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Gallery

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FotoScript

by Kay Kenny

Thomas Wrede: Magic Worlds-Magic Feelings, Cristinrose Gallery, Feb. 27- Apr. 3, 1999



Before the advent of digitized virtuosity, photographically imagined landscapes leaped before our eyes through the collaborative efforts of Hollywood cameramen and a back lot movie studio crew of scene painters and carpenters.

Photographers without access to such monumental fakery, macroed their way through the illusion of scale with table top maquettes or the labor-intensive skills of air-brushing and double-exposure. All of the above took monumental skill and time. The real magic, however, was in photography itself and our faith in its reflection of reality, our underlying willingness to suspend disbelief.

Then Disney builds a theme park: its back lot movie studio goes public and everybody wants one. This global dreamscape (in effect) transforms small towns and cities alike, and no entertainment center will ever be the same. Meanwhile, this cinematic version of structural reality is not without its challenges; along comes the virtual and takes our imaging to new heights of transformation. The cyclo-pic spiral of special effects and computerized dreamscapes, blows away the last vestiges of our faith in pictures. However, the truth is revealed: photography will never again be regarded as a record of reality.

Suspension of disbelief is still good, old-fashioned entertainment, however, and theme parks have remained a first choice tourist destination the world over. Now, here's the hard part: how do photographers take pictures of illusions that are structural realities yet no longer believable as records of those



realities?

When I first walked in to Thomas Wrede's exhibit, *Magic Worlds- Magic Feelings*, my immediate response was model railroad maquettes or computerized manipulation. These big gorgeous color photos looked like some architect's vision of a global village, spliced and tied together by a quaint little railroad track, that zipped by some of the world's most scenic views in the space of under an hour. The only

things missing were the little plastic people.

In fact, these *are* images of some architect's vision of a global village, one that exists full scale and open for business somewhere in Germany. Photographed in the flat light of a day without shadows (or were they removed?) and people, nothing stirs but an occasional tree leaf in the *Alpine Panorama with Canal* and the rushing waters of the *Waterfall*. The Statue of Liberty looms over a *Black Forest House* in one view. Go a bit further on and view Japanese gardens, Statue of Liberty and alpine panorama in one wide-angle sweep of the lens. Every detail is hyperfocused, every incongruity noted. It is clear that this is not real and it is just as clear that it exists. In an adjacent room, however, photographed in grainy black and white, soft-focused head shots line the walls: *Magic Feelings* portraits of roller coaster riders succumbing to the adrenaline rush of suspended belief. Their faces reveal the mixture of pleasure and fear that only the safety net of fake thrills can provide. Their heads are as disconnected to their torsos as their faith in the dangers of their realities. Wrede, in

photographing them as black and white, grainy, blurred, and disembodied visions of a singular emotional state, in ironic but real spatial separation from the static, sterile yet colorful vision of the theme park makes a powerful statement about the nature of entertainment.

It is not easy to astound us. *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*, the classic thriller of early moviegoers, the ferris wheel and the Eiffel Tower (erected for the Paris Exposition of 1889) just won't do it for the "Star Wars" generation. We need a greater and greater sense of reality in order to suspend our belief in it. It is only our willingness to relinquish ourselves to this artificial construction, be it virtual or assembled, that provides the thrill, entertainment, and ultimately, intrigue.

In the case of photography, it is intrigue that holds sway. In Thomas Wrede's images, by going back to photographing the

reality of an illusion, he pulls us again and again into this question of the photograph: a documentation of reality or virtual extension of the photographer's illusion? Or, has photography, in light of the virtual challenge, become the media for mindscapes, the imaging of concepts, rather than realities? Has this model of photographic reality made it impossible for us to accept unmanipulated "straight" image, documentary or landscape, at face value? If photographic skills and tricks will no longer provoke our curiosity, and images are no longer believable, then we are on the threshold of an oddly familiar challenge. Is photography (as we know it) dead or are we simply in a new recycling mode; a reissue of the age of "pictorialism"? Wrede's photographs certainly provoke more questions about the nature of reality than its landscape.

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