

Father Knows Best

Tim Roda Photographs His Family

By Jen Graves / THE STRANGER, Jan 19-25, 2006

Tim Roda's latest photographs are hot, muscular, witty, and can't be trusted. They push you around and then apologize. They promise you everything but keep the best of the secrets. Nearly every time they say something serious, they were only kidding. I don't like them. I do love them. And so do a lot of other people, because they're going like crazy at Greg Kucera Gallery, the little red "sold" dots piling up salaciously next to their untitled titles.

Roda is a 28-year-old graduate of the University of Washington's MFA program. He more or less stormed the scene in 2004 when he had his first solo show at the gallery, called Family Album. The current show, in a telling revision, is just called Photographs. It stars a young couple, which happens to be Roda and his wife, Allison, and their 7-year-old son, Ethan - photogenic all - in a series of black-and-white, grainy scenes that look part Blair Witch Project, part Grand Guignol. The stylistic resemblance to documentary imagery is unmistakable, yet the dingy, cluttered scenes are, upon closer inspection, meticulously arranged by the artist. And the action is absurd and surrealistic. Tim disinterestedly inspects a large toy camel with one hand and holds a shotgun in the other while Ethan stands under a bright light, ominously wielding a carrot, sharp end up. Or Tim, in a fat suit, chomps on a burger while Ethan explores a mound of dirt while wearing a scuba mask.

At first glance, it looks like Roda is exaggerating and perverting family life to reveal its malignancies, like picturing a raging domestic subconscious. If only his subversions were that simple. Instead, he is toying with the temptations of photography itself. He provides a mess of information - each scene looks like a construction zone, with scattered lamps, hidden objects and industrial detritus - but much of the information is distraction. Faced with the dense traffic of the imagery, it isn't possible to figure out which roads are dead ends - which details are artifice as artifice, and which are artifice as code. Ultimately, Roda's photographs promise, then withhold, knowledge. The realities of these relationships, identities, even these moments, are only seen in glimpses.

Roda, a native of Pennsylvania, doesn't live in Seattle anymore. He moved last fall to New York, where more of this series plus earlier works are on display at Klemens Gasser & Tanja Grunert Inc. in Chelsea. The earlier photographs are similarly gritty and brash, but smaller, and pinned brutally to plywood chunks, rather than tamed by thin black frames. Roda offsets the obedient framing in the latest series by hacking with scissors at the photographs' edges, double-casting the works as dusty, matte-paper superflats and sculpture, too. He is nothing if not devoted to dramatic tension.

An unfortunate drama presented itself in the place where he made these photographs, in and around the Archie Bray Foundation for the Ceramic Arts in Helena, Montana. The Rodas spent nine months there in 2004 and 2005 for an artistic residency (Roda was once a ceramic sculptor). Ethan's playdates began falling through when the conservative community realized the Rodas were making unusual photographs instead of pottery and failing to attend church. Some of the darkness in the works can be seen as a representation of the sinister view the Montanans had of their interlopers. Social claustrophobia circumscribes the images, hunkering down around the question of whether Roda is exploiting his family by using them in his art. If at first it seems he is, look again. These three are a closed circle. Above all, the series can be seen as the work of a protective father obscuring his family as much as revealing them. (It also represents a successful breadwinner in action.)

Photographers such as Sally Mann and Diane Arbus come to mind in this context, but Roda's images are frozen performances - shot by pressing a button on a 10-second timer - and they have additional resonances in theater and music, especially the family business of the Trachtenburg Family Slideshow Players and Fiery Furnaces.

The fact that these stagings are family events for the Rodas produces a hunger for the slightest sentimentality, which Roda mostly starves. A certain gravitas appears in its place. Tim kneels at Allison's parted bed curtains as Ethan is apparently leaving her side. Tim, wearing an apron, serves dinner to Ethan, whose eyes are closed and whose cute little tilted head is framed, angelically, by two lit candles.

Ethan is our stand-in. Both as the subject in an artist's photograph and as a 7-year-old in his parents' family, there are things he doesn't, and can't, know. It's still good to be a part of it. Recommended