Roe Ethridge

JUNCTION

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Clough-Hanson Gallery
Rhodes College
Roe Ethridge doesn’t have it all figured out. I would argue that this is a good thing. Ethridge’s work offers a young way of seeing, giving the viewer a sense that this is an artist working with a set of concerns and working with a variety of languages to explore these concerns. Not wanting to be pinned down to one way of working, he prefers to keep his studio practices loose. He is focused not so much on a particular methodology as he is interested in the relationships between his images. His exhibitions are sparse, and while each image is consistent and good, the images vary both stylistically and in their subject. Sometimes the images have an almost supernatural crispness; others are shot through a star filter. Some images feel like studio set-ups, while other images feel stumbled upon.

One sees tangents being followed and different paths explored. The impulse for a photograph is sometimes clear to the artist as he takes it, yet for other images the impulse is identified long after the picture is taken. This allows images the time to percolate and find their way into the conversation that Ethridge’s way of working encourages.

While the shows are made up of individual pieces that are surefooted in their execution, the images are far more slippery and interesting when viewed as a whole. The brutally honest self-portrait with a black eye is placed next to a pigeon frozen in flight. The overhead view of the Atlanta freeway is found on the same wall as a multiple exposure shot of the moon in its night-time orbit. Like the order of songs in a band’s set list, the selection and arrangement of the pieces is constantly changing as the artist works toward the best selection for a particular space. This way of working allows the relationships between a given set of Ethridge’s
images to become like an exhibition's mood or voice, unique to the particular space.

Ethridge describes his work using the format of a magazine as a metaphor:

"Think about the structure of most monthly magazines. They have a main theme or a cover story. They also have sections that recur every month, also something to open the issue and something to close it. When it's done, they start all over again."

The common threads that run through Ethridge's "magazine" are issues of transit and work (the moon in its orbit, the freeway, and the UPS insignia). There are also images relating to a suburban understanding of the world and how suburbia brings with it a kind of common American language (again the image of the freeway, re-photographed illustrations from Henry and David catalogs, a middle class family's refrigerator door with all its bric-a-brac). His work addresses contemporary conceptual concerns, such as making the banal extraordinary through high quality photographic means, detailing the imperfections of super-models, and blurring the line between art and commercial work.

This magazine metaphor not only speaks to the varied selection of images and their relationships but also to the way most of the artist's images feel staged. The figures and pigeons are photographed against monochromatic backdrops. The space in the image of the young pine feels
evenly lit and shallow, like a museum diorama. Even the moon feels matter-of-fact in its silky, smooth black sky. The startling detail that comes with the photographer's large format camera catalogs every wrinkle on a face and paired with a high speed flash, captures every feather on the flying pigeons. The images carry with them a kind of distance that leads the viewer to disregard issues of sincerity in favor of a pinch of detached glamour that would go right along with the magazine metaphor.

The themes or connections in Ethridge's collections are not as easily discerned as an issue of Martha Stewart's Living or Parkett. Rather than presenting all the answers the artist takes a far riskier path: he leaves the viewer with the task of sorting through the questions and bringing to the experience their own ability to ruminate. The viewer is invited to work through the connections, wondering and wandering, right along with the artist.

Hamlett Dobbins, Director
Clough-Hanson Gallery