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Photos dredge up our "Anxiety and Desire"

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[Denver Post Fine Arts Critic](#)



The 72 photographs in the Center of Visual Arts' latest exhibition don't provoke "Friday the 13th"-style fear.

They work far more subtly, quietly but persistently attacking the subconscious and generating that nagging, unsettling feeling known as anxiety.

It seems only appropriate, then, that the show is titled "Anxiety and Desire: A Photographic Map of the Psyche," though the "desire" part of that pairing proves more elusive than its counterpart.

Visitors should not expect to find pretty pictures of pastoral landscapes or couples in love - or, for that matter, even photographs that present subject matter in any kind of conventional, straightforward way.

Instead, guest curator Clare Cornell, an assistant professor of digital imaging at Metro State, has drawn on a tradition of the offbeat, otherworldly and even macabre that dates virtually to the origins of photography.

Robert Flynt's "Untitled 2003" is in the exhibit.

In the often unsettling images of artists working in this vein, such as the enigmatic portraits of 20th-century photographer Ralph Eugene Meatyard, what is

not seen or is only hinted at can be every bit as important as the explicit.

Such tendencies have found especially fertile ground in recent decades as artists urgently try to perceive and interpret the world in fresh ways, mixing technology old and new in unexpected and, yes, anxiety-inducing ways.

Cornell has assembled works by seven such boundary-busting photographers from across the country, conceiving one of the most provocative and edgy exhibitions at this college-run art space and, indeed, in the city at large in recent years.

If the show has a downside, it lies with the text panels accompanying each body of work. They were written by the artists themselves, and the language is often so pedantic and convoluted that it is all but indecipherable.

But this minor flaw is easy to forgive, given that such explanations are accessories and not essentials. The heart of any show should lie with the selections themselves; in this case, they provide plenty to stimulate the mind and eye.

Cornell has devoted the most space to Mark Kessel. Such attention is justified, given the technical sophistication and haunting power of the New York City photographer's two series of images, some suffused with washed-out, low-key color.

Like artists have done for centuries, Kessel has managed to achieve the new by mining the old. He has revisited the venerable daguerreotype, a 19th-century method of imprinting a photograph on a silver-coated copperplate.

Some of his works involve that technique alone; others incorporate it as one step in a complicated process of rephotographing the same image and manipulating aspects of it in the darkroom.

In this way, Kessel manages to eerily distance the final image from the reality it depicts. While it is usually possible to identify the subjects depicted, they seem somehow suspended out of reach in an alternative dimension.

This is especially true of his 50-by-40-inch images of blind children in the "To Be Determined" series. A good example is "Caught in the Act of Imagining," in which the close-up of a tilted face looks slightly distorted, as though the viewer were looking at it through water.

Far more menacing are his images of medical implements, such as "Florilegium 1213" or "Florilegium No. 1336." The teeth of the tongs and clamps look like the claws of some nasty creature ready to pounce on an unsuspecting viewer.

Also merging the old and new in intriguing ways is Robert Flynt of Brooklyn, N.Y., who superimposes contemporary photographs on vintage ones, creating ghostly amalgamations infused with new and, in some cases, unexpected meanings.

In "Untitled 2002," underwater images of a nude man and woman from the present dreamily merge with a rigidly posed antique portrait of a very proper couple, suggesting the freedom those two might have enjoyed without the social strictures of their time.

In other works, such as "Untitled 2003," the merged photographs from past and present seem to be locked in a struggle with each other, neither able to assert control and neither looking comfortable with the other.

A series of oddly beautiful black-and-white photographs by Mary Beth Heffernan of Los Angeles look innocuous at first, and then one realizes they are actually images of chunks of raw chicken in various "poses," the wrinkled skin draped like a robe.

All that would be unusual enough, but these images are meant to re-create depictions of the loincloths of Christ in old-master paintings by Fra Angelico and others. The leap from chicken to loincloth is a big one, but that is the joy and wonder of art.

Call them what you will - mysterious, disconcerting and even bizarre - the images in "Anxiety and Desire" are well worth a look.

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"Anxiety and Desire: A Photographic Map of the Psyche"

THROUGH JAN. 15|Photography exhibition|Metropolitan State College of Denver's Center for Visual Art, 1734 Wazee St.|Free|10 a.m. to 5 p.m. Tuesdays through Thursdays, 10 a.m. to 8 p.m. Fridays, noon to 5 p.m. Saturdays (303-294-5207 or www.mscd.edu/news/cva)