting effect produced in works by these and other artists in the show is underscored by the exhibition's maze-like layout, based on a drawing by Martin Boyce. But even as it loops back on itself both physically and conceptually, the show nevertheless feels surprisingly spacious, its lively mix of art affirming the usefulness of the simulacrum as a way to generate meaning, to express sensation, to tease, bewilder and liberate.

—Anne Doran