

# The Bulletin

PHILADELPHIA'S FAMILY NEWSPAPER • RES IPSA LOQUITUR

Thursday, March 05, 2009

## Levels Of Reality, Unreality

### Eileen Neff Show At Locks Distorts, Creates

By Melinda Steffy,  
For The Bulletin

Eileen Neff's current show at Locks Gallery, "Things counter, original, spare," creates a still, silent space in which perceptions of reality and originality are subtly twisted and distorted. The large-scale photographs, along with a smaller diptych and a narrow vertical line of abstracted color, occupy a spectrum that considers various states of existence and gently blurs boundaries between what is real and what is unreal.

On one end of the spectrum are photographs of scenes that presumably actually exist somewhere in the world. "Under the Summer Sky" shows a dilapidated zoo enclosure in which the surrounding forest has reclaimed the wooden beams and wire mesh. Instead of housing animals, the pen now holds tree branches and shrubs with a distorted sense of what is outside/inside, of which is the container and which is being contained. "Two Deer" juxtaposes a photograph of a real deer standing attentive in a clearing next to a photograph of a fake deer (and its black bear companion) lazily propped against the side of a cabin. And although it's likely that "A Goat in the Field," depicting an inquisitive-looking white goat standing in Ms. Neff's signature forest-enclosed green field, is a digital composite, the resulting image is plausible — faintly bizarre, but an image one might actually see.



"Before and Behind," is on display through March 31 at Locks Gallery in an exhibit titled "Things counter, original, spare."

Moving along the spectrum are montages of images of real scenes, combined for abstraction and visual complement. In "Before and Behind" a different zoo pen image has been inserted over the same field image, rectangle on top of rectangle, so that various forces of openness, containment and space exist simultaneously. It brings out different degrees of human control (mown field, wire cage) versus natural growth (forest around field, trees filling cage). Another piece, "Horizon," takes a photograph of dense, barren tree trunks and places it next to a thin vertical stripe with a sky-blue top and grass green bottom. The stripe grounds an otherwise horizon-less view of a winter forest and adds a heightened perception of distance, without any of the horizontality usually associated with landscapes.

Another segment of the show splices together images of images of real scenes so as to appear believable, but to actually distort reality. By using a photograph of the bare gallery wall as a backdrop for inserting photographs of her other pieces, Ms. Neff twists the viewer's sense of originality, creating an artwork of her own artwork. The gallery itself and then Ms. Neff's representation of the gallery emerge as active, intertwined elements, while the original scenes, being

twice removed from their concrete existence in the world, become abstracted. In “After the Winter Before,” it looks like “Under the Summer Sky” has been propped against a wall next to the wall-mounted vertical stripe of “Flipping Glimpse” (the same stripe from “Horizon,” this time isolated against the white gallery wall) and an already hung “A Goat in the Field.” The faux installation-view pulls together the visual relationships of the three pieces and opens a window to an alternate-universe viewing possibility.

In a similar piece, “The Winter Before,” Ms. Neff includes an image of a piece not present elsewhere in the show, taking the distortion of reality a step further. Sandwiched between the edges of “Two Deer” and “Horizon” sits an image of a picture of blurred branches rushing past. Given the stillness and location-specificity of all of the other images in the show, this one moment of decontextualized movement stands out — it is both present in its activity and absent in its lack of place. It exists as an image of a photograph, but doesn’t actually exist in photographic form in the show. It is as if the viewer can only see it secondhand, through someone else’s lens, which raises the question of whether it physically exists at all. In the age of digital creativity and virtual community, Ms. Neff engages her nature-themed artwork in a conversation about what is really real and suggests that perhaps reality isn’t what we expect.

Melinda Steffy can be reached at [melindasteffy@gmail.com](mailto:melindasteffy@gmail.com)