

Nelson photography show explores human/nature relationship

By ALICE THORSON

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As everyday people seek ways to reduce their impact on the environment, many artists are taking a hard look at the human/nature relationship.

In the last couple of years a flurry of exhibits has tackled the issue, including "Cryptozoology" at Block Artspace and "American Soil" at the Nerman Museum.

This summer, coinciding with the G-8 summit on climate change and a growing tide of eco-horror films, the New Museum in New York explores the human/nature relationship in a big international show, "After Nature."

In Kansas City, the Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art weighs in with a little gem of an exhibit in the Bloch Building photography galleries.

"Human/Nature: Recent European Landscape Photography" features 17 large-scale color photographs from the museum's Hallmark Photographic Collection. Although the 10 featured artists are well-known in Europe, they're new to Kansas City and the Nelson's collection.

All of the works, made between 1995 and 2008, were acquired in the last 18 months.

About halfway into his purchasing spree, the museum's photography curator Keith Davis invited associate curator April Watson to come up with a theme for a show. After settling on "Human/Nature," the two worked together to identify additional works that would flesh out the concept.

The exhibit showcases the differing perspectives that these European artists bring to the human/nature relationship, while also using it as an occasion to explore changing ideas about the landscape and photography.

Among the most haunting and beautiful photographs are Belgian Bart Michiels' present-day images of World War I battlefields, now cleansed of all evidence of the horrors that went on there.

Pumpkins grow in furrowed rows in the tiny Belgian village of Goudberg, where thousands of soldiers died in the mud in the battle for Passchendaele.

The image is one of three in the show from Michiels' "Course of History" series, picturing battle sites dating from before the birth of Christ up to Omaha Beach. The Nelson's selections all focus on World War I.

Although nature has reclaimed these sites, Michiels is on the alert for ghosts. By his own account he seeks out "happenstance traces and features on the land that refer metaphorically to combat."

The tractor tracks that cut through the mist-shrouded field shown in "Verdun 1916, Le Mort Homme" (2001) evoke the tanks that rolled through the area during the Battle of Verdun.

Subtlety is one of this exhibit's strong suits.

Wout Berger's "Ruigoord 5" (2002) has the layered, linear energy of an abstraction by Jackson Pollock. But the struggle it records is not rooted in the individual psyche. The piece depicts wildflowers, grown from seed to prevent erosion at an abandoned development site in the village of Ruigoord on the outskirts of Amsterdam.

Berger's camera angle affords a view of puny plants struggling to establish roots in a thin layer of sand strewn across the lot. The image is poignant, but also ironic, highlighting the foibles of this floral quick fix in a country that prides itself on its floriculture.

The digitally fabricated landscapes of German photographers Andreas Gefeller and Beate Gütschow take a quite different tack from Michiels and Berger's landscape views.

Gefeller's "Untitled (Tree Nursery), Neuss" (2005) is a striking digital compilation of photographs of individual trees — some bare, some leafy — shot from below to yield a series of spider and starburst motifs.

Evoking a God's-eye view of a marooned futuristic nursery, the individual images appear on a white backdrop, unevenly spaced in 11 rows. While respecting the organic beauty and irregularity of the individual forms, there is something chillingly clinical about the composition as a whole.

Gutschow's computer-generated landscape montage "LS#16" (2002) takes its cues from the 17th-century landscape visions of Claude Lorrain and Jacob van Ruisdael. Both artists sought to improve on nature in their idealized landscapes, an impulse Gutschow subtly takes to task in her sterile composition of landscape elements drawn from different sources.

Feeling has long been out of fashion in an analytical postmodern world, but the images of Germans Peter Bialobrzeski and Olaf Otto Becker suggest it is fundamental. Laws and strategies to preserve and restore the world's beautiful places are crucial, but people must care about something before they are moved to take action.

Bialobrzeski mines the German romantic tradition in his images of tiny humans against the immensity of nature, shot in the Bavarian Forest in southeastern Germany and the Alpine mountains of Allgau.

Becker revisits the concept of the sublime in his spectacular images of the Icelandic landscape taken at night. "Haifossnebel, Iceland" (2002) pictures a plunging waterfall; a sense of melancholy suffuses his "Strand von Akranes, Iceland" (2002), a quiet silvery image of rocks, sand, water and distant industrial buildings.

Bialobrzeski and Becker both convey a sense of reverence for their landscape subjects. Not so the tourists and bathers pictured in the photographs of Marc Rader and Massimo Vitale.

In two images from his Mallorca project, Rader focuses on the wealthy visitors and unrelenting development that are slowly eroding the beauty that attracted them to the Spanish island to begin with.

The Italian Massimo Vitale shows himself to be similarly unsympathetic to beachgoers crowded together on a narrow strip of sand in the coastal city of Viareggio.

A gentler, give-and-take relationship between humans and nature emerges in Dutch photographer Hans van der Meer's images of amateur soccer players against scenic landscape backdrops and two photographs from British photographer Jem Southam's "Upton Pyne" series.

A bonus of this exhibit in these "staycation" times is the virtual European tour it provides. In the space of two galleries one can visit beaches and mountaintops, rural haunts and historical sites with no expense — the exhibit is free — and no carbon footprint

ON EXHIBIT

The show: Human/Nature: Recent European Landscape Photography

Where: Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art

When: 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. Tuesday and Wednesday; 10 a.m. to 9 p.m. Thursday and Friday; 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. Saturday; noon to 5 p.m. Sunday. Closed Mondays. The exhibit continues through Oct. 5.

How much: Free

For more information: 816-751-1278 or nelson-atkins.org