



Photo by Chuck Samuels

Chuck Samuels: Easy Targets

SEEN at Neutral Ground August 10th to 25th - by Greg Beatty

In this thought-provoking photographic installation Montreal artist Chuck Samuels presents a series of over fifty black and white in-camera triptychs, each one accompanied by a written text.

The installation has its roots in a trip Samuels took through the southern United States in 1985. During his travels he visited, and photographed, a number of familiar American landmarks like Graceland, and Grand Canyon and the notoriously opulent Hearst estate in San Simeon, California.

The text that accompanies each set of three photographs consists, for the most part, of quotes

from well-known figures like Oscar Wilde, Susan Sontag and Sigmund Freud on such diverse subjects as human psychology, art history and photography.

But whereas these traditional tools of mass media—words and pictures, are usually used to compliment each other, Samuels has instead chosen text which appears to contradict, or work at cross-purposes to the photographs.

In doing so, Samuels creates a subtle tension between image and text which serves to undermine the supposed authority of both the photograph and the printed word.

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For example, an untitled work contains this quote from American sculptor and feminist Kate Millet. "Perhaps patriarchy's greatest weapon is simply its universality and longevity."

The trio of photographs that accompany the quote are from a wax museum in Niagara Falls, Ontario, and show an enraged King Kong, Frankenstein with his reluctant bride and the durable Jason, of Friday The 13th fame, with his trademark goalie mask and blood-spattered knife.

At first glance, the link between these fantasy/horror figures and patriarchy seems tenuous. But when one considers the role strength and aggression have played in perpetuating male domination in society the relationship between the photographs and text becomes clearer.

A second work features this well-known quote from the Greek philosopher Plato, "Necessity is the mother of invention."

Above the text, Samuels has placed three photographs showing scores of mass-produced ceramic figures; winged angels, fantasy castles, robed monks, from a factory workshop in Santa Fe, New Mexico.

Since the aesthetic appeal of these decorative figures is minimal, one is led to the inevitable conclusion that the only 'necessity' which compelled their 'invention' was the necessity of the modern industrial economy to sustain itself through endless cycles of production and consumption.

A final example of Samuel's work, particularly relevant to the political situation in Canada today, contains this quote from German-American writer Theodor Adorno. "museum and mausoleum and connected by more than phonetic association."

A trio of photographs from Vernal, Utah accompany the text, showing a museum display devoted to the evolution of the horse, a selection of scale model dinosaurs and fossilized remains and a mannequin of a native American Indian in feathered head-dress sitting on a buffalo hide.

The photographs and text seem to address the issue of cultural chauvinism, particularly the Western practice of marginalizing other cultures (be they Indian, African or Oriental) by relegating their artifacts to a wing in a natural history museum.

As the title of this exhibition implies, Samuels does take aim at a number of complex problems that are currently facing society. But by doing so in a humorous and playful manner, he encourages us to examine these difficult issues in a critical way.