

WEEKEND ARTS EXHIBITIONS

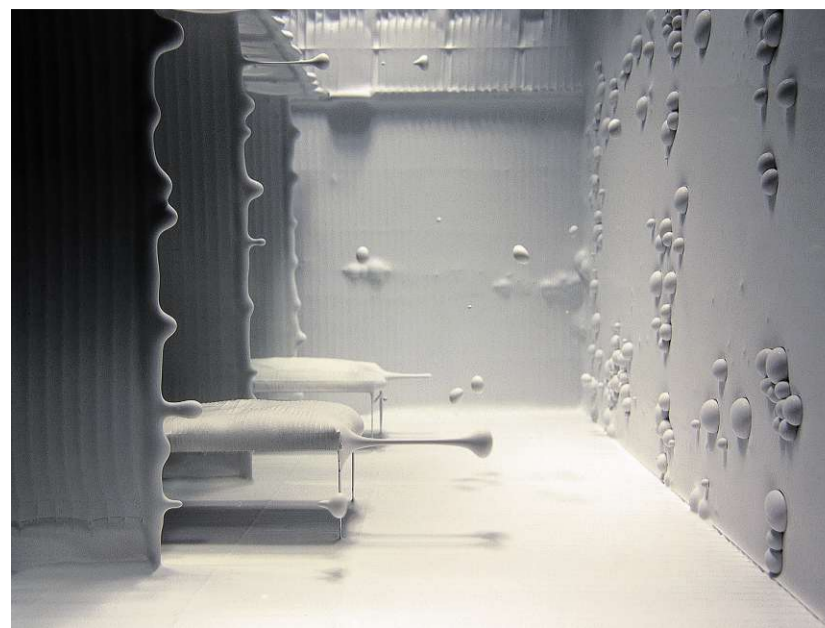
From right, a detail from Thomas Demand's "Presidency," which was constructed using built sets and digital photography; and Sonja Braas's "Tornado," which was inspired by 18th-century landscape painting and modeled and photographed in her studio.



THOMAS DEMAND, VG BILD-KUNST, BONN/SLAE, ROME



DZ BANK KUNSTSAMMLUNG/SONJA BRAAS



SASKIA OLDE WOLBERS AND MAUREEN PALEY, LONDON



ARARIO GALLERY

A globular interior, above, in Saskia Olde Wolbers's video "Placebo"; at left, Osang Gwon's "Fuse" composition, which uses thousands of photographs electronically "stitched" together.

Creating provocative new 'realities'

FLORENCE

Using digital technology, artists build works that challenge our perceptions

BY RODERICK CONWAY MORRIS

Faking photographs is almost as old as photography itself, but the digital revolution has opened up vast, hitherto undreamed-of possibilities for making constructed, fictional images look real. It has also expanded the potential of photography and video as forms of artistic expression.

The sheer variety of the application of digital technology in imaginative fields is revealed by an absorbing, sometimes

disturbing, exhibition of 23 artists from around the world, "Manipulating Reality: How Images Redefine the World" at the Strozzi Center for Contemporary Culture at the Palazzo Strozzi.

Art photography and video in the past often distinguished themselves from their professional equivalents by a willful level of technical incompetence and amateurism. What is immediately striking about almost all the exhibits on display here are the high-grade production values and slickness of finish. And while much post-modern art has seemed to pride itself on its lack of traditional art skills and its contempt for aesthetics, a significant number of the pieces here have relied on manual dexterity and a developed sense of composition, design and color at some stage in their production. Although the end result may be a di-

gital photograph or video, many of these works have also been labor-intensive.

The American Thomas Demand, for example, spent weeks constructing the closely observed models of the Oval Office for his "Presidency" sequence of photos displayed here. They were commissioned for publication during the U.S. presidential election in 2008 by The New York Times Magazine. From a distance they look like documentary pictures; only on closer inspection do they reveal themselves as built sets to which the medium of digital photography lends a greater semblance of reality.

Likewise, the German Sonja Braas's dramatic, seemingly authentic, pictures of violent natural events — "Lava Flow" and "Tornado" — are inspired by 18th-century landscape painting but painstakingly modeled and photo-

graphed in her studio.

The Korean sculptor Osang Gwon's life-sized motorcyclist lying on the ground looks convincing from a few paces away, but turns out to be composed of a patchwork of thousands of photos electronically "stitched" together. The German Christiane Feser's "Falten" (Folds) is an expanse of visually fascinating, light-reflecting creases, reminiscent of expertly executed drapery in traditional paintings. In fact, they are made of loosely folded sheets of A4 paper, which Ms. Feser photographs and then builds into a seamless image using meticulous digital-processing methods, sometimes taking months to arrive at the final picture.

No less time-consuming to construct were the weird, but mesmerizing, shifting globular room interiors of the Dutch Saskia Olde Wolbers's video "Placebo," the voiceover of which relates a strange, tragic love story that has ended with both protagonists on the edge of death in intensive care and the woman's realization, as she slips in and out of consciousness, that she has been duped and deceived by her lover from the start.

The disquieting urban landscapes of Andreas Gefeller and Beate Gütschow of Germany are the result, too, of extended preparatory periods during which hundreds of images are digitally combined

What is striking are the high-grade production values.

to create dystopic vistas of disjunction, decay and concrete architectural futility.

The American Gregory Crewdson's oddball, startlingly high-resolution stills of what appear to be Hollywood movies, but are one-off moments in non-existent films — challenging us to think up our own narratives to explain them — are so elaborate that they require teams of professional set designers, lighting technicians, makeup artists and extras (and sometimes real stars, such as Gwyneth Paltrow and Julianne Moore) to stage them.

Paolo Ventura's sequence of photographs seem like all-too-familiar scenes of U.S. troops in action in Iraq, but against the background of the military censorship rules that apply to embedded reporters, they raise questions about the authenticity of modern war reporting and how we have become inured to repetitive images, failing perhaps to look at them as closely as we should. These photographs, at first remarkably plausible, are all artfully constructed fictions put together by the Italian-born artist in his New York studio, using "action-man" style dummies and minutely modeled sets.

The London-based Adam Broomberg

and Oliver Chanarin have both been embedded with British troops in Afghanistan. They have expressed their conviction that current practices conflict with honest war reporting by making a video that follows a box of film as it makes its way from the front back to base. In reality, the box contains a role of film, exposed in sections to sunlight for 20 seconds every day, showing absolutely nothing.

The Dutch Aernout Mik's installation consists of two screens showing extended clips of news video shot during the Bosnian conflict that ended up on the cutting room floor. Much of it seems to be inconsequential, but the cumulative effect is unsettling. Most of the individuals we see, in civilian clothes, in semi-battle dress, armed and unarmed, seem rather ineffectual, often apparently passive spectators of the disintegration of their country and civil society. But among those caught on film are almost certainly some who would subsequently become innocent victims of the conflict and others who at some point participated in war crimes out of view of the camera's recording eye.

History, politics and the environment are the subjects obliquely raised by the artists Ilkka Halso of Finland and Rosemary Laing of Australia. Mr. Halso's eerie, futuristic image of a single tree in a high-domed museum setting envisions a world where man's desecration of nature has become so complete that even a mere tree has become a museum exhibit. Ms. Laing has covered sections of woodland floor in southeast Australia with floral-patterned carpeting of the type popular in the suburban homes of her youth — a surreal visual metaphor of the appropriation of Aborigine lands by European colonizers.

The Italian Moira Ricci's touching photo sequence "20.12.53 - 10.08.04" takes its name from the dates of her mother's birth and sudden death. Ms. Ricci has digitally inserted herself — an apparently ageless young woman — into family snapshots taken at various stages of her mother's life, in different places and seasons, a mysterious ghost-like presence gazing at her parent as she progresses from infancy to adulthood, through motherhood into middle age, mystically sharing moments that occurred even before Ms. Ricci was born.

Another, literal, form of self-reflection is represented by the German Melanie Wiora's at first puzzling, indistinct cityscapes. They were created by photographing images refracted by the convex lens of her own iris and framed by her eyelashes.

Manipulating Reality. How Images Redefine the World. Palazzo Strozzi, Florence. Through Jan. 17.

ARTS GUIDE

Tokyo

NATIONAL ART CENTER | Treasures of the Habsburg Monarchy. www.habsburgs.jp

During the 600-year rule in Austria before their abdication in 1918, the Habsburgs actively supported the arts. Their patronage is attested to in this display of decorative objects, armor and paintings (more than 100 works by Dürer, Titian, Velázquez, Raphael, El Greco, Goya and others), which are now held in the collections of the Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna and the Szepmuveszeti Muzeum, Budapest. Japanese lacquerware and a book of ukiyo-e prints presented by the Meiji emperor to King Francis Joseph also figure in the show, which travels next to Kyoto. Through Dec. 14.

Rome

GALLERIA BORGHESE | Caravaggio-Bacon. www.galleriaborghese.it

Caravaggio (1571-1610) did not overtly influence Francis Bacon (1909-92). Therefore, the exhibition needed curatorial justification. Both painters, however, "express the torments of existence," possibly drawn from their own lives, which were marked by homosexuality and violent episodes. Seventeen works by Bacon hang alongside 14 Caravaggios, the latter's chiaroscuro-enhanced realism setting off Bacon's distorted figures. Bacon's



GALLERIA BORGHESE, ROME



TATE GALLERY, LONDON

triptych, painted after a lover's suicide in 1971, contrasts strikingly with the ornate entrance to the Galleria. The show is co-curated by Michael Peppiatt, an authoritative biographer of the British painter. Above, Caravaggio's "David with the head of Goliath, 1605-06" and Bacon's "Portrait of Isabel Rawsthorne, 1966." Through Jan. 24.

Dublin

DUBLIN CITY GALLERY, THE HUGH LANE | Francis Bacon: A Terrible Beauty. www.hughlane.ie

Bacon's native city celebrates the centenary of his birth. The museum that houses the painter's reconstructed studio, its 7,000 objects repositioned with the help of archaeologists, is showcasing a selection of paintings, drawings, photographs, unfinished works and slashed canvases by the figurative artist. Through March 7.

Bilbao

GUGGENHEIM BILBAO | Frank Lloyd Wright. www.guggenheim-bilbao.es

The New York Guggenheim, with its unique spiral ramping gallery, opened its doors in 1959, only a few months after Wright (1867-1959), its architect, died. Its Spanish branch is now paying homage to Wright, showing 63 architectural projects, including private homes, government buildings, religious spaces and unrealized urban sites designed to promote social interaction and integration with the natural world. The projects are presented through a range of media, including original drawings, models and photographs. Through Feb. 14.

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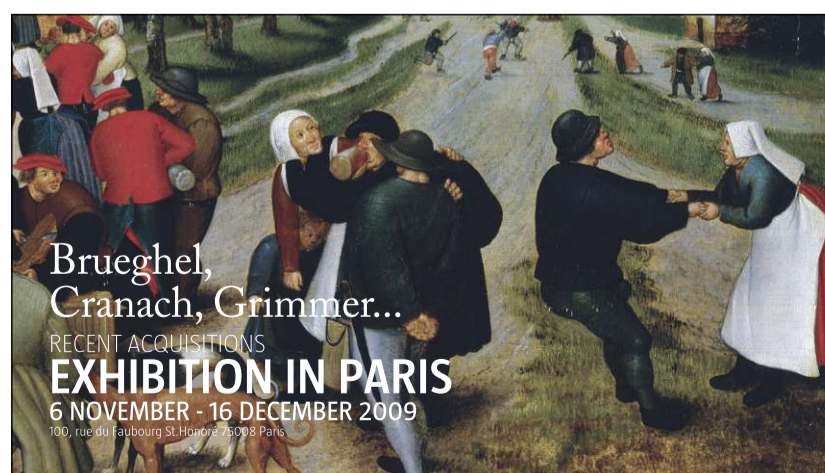
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