

contact

The month-long Contact Photography Festival of more than 500 artists continues at hundreds of local venues. NOW's art writers deliver tips on what exhibits you won't want to miss. Check out upcoming issues for more picks.

1 Ingo Gerken

Where/When: Birch Libralato (129 Tecumseth), to May 26. 416-365-3003.

What: A hand (often visible) holding an object, sign or postcard (including works by Piet Mondrian, Gerhard Richter, Josef Albers and Barnett Newman) is integrated into various Berlin streetscapes.

Why: As an example of The Constructed Image, this year's Contact theme, Gerken's idea of plunking postcards and objects into cityscapes is disarmingly simple and elegant. No Photoshop trickery here, just an astute eye for perspective, composition and colour, with some clever winks at art and architectural history.

Buzz: In his native Berlin, Gerken is already well known for work in several media. This is his first North American show. Judging by the sheer visual exuberance and cleverness of these photographs, we'll be seeing more of him. **DAVID JAGER**

2 Robyn Cumming

Where/When: XeXe Gallery (624 Richmond West), May 3 to June 4. 416-646-2706.

What: Unsettling and deliberately wonky tableaux show ordinary characters in interesting, possibly traumatic situations, all shot on Cumming's elaborately constructed sets.

Why: Cumming has an uncanny ability to conjure up entire short stories in a single image. She takes



us on an off ramp from reality into fiction, visually cementing her world with each deftly placed detail.

Buzz: These images have more off-kilter humour and tawdry glamour than many a pretentious indie flick. We can only hope she starts making movies. **DI**

3 Joshua Jensen-Nagle

Where/When: Parts Gallery (1150 Queen East) to May 31. 416-465-8500.

What: Portraits Of Decadence is a dark and juicy journey of animal moments. Polar bears, deer and birds stand out against glossy black backgrounds. The animals inhabit a kitsch universe, a twisted space between culture and nature.

Why: Photographed in natural history museums, these animals are stylized hybrids immersed in a bleak nostalgia. The work's lush texture posits nature as a collapsing and man-made con-

struct separated from its origins. Strangely, the images are gorgeous, almost sexy at first, but in the afterthought dread sets in.

Buzz: Portraits Of Decadence is art photography at its best, announcing a new era in the genre. Realism and documentation are passé; instead, Jensen-Nagle offers ingenious challenges for the mind and eye.

BJARKE MADSEN

4 Elena Willis

Where/When: Part of Rising at the Gladstone Hotel (1214 Queen West) to May 31. 416-531-4635.

What: Rising offers 12 shooting stars of Canadian photography, among them Elena Willis, whose images balance absurdity and humour in masterfully staged scenes. Her highly improbable incidents, involving live horses and massive splashes of water, are drawn

from dreams that she re-enacts for her photographs.

Why: Incredibly detailed and jaw-droppingly inventive, Willis's images go against the grain by emphasizing the aesthetic and cultural importance of dreams. The artist plays ping-pong with viewers' understanding of the laws of nature by allowing seemingly irrational messages to become the organizing principle of her art.

Buzz: Willis's engagement in dreams as a separate reality enables her to distance herself from linear thinking to explore disrupted stories propelled by the subconscious. She represents an edgy alternative to the portrayal of real objects, and points to dreams as an untapped resource for inspiration. Willis and the Rising show are a must-see for Contact-goers. **BM**

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