

BRIDGETTE MAYER GALLERY

Galleries: Photographer Eileen Neff, capturing the real thing

Edith Newhall, *For The Inquirer*

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A three-week artist residency at Monte Azul, a combination contemporary art center/eco-resort/nature preserve in the rain forest of southern Costa Rica, clearly agreed with Eileen Neff.

The Philadelphia conceptual artist and photographer returned from her January 2014 sojourn with a body of work that easily qualifies as her most romantic to date. Neff's work has often captured the inherent poetry in fleeting moments, but this is a wholehearted embrace of unexpected encounters in an unfamiliar place.

As with her first exhibition at Bridgette Mayer Gallery three years ago, her current one there, "Traveling Into View," is ingeniously installed, transforming the gallery architecture into a platform or frame for her work.

Many of her wall-mounted photographs, for example, appear to be views through windows in the gallery, which has none other than in the front. Even more uncanny in this regard are the photographs that actually were shot through windows, a way of seeing that Neff has explored for some time. You don't really believe you're seeing a window view of the ocean and sky at dusk as

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shot through the window of a plane, or an image of a mountainous emerald landscape photographed from a moving vehicle - and certainly not anywhere close to the Walnut Street gallery - but it's easy to feel that rush of being momentarily transported to a place of powerful, quiet beauty.

Neff's new work plays with perception throughout this show.

Framed life-size color photographs of single leaves of various tropical plants displayed together make them look like they're the actual foliage, cut just minutes ago. A large, solitary white horse, shot from behind, its head turned back to face Neff and her camera, also seems so alive you expect to hear a disaffected snort at this invasion of privacy, but its soulful brown eyes simultaneously suggest an invitation to be followed.

The photos that incorporate a mirrored disc or Mylar film, both of which Neff took with her to Costa Rica, do not immediately reveal her methods and allow the works an ineffable strangeness. (They also heighten the fecundity of their rain forest settings). Her photographs of landscapes as reflected on Mylar, which distorts them, reminded me of the scraped and blurred oil-paint surfaces of Gerhard Richter's abstract paintings.

There are some humorous touches here, too, not least Neff's life-size photos of leaves printed on latex-impregnated paper cut to the exact contours of their subjects. An especially large one, perhaps from a banana tree, reclines in an Eames chair in the back gallery, as though viewing the rest of the show.

Bridgette Mayer Gallery, 709 Walnut St., 10 a.m. to 6 p.m. Tuesdays through Saturdays. 215-413-8893 or www.bridgettemayergallery.com. Through April 18.

http://www.philly.com/philly/entertainment/sunday/20150405_Galleries__Photographer_Eileen_Neff__capturing_the_real_thing.html