

A Revealing Look: Artistic Photos Give Us an Avenue of Self-exploration

By Robert L. Pincus

When it comes to landscapes, photography just might be the medium that dupes us best. It can convince a lot of viewers that the scene captured with a camera simply transcribes a place, much like the court reporter setting down the words uttered in a courtroom.

If only it were that easy and straightforward. The successful landscape always needs an inspired sense of artifice and a keen eye for composition.

As the distinguished photographer Robert Adams wrote, “If landscape art were only reportage, it would amount to an ingredient for science, which it is not.”

The challenge is to document a place and transcend it, to make a picture more than a record of some bit of terrain.

The sites in David Fokos’ black-and-white images, the subject of a solo show at the Museum of Photographic Arts, are readily identifiable. He pictures a fragment of beach under a full moon, field and forest under a crescent moon, a jetty reaching out to sea and posts emerging from still waters near a shoreline.

The best of the photographs in “David Fokos: Borrowed Time,” such as “Jetty, Oak Bluffs, Massachusetts” (2001) and “Two Rocks, Study #2, Chilmark, Massachusetts” (1995), create a powerfully tranquil atmosphere. The surface of the water is so smooth it resembles stone. The jetty, in the first of these images, seems to dissolve as it recedes into the distance. Two large rocks, in the second, resemble sculptural forms.

Oak Bluffs and Chilmark are both on Martha's Vineyard. Though Fokos has lived in San Diego for a decade, he is from New England and clearly still feels a deep attachment to its landscape.

In his photographs, he combines old and new technology. The large-format camera Fokos uses is 80 years old, but he favors LightJet prints and makes subtle use of digital manipulation in his compositions. All of the photographs are elegantly printed. A few, like "New Moon, Chilmark, Massachusetts" (2002) are merely pleasant, picturesque scenes. But most convey an intense appreciation for moon and water, rock and vegetation. Creating these pictures is evidently part of the meditative process for the artist and they are likely to put you in a similarly pleasurable state. Fokos' pictures coax you to look within as much as look at them.