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Psyched Out

Photo shows at the CVA and CPAC are filled with edgy psychological subject matter.

BY MICHAEL PAGLIA

The dead of winter is either the best or the worst time to see art shows filled with heavy psychological content. The best because it's the time of year to go inside and to turn inward; the worst because being inside and turning inward might make you depressed -- and who needs that?

I've got a job to do, so regardless of any potential risk of brain damage, I had to see *Anxiety and Desire: A Photographic Map of the Psyche* at the Center for Visual Art. Fortunately, the work is so unremittingly elegant and aloof, so ultimately polished, so vague in its content, that there's absolutely no bummer factor at all.

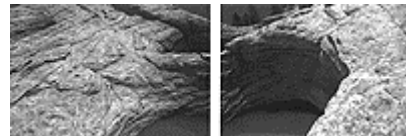
The man responsible is Clare Cornell, an assistant art professor at Metropolitan State College of Denver who specializes in digital imaging. It was CVA director Kathy Andrews who invited him to be a guest curator.

"When Kathy Andrews came on board at Metro, she had a meeting with the faculty and said, 'What can I do to support you guys?' I said, 'Show me stuff I don't have to go to New York or Los Angeles to see,'" Cornell recalls. Soon after, Andrews granted Cornell's wish by drafting him to put together *Anxiety and Desire*. Sally Everett, a former faculty member at Metro who addressed anxiety and desire in her criticism classes, also worked on the show in its early stages.

"I started to look at the idea of anxiety and desire, which is something I've thought about for a long time," Cornell says. "It's kind of common. For example, you're driving down the road and there's an accident. You have the desire -- the want, the wish -- to see it, but then once you see it, it produces anxiety."



Image from the "Bed_Ridden" photo series, by Cinthea Fiss.



"Edge #1 -- Cisterns, Lily Mountain," by Andrew Beckham, quadtone inks on rag paper.

Details

Anxiety and Desire
Through January 15, Center for Visual
Art, 1734 Wazee Street, 303-294-5207.

Desire is nearly the perfect opposite of anxiety, which allowed Cornell to put just about anything in the show, because just about anything would qualify. Adding to Cornell's curatorial freedom was the conceptual organization of the show around theories of the psyche -- where black could mean white and vice-versa. To be frank, the only thing that connects the seven artists is their use of photography or other photo-based methods.

Anxiety and Desire begins with the entire entry gallery fitted out with digital prints by nationally known Colorado conceptual photographer Cinthea Fiss. The series, called "Bed_Ridden," is made up of grainy shots of people in bed, as seen on television. The cheesy production values in the shows -- mirrored in the lowbrow high-tech digital prints -- suggest that Fiss is appropriating images from soap operas. This is also suggested by many of the actors' being somehow unconvincing in their roles as people lying in bed -- if you can believe that. This lends the prints a wry quality, but because everyone in the photos is alone in bed, the specter of disease is also implicit, as the series title underscores.

Proceeding to the large multi-part space that runs across the back of the CVA, viewers encounter a group of photos by Mary Beth Heffernan, who lives in Los Angeles. For these silver-gelatin prints from the "Corpus Inductum" series, Heffernan took poultry skin and sutured it into the form of Christ's loincloth as depicted in Renaissance paintings. She then photographed the poultry-skin loincloth against a rich black background, creating very abstract forms. The inspiration for the series, which is pretty outrageous, came to Heffernan when she noticed that paintings of the crucifixion often featured the loincloth as a key compositional element. Heffernan had done earlier photos of small creatures made of poultry skin, and the loincloth pictures are an outgrowth of that work. As gross as the idea of sewing up poultry skin is, and as seemingly crazy as it is to focus on Christ's loincloth, these oddball Heffernans are undeniably beautiful.

In the small niche in the corner is the work of Robert Flynt. The New York artist used found historic photos from the turn of the last century and laid in images, typically of nudes, that he took himself. The historic images predominate, with the nudes appearing to be shadows or smudges on them. This suggests that they might represent the ghosts of the people who sat for the original antique photos.

The most famous artist in the show, New Yorker Clarissa Sligh, is the only artist who is not afforded a solo-type presentation. She is instead featured with only a single work: "Wrongly Bodied Two," an artist book in a Plexiglas case placed next to the gallery filled with Flynt's photos. It's hard to appreciate this piece, as the book cannot be paged through because it would be damaged in the process -- always a problem when displaying artist tomes. The book, which Sligh bound herself, interweaves three narratives: a transsexual's journey from woman to man; the story of a Civil War-era female black slave who passed as a white man; and Sligh's personal history as an artist.

In the space connecting the two galleries, Cornell has paired a selection of digital

Evaskus. Tracy, whose day job is as a computer special-effects artist in Hollywood, does what she calls "digital dumpster diving." She retrieves one layer from a multi-layered digital image that has already been used in special effects and then discarded, and uses it to create abstractions with animal imagery. These pieces are kind of scary. Even scarier are Evaskus's photos of a beautiful nude female torso that has been "adorned," so to speak, with X-rays of the spine and the ribs -- which aren't so beautiful. Though they look digital, they were actually created in the darkroom.

With the exception of Sligh, all of the artists mentioned so far are well-represented in what could pass for a lineup of single artists' outings, but Mark Kessell, the last artist in *Anxiety and Desire*, is given even more of a send-off. There are three whole galleries devoted to his striking work. Kessell's pieces are gorgeous and very unusual in their stylish iciness, which is the result of the metallic surfaces he develops.

Kessell, who lives in New York, is one of only a few artists anywhere who does daguerreotypes, a nineteenth-century method acknowledged as the original photographic process. In daguerreotypes, the photographic image is "developed" onto metal plates using mercury vapors. Sounds dangerous to me, and because Walgreen's won't process them, artists like Kessell must carry out the hazardous developing process themselves.

The daguerreotypes are installed in the first gallery to the right, hung on opposite walls painted charcoal gray. The walls must be painted a dark color because the surfaces of the daguerreotypes are reflective and hard to see, and the dark reflection makes the images clearer.

There's a lyrical quality to these images, which are from Kessell's "Florilegium" series. Essentially abstract, they look like botanical scenes, which is weird considering that the objects captured here are not plants, but surgical tools. In the next gallery are digital prints, also from the "Florilegium" series. These prints are derived from the daguerreotypes, which have been scanned into a computer -- and although they're very engaging, it's hard for them to stand up to the powerful originals.

That must have been what Kessell was thinking, too, because the majestic digital prints of blind children from his "To Be Determined" series are enormous and thus hold up to the daguerreotypes. Like the "Florilegium" prints, the "To Be Determined" works are based on daguerreotype originals.

Anxiety and Desire is a compelling show, and it proves that Metro teacher Clare Cornell is a gifted curator, a fact that was heretofore unknown.

It's a complete coincidence that Lisbeth Neergaard Kohloff put together the duet *Angst* at the Colorado Photographic Arts Center at the same time as Cornell did his show at the Center for Visual Art. But what a coincidence: It's also a show made up of photos that chart mental states. *Angst* pairs Colorado photographer Andrew Beckham with Oregon's Gary Wilson.

Beckham does photographs of the Rockies that are meant to convey a fear of heights, and the series is descriptively titled "Imaging Acrophobia." The photos are presented in pairs, which superficially suggest antique stereopticon cards. However, unlike those cards, the two Beckham images differ from one another. In the landscapes, the land falls away, with Beckham trying to conjure that knot-in-the-stomach feeling. In some, such as "Edge #1 -- Cisterns, Lily Mountain," he really pulls it off. Maybe Beckham should think about doing actual stereopticons that create a three-dimensional illusion so he could push the effect he wants even further.

Wilson records the sights of his evening walks. He has written that he feels these once-familiar views have changed since the life-altering effects of his wife's recent experience with breast cancer. This is something a lot harder to communicate than fear of heights: How do we know how he feels now versus how he felt? Nonetheless, the photos are haunting and compelling. The ordinary scenes captured at night are out of focus and altered. These color photos by Wilson are giclee prints on artist's paper.

The photos in *Angst* are a lot less outré than those in *Anxiety and Desire*, but they'd fit right in that show anyway. I'm not sure what to make of all this interest in mental turmoil, particularly among photographers, but I'm tempted to say that maybe people ought to cheer up a little.