

Hell Is for Children: Tim Roda's Family Matters

Tim Roda Greg Kucera Gallery by Nate Lippens
The Stranger, August 12 - August 18, 2004

Childhood is a narcotic for artists, especially traumatic childhoods. Cut wrong or mixed in ill-advised combinations, the stuff can be deadly. But in the right dose it's powerful, transcendent, and frightening. Tim Roda, a recent MFA graduate from the University of Washington, in his potent and fully formed debut exhibition at Greg Kucera Gallery, knows exactly how much is enough. His black-and-white photos are gritty, tough, and a little shocking; there's a visceral punch and immediacy to them that subsides into deep unease. He's also judicious and smart enough in his distribution of the hard stuff to keep us wanting more.



TIM RODA Powerful, transcendent, and frightening.
Photo by Alice Wheeler

His work draws on his eccentric childhood as the youngest of four children in an Italian family in Lancaster, Pennsylvania, who raised and slaughtered their own food, and on his current family life as a young married father. The untitled photographs feature Roda, his wife, and his son, but they aren't rotely diaristic snapshots. The installations are meticulously composed in his studio with the deliberate symbolic weight of Old Masters' paintings, a traditionalism off-balanced by a thrown-together feel that recalls the thrift-store sets of Jack Smith's experimental films, such as *Flaming Creatures*. Roda uses mirrors, doubles, pictures within pictures, geometric constructions, and lighting to create a world that is part indelible childhood memory and part claustrophobic parallel universe. The presentation of the work eschews any preciousness. The black-and-white photographs on fiber matte paper are mounted to plywood with screws, some strategically placed to appear to pierce a hand or suspend a prop in an image.

The pictures embody the heightened art of balancing everyday domestic clutter over a pit of existential darkness, conjuring a tension that operates on levels big and small: You experience the discomfort of being a guest at another family's dinner table, where you suddenly sense barbs beneath coded banter. It's life mediated by art's inherent artificiality--its self-awareness--but retaining the ineffability of both.

One photo depicts a makeshift table made of a board suspended between sawhorses. Roda sits in black underwear looking at the camera; at the knees, his legs turn into clay that's stretched the length of the table, ending in misshapen feet with crooked toes. The boy stands beside the table looking at his father with a mixture of petulance and curiosity. Another photo has Roda's son yelling into a giant cone that functions as a megaphone, with Roda sitting in a cone hat that resembles a dunce cap, looking unruffled and uninterested in what his son is saying. It's the perfect, surreal exaggeration of a son's unheard story, being ignored by a father.

The relationships between boy and man, and father and son, and their relationships to their shared history, are at the heart of the work. Roda appears shirtless, in wigs, in a cowboy hat, never quite in control, always a bit disempowered, adrift and sad alongside his son whose big brown eyes make him the viewer's entry point to the work; he is the soul of the pictures. Yet Roda evades cheap horrors or exploitation as well as sentimentality. By maintaining its enigmatic quality and shifting emotional alliances--no one is having an easy time of it--the diary is larger than his life and his family. It's also more startling than any realist presentation could be because the viewer can't switch over into social-worker burnout mode: I've seen this before a hundred times; I just can't feel it anymore. We are engaged in decoding the pictures and open ourselves up in the process.

While the easiest reference point may be the photography of Sally Mann, who infamously used her sometimes naked children in her work, Roda's photographs couldn't be more different. He is, first and foremost, an installation artist who uses performative techniques to create tableaux. What is most striking, especially in one photograph where he wears a blond wig and a blank yet slightly sinister expression while his son stands beside him crying, is how the people in the photographs don't appear posed; it's as if they have been snapped--documented--while in the process of their lives. Except the lives depicted in the scenes are not real life; they are heightened memories, personal mythologies slightly perverted, that are part diaristic, part fantastic: The images are frozen and distorted over time. They seem to be becoming something else. They are coded and corrosive. In other words, they are a lot like family life.