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Curtis Mann explores the varnished and white-washed truths of photography

By ALICE THORSON
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Photography helps shape our view of the world, showing us people, places and events we otherwise might not see.

But photography also can be dangerous, providing partial truths at best.

That's what concerns Chicago-based photographer Curtis Mann, 30, who wages an attack on photography's guile — and the viewer's gullibility — using varnish and bleach.

Mann, whose work was featured in the 2010 Whitney Biennial, performs these chemical alterations on images of global hotspots that he scavenges from the Internet.

He applies varnish to the parts of the image he wants to preserve, then submerges the print in bleach, which not only erases the unvarnished areas, but causes the colors to change and run.

The striking and provocative results can be seen this summer in "Curtis Mann: Altered States," a one-person show of his work at the Epsten Gallery at Village Shalom.

"Photographs are so powerful," Mann said recently. "They want to make you come to judgment so quickly. A lot of masking, filtering and shredding of the images hold people back from doing that."

Mann began to experiment with varnish and bleach during his student days at Columbia College of Chicago, where he completed his master's of fine arts in 2008. The following year he had a solo exhibition at Chicago's Museum of Contemporary Art and another in Basel, Switzerland.

His career has taken off in the wake of his Whitney appearance: Sales are jumping, and he has solo shows lined up at Kavi Gupta Gallery in Chicago and in Brussels, Belgium.

His Kansas City exhibit is a miracle of timing, Epsten Gallery curator Marcus Cain said. Cain confirmed the Village Shalom showing on the very day Mann learned he would be in the Whitney. If he'd been any later, Cain said, it wouldn't have happened until 2012 or 2013.

The exhibit is an eerie panorama of quavering, tattered figures, foreign landscapes and piles of rubble. In some works, the images emerge from bleached-out backgrounds that evoke the blast of white light accompanying an explosion. In others, multiple individual shots are organized into what look like big gridded abstractions but are in fact compilations of multiple shots of real things.

Mann culls many of his images from the photo-sharing website Flickr, where, he says, “you can download full-resolution images.”

But by the time he’s finished with them, only selective details are left. As Cain notes in his accompanying essay, “Rather than being accepted as empirical data, visual information may now be viewed as unfixed, flexible, fluid, and therefore easily changed ...”

The viewer is left to puzzle out locations and narratives, aided occasionally by Mann’s titles.

“Tall Man (Road Block Removal, Northern Gaza)” (2009) depicts an isolated figure wearing a green athletic-style jacket with black stripes down the sleeve. The red and white keffiyeh covering his face completes a color scheme that evokes the Palestinian flag. Most of the background is blank, save a pile of rubble that rises at his feet.

Mann has manipulated the bleach and varnish to give his subject a battered and tentative appearance. The man’s arm is partially eaten away, suggesting the corrosive effects of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. It’s hard to tell whether the object in his left hand is a weapon, a cane or a tool.

The “tall man” reappears in the diptych “Removal, Two Sides” (2010), in a scene featuring multiple figures pulling on a rope. A swath of bleach has erased their faces, as well as the upper bodies of several onlookers.

The other side of the diptych shows two men, one looking out from a pile of rubble and the other, shown from the rear, beside a toppled cement panel covered with handwritten red letters. Most gallerygoers will have no idea what they say — if, in fact, they say anything. Nor will they be able to make out the faces of the two men.

The identity of individuals is masked throughout these images. Their anonymity steers the viewer’s attention to the land, whose ownership is the source of conflict.

A strong but subtle anti-war message runs throughout this show. Mann’s process turns many of his landscape images blood red, including the multiple shots arranged in a grid in the 2010 piece “Red Field.”

The specifics of the images, which feature structures, soldiers and other figures in indeterminate landscape settings, are difficult to discern. The challenge is compounded by the hundreds of small white bleach spots that give the whole a resemblance to a Jackson Pollock drip painting.

“It’s sort of me growing,” Mann said. “I’m sampling all these different modes or histories of painting.”

Mann’s drips trigger a dialogue between America’s land mythologies and those of the Middle East. His use of the grid — a mainstay of modernist painting evoking order, reason and self-containment — plays as an ironic comment on the failed attempts of Western militaries to impose order on people and places they don’t understand.

Mann’s hands-on approach further aligns the work with painting. The artist’s thumbprints appear in several compositions.

“Second Sky,” the other large gridded work in this show, compiles multiple images of clouds and sky, yielding a gestalt of celestial turbulence. A partial close-up of an airplane engine sounds an ominous note. We don’t know what it bodes for the unidentified locales pictured at the bottom of the grid, including one image capturing an explosion.

The exhibit constantly reminds us how much the meaning of photographs is dependent on one’s prior knowledge, not to mention political sympathies and national identity.

Mann challenges us with his image of an unknown soldier, face obscured save a glimpse of dark whiskers. Facelessness is a time-honored way of portraying soldiers as cogs in a military machine. The real mystery of this image is who is he fighting for? His unfamiliar blue and white uniform frustrates our desire to label him as friend or foe.

Ironically, Mann's revelation that he is in fact an Afghan soldier doesn't necessarily put that issue to rest.

On exhibit

•**The show:** "Curtis Mann: Altered States"

•**Where:** Epsten Gallery at Village Shalom, 5500 W. 123rd St. (at Nall Avenue), Overland Park

•**When:** 11 a.m.-4 p.m. Tuesday-Friday; 1-4 p.m. Saturday and Sunday. The exhibit continues through Aug. 22.

•**How much:** Free.

•**For more information:** 913-266-8413 or www.kcimca.org

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