

Arts and Leisure: Paradise lost, paradise found

by Robert Pincus

Creating a photographic image of Eden may sound like folly, on the face of it. How do you photograph a place that, as the archetypal story goes, only had one pair of residents and never had any other visitors?

PICTURING EDEN - If the girl doesn't look entirely natural in Ruud van Empel's 'Untitled #1' (2004), which is among the Dutch artist's pictures in 'Picturing Eden,' that may be because she isn't. CNS Photo courtesy of San Diego Museum of Photographic Art. But visualizing it with the use of cameras and software isn't really anymore absurd than using a paintbrush to construct a vision of the unseen garden. Artists have been giving us images of Eden for centuries.

Deborah Klochko, director of the San Diego Museum of Photographic Arts, plunges into the topic in "Picturing Eden," its big fall exhibition. After leaving San Diego, the 2008-2009 shows will be at The Grace Museum in Abilene, Texas, from Feb. 9 to May 4; the Munson Williams Proctor Art Institute in Utica, N.Y., from Sept. 20 to Dec. 14; and the Herbert Johnson Museum at Cornell University in Ithaca, N.Y., from Jan. 24 to April 18, 2009.

This thoughtfully crafted show, which she originally curated for the George Eastman House in Rochester, N.Y., features 37 photographers from the United States, Europe, Japan and Southeast Asia, who supply more than 100 images. The show focuses on pictures of the last decade, but includes a few revealing historical examples, like an anonymous 18th-century engraving of a full-figured Eve.

The generous number of pictures reinforces the idea of Eden as a mental construct. Klochko's wall text calls photographs themselves "a kind of Eden," a way of shaping the world into the ideal or real-looking state we want to be.

The title "Picturing Eden" isn't meant to be taken literally. By my count, only one photographer, Greta Anderson, references the theme of Adam and Eve explicitly - and she takes an ironic view of it. The scene is a Bat Garden in Sydney, Australia, and it's not clear that the photographer's surrogate Adam and her substitute Eve even know they are playing this part in her photographic drama.

Others that touch on themes of paradise do so indirectly, picturing places that might be seen as sanctuaries from our everyday world of small struggles and large tragedies. John Pfahl, long known for his observant eye on contemporary landscapes, looked at gardens dominated by topiary back in 2000, in Kennett, Pa., and Montecito, Calif. These are gardens, of course, though anything but natural. Michael Kenna takes us to historically loaded places like Tsarskoe Selo, Russia, where trees create elegant order.

Pfahl's and Kenna's examples, like Anderson's, are grouped under the banner of "Paradise Re-created." This is one of four categories Klochko created for the exhibition and accompanying book. Taken together, these selections raise questions about just what qualifies as a picture of paradise. The photographers probably weren't thinking about this concept while taking these pictures, but maybe any poetic view of a garden carries connotations of an Eden along with it.

In "Paradise Anew," a much bigger grouping of works, the show becomes too diffuse at moments. Ruud van Empel's photographs seem as if they are scenes from an artificial paradise. Digitally produced girls inhabit digitally produced places. The children look sweet, at first glance, but their eyes are vacant.

Those that better suit Klochko's notion of renewal have a stronger bond with nature. Jiri Sigut leaves "photographic paper pregnant with silver salts," in remote spots and images of ghostly forms of grass, stalks and leaves in a lagoon are the result. Susan Derges takes a similar approach, working by moonlight. Both yield delicate, pleasing compositions, akin to asymmetrical tapestries.

The kind of communion with nature that Sigut and Derges practice is admirable. But more often, the photography in "Picturing Eden" addresses the ways we abuse it and underscores our alienation from the natural world. At a time when species are dwindling and the environment is looking increasingly imperilled, the relevance of picturesque idylls is in decline.

Perhaps that's why the pictures in the section called "Despairing of Paradise" are so convincing. The dystopian mood fits our times more than the utopian.

Simen Johan disturbs the bucolic look of the forest in a selection from his "Breeding Ground" series (2003) by adding the mammals, large and larger, ascending the trunk of every tree. Nature is seriously out of balance in his pictures.

Like Johan, Lori Nix and Maggie Taylor manipulate photographic imagery to create metaphorical effects. There is a white picket fence universe in Nix's candy colored "Food Chain" (2002), but bugs have taken over. In Taylor's "Girl With a Bee Dress" (2005), for which she alters a vintage print, the sweet-faced girl looks peaceful, even if her clothing is creepily true to the title.

It isn't only the photographers who mold imagery with digital means that see the world in anti-paradisiacal terms. Jo Whaley does, too, in scenes she creates in the studio, like "Harvest, the Fall" (1992).

Whaley's beautifully constructed picture is telling. It consists of an upright board, with branches nailed to its surface. The apples hang by wire from the branches and some are piled in a nearby wire basket. The backdrop is a painted version of sky.

And this isn't just any fruit, of course. Perhaps Whaley is suggesting the notion of original sin is suspect. Perhaps she's hinting that human knowledge itself, given the state of the world, isn't to be trusted. The apples are real, but the scene is obviously a setup.

Whaley's strain of uneasiness is pervasive in "Picturing Eden." Even in the portion devoted to "Paradise Anew," light is muted, shading toward nocturnal, as in Han Nguyen's striking "Dusk" series. The radiant light of paradise may exist, but it's way off in the distance.

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