

John Largaespada: Atlanta College of Art Gallery.

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Minneapolis-based photographer John Largaespada works in the traditional genres of landscape and portraiture. But since his images are constructed from appropriated and invented sources digitally sutured together, neither the places nor the people he depicts really exist. With apologies to Walter Benjamin, the work of art has now entered the Age of Photoshop. Largaespada explores his medium's liminal state by looking back to what photography once was and forward to what it may yet become.

[ILLUSTRATION OMITTED]

In this large exhibition, Largaespada showed four untitled series of works. One was made up of landscape images, depicting national parks and other scenic locations in South Dakota. These resemble tourist snaps or postcards and reproduce the atmospheric effects associated with such images: light filtering through leaves; the contrasting yellows, greens, and blues of plain and sky. Upon closer inspection, however, the "forest" of Dutchman Forest, 2001, appears to be a single pine branch stuck in the ground and set against a blurred, woodsy background to make it look like a stately tree. Similarly, the colors of Custer State Park, 2001, look too bright and elegant to be real. The disturbing presence of a recumbent buffalo gives the game away: This is no standard vacation souvenir. It is as if the buffalo has surfaced from the landscape's unconscious to recall a narrative that would have remained invisible in a straightforward photograph of the site--the story of the grim, genocidal triangle formed in the nineteenth century by the buffalo, Native Americans, and white soldiers like General Custer.

Largaespada's figural compositions, which are even more obviously artificial than his landscapes, exploit photography's expressionistic potential. One series, for example, depicts scenes from well-known operas. The figures are disproportioned with overlarge heads and misshapen faces: While some appear to be dwarves, others are giants. But we do not feel sympathy for these grotesques the way we do for some of Diane Arbus's subjects. Largaespada's images are clearly theatrical; they are even surrounded by ornate, proscenium-like frames. We respond to his figures in much the same way as we respond to characters on a stage--they have the power to shock or move us, but in the confines of an overtly fictional context. The pathos of Arbus's work derives from our understanding that her photographs are testimonials to the lives of her subjects. Disturbing as Largaespada's figures are, it is quite evident that they are fabrications. *La Boheme*, 2003, a portrait of the tawdry nineteenth-century demimonde depicted in that opera, is clearly staged and manipulated. And the figures in *Rigoletto*, 2004, are barely human, so digitized as to seem more like puppets or computer-generated animations.

This is not the only instance in which Largaespada's images are reminiscent of movie stills. His work often recalls cinematic styles that sublimate photographic realism to extreme stylization. His *Lakme: The Flower Duet*, 2004, is Delibes by way of Bollywood, while several images evoke the magic realism of Tim Burton. Two works in this vein push photography rather forcibly toward painting. While some elements of *Papageno: In Despair*, 2004, are recognizably photographic, the palette and the soft lines defining the figure belong to pastel drawing. The house in *The Turn of the Screw*, 2004, is made up of photographic fragments shot at different angles, producing a cubist effect. Although each part of the image is photographic, the combined effect is simultaneously stagey and painterly. Largaespada seems to ask us to remain aware of the objectivity traditionally imputed to photography even as he makes the case for photography as a purely expressionistic medium.

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