



QUIET TIME by Roberta Fallon

Eileen Neff, "Between Us," Sept. 7-Dec. 16, 2007, at the Institute of Contemporary Art, University of Pennsylvania, 118 South 36th Street, Philadelphia, Pa. 19104-3289



The Philadelphia photographer Eileen Neff (b. 1945) presents a dreamy world of landscapes and empty interiors where the players are clouds and trees, chairs and birds, all of them ghostly stand-ins for the human. Neff's scenes suggest a Godot-like waiting. When a small cloud inhabits an empty room, as in the black-and-white photograph *Western Wind III*, or snuggles like a lover with a tree in a garden, as in *Another Bride*, the story's about us, about loneliness, love, beauty and the wonder of life.



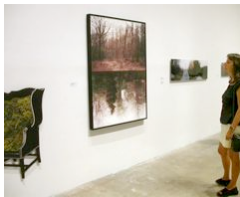
With its familiar if quirky scenes, Neff's work is like a throwback to a quieter time, one when people sat at the water's edge and contemplated life without today's constant digital connection. Her works are very much in step with a diaristic approach to story-telling, except that she's put herself out of the picture. Where other artists might give you a scene with a figure on a lonely country road, Neff gives you just the road, leaving you to embroider your own story.



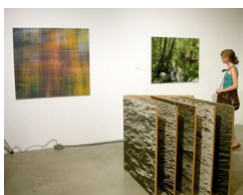
But Neff's work is also frisky, and its sly humor is infectious. In this mid-career retrospective of 30-plus works spanning the years 1990-2007, Neff shows some early photo-sculpture hybrids, many c-prints and a new video. The photo cutouts are particularly droll, with one early work showing an overstuffed chair filled with a forest scene, as if nature is being domesticated, or perhaps the picture frame has turned into Henri Matisse's comfortable armchair. Though the artist has since moved away from her labor-intensive sculptural cutouts, their presence in the exhibition emphasizes her sense of play and attention to detail.



Neff's eye for the small moment that holds a bigger meaning is shown in her new digital video. *Moving (The Couple)* (2007) pictures two mature trees of two different botanical classes, but standing in such close proximity to each other that they are like one or, indeed, like a married couple. The camera focuses on the static objects, Warhol-like, and captures the trees doing pretty much what trees do, which is fairly low-key. Then a breeze comes up and the audio swells with applause. Lovely and sly, the video winks at itself but also captures a child-like appreciation for something that can't really be explained but can be loved for its weird perfection.



Another big player in her photographs are clouds, which can appear in unexpected places, as if kin to objects in the paintings of René



Magritte. In a photo from 2001 titled *Narcissus*, a river appears as a vertical zip, as if communing across time with Barnett Newman. And in *The Field and the Plane* (2007), a montage with three horizontal stripes, two of grass and a third of yellowish sky, can't help but suggest the paintings of Mark Rothko.

Contemplations of the absurd, the works exist on the threshold between the abstract and the representational. Rather, as in the heady *Anecdote of the Tree* (1999-2000), a color photo of a lone tree trunk centered in the middle of the picture, as if poised dramatically like Hamlet during his soliloquy, these works are poetic manipulations that make an existential point.

Other photos seem like straightforward homages to the wonders of the world. *Summer (The Couple)* (2007), which features the same pair of trees that appear in her video, and *A Planet's Encouragement* (2007), are lovely scenes imbued with a sense of grandeur and loss.

Neff's works are spirit photos for a new age. Self-aware and knowing, they pose hypothetical questions that aren't for scientists but for those who want to take the leap of imagination and think about life's why and what if. It's a great imaginative game that everybody can play.

Organized by ICA senior curator Ingrid Schaffner and Patrick T. Murphy, director of the Royal Hibernian Academy in Dublin (and a former director of the ICA), this exhibition travels to the RHA in the spring of 2009. The show is accompanied by a catalogue with essays by Schaffner and the poet Jeremy Sigler, and a conversation between Neff and Murphy.

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