



Camera Obscura

Prairie Gallery offers magic and manipulations without a lens

MATT MORRIS // JUN 24, 2009

The ancient device known as a camera obscura (from the Latin for “veiled chamber”) was an indispensable art-making tool for centuries. A new exhibition at Northside’s Prairie Gallery tries to continue its relevance for contemporary artists.

The camera obscura’s simple but important technology, which informs modern photographic equipment, consists of a darkened enclosure that can be very small or as large as a room. It is fitted with a small hole — an aperture — on one wall. Light passes through that aperture and projects the images of external objects upside-down onto the facing wall inside the device. Although inverted, the image is accurate and in perspective. Many art historians believe that this proved useful for such master painters as Johannes Vermeer or Leonardo da Vinci.

One component of Prairie Gallery’s current exhibition *Camera Obscura* was to build a room-sized camera-obscura device inside the front room. Seven artists then were invited to use or consider the device in creating their works. Also, visitors to the gallery are invited to enter the enclosure and gain a firsthand experience.

Prairie’s shed-like camera obscura is a warm, dark space in which glowing, upside-down images of Hamilton Avenue realize themselves across the wall. According to the exhibition statement posted in the gallery, only two of the artists created traditional images using the camera obscura. Josh Pfeifer’s experience with the device resulted in the series of inkjet prints collectively titled *Stieglitz in Plato’s Cave*. While photographically produced, Pfeifer’s wooly light-and-shadow abstractions depict

nothing in particular. Their nonobjective content undermines the concept of the photograph as a trustworthy record of fact.

Truth and realness are why Pfeifer invokes Plato. The cave featured in an Allegory within Plato's *The Republic* is a metaphor for minds not yet opened to the reality of the world through philosophy. Cave dwellers believed the shadows they saw cast on the walls to be real forms and objects.

Along with Pfeifer, many of the artists show an interest in photography deployed as fantasy rather than direct documentation. I sense an anxiety over the believability of the medium in many of the artists' work. Aaron Walker didn't even make a photograph. He made two graphite drawings on paper that are spunky, resistant and actually pretty funny: They each depict a word, seemingly draped in white fabric like a homemade ghost costume. The top one reads "BLACK" and the lower drawing reads "MAGIC." He invites speculation about the subject matter of the exhibition while also evoking the pre-Enlightenment fear of technology as a form of 'black magic' (both as much a part of photography's history as the camera obscura).

Phil Spangler's one work is a wondrous delight. "God's Green Acre" is a complicated-looking contraption built around a scale model of a farmhouse suspended upside-down, spinning as a small fan blows on it. A lens in a viewing tunnel isolates this action and inverts it to appear logically upright so that viewers find a luminous little house tumbling in circles like the twister scene from *The Wizard of Oz*.

In the end, Spangler and the majority of exhibiting artists considered the camera obscura as a departure point. The show is informed by its presence and history, but the artists primarily responded to broad notions about technology's usefulness and interference in artful expression.

Other artists in the exhibition include Peiter Griga, Jess Linz, Andrea Millette and Laura Fisher.

CAMERA OBSCURA runs through Aug. 8 at Prairie Gallery, 4035 Hamilton Ave., Northside.

<https://www.citybeat.com/arts-culture/visual-arts/article/13016922/camera-obscura-review>