

The New York Times.

August 11, 2011

Out-Magritting Magritte, or at Least Coming Close

By KAREN ROSENBERG

“La Carte d’Après Nature” at the Matthew Marks Gallery in Chelsea is the kind of magical, intuitive show that could only have been devised by an artist. Using the Belgian surrealist painter René Magritte as a kind of divining rod, it finds surrealism in some unlikely places.

Its curator, Thomas Demand, is well versed in the uncanny; his best-known works are photographs of paper [reconstructions](#) of historical landscapes and interiors photographed to look just enough — but not too much — like the real thing.

You won’t see any of his art here, except for a wall-size photograph of red curtains that cuts through the maze of an installation and makes a striking backdrop for the show’s three Magrittes. But you’ll come to know Mr. Demand intimately through the pieces he’s chosen.

Among them are 19th-century landscape photographs by the German artist August Kotsch, 1970s shots of parkgoing tourists by the Italian artist Luigi Ghirri, and an architectural model from the 1967 Montreal Expo. And that’s just a sample of the older work; on the contemporary end are memorable sculptures by the emerging artists Becky Beasley, Saâdane Afif and Kudjoe Affutu, as well as a film installation in which the artist Rodney Graham bikes through a German park while taking LSD.

The Matthew Marks exhibition is a version of one Mr. Demand organized last year for the Nouveau Musée National de Monaco. It features different paintings by Magritte and has been updated with a New York-specific work: a recording of bird sounds made in the Central Park Ramble by the Swedish artist Henrik Hakansson.

Also specific to New York is the layout, based on a drawing by the artist Martin Boyce, that creates intrigue and maximizes serendipity with triangular niches and wall cutouts. It also forces you to double back through certain galleries, further intensifying the Magrittean sensation of *déjà vu*.

What is it about Magritte, anyway, that entices artists to play curator? Mr. Demand’s homage inevitably brings to mind John Baldessari’s 2006-7 show for the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, [“Magritte and Contemporary Art: The Treachery of Images.”](#)

But where Mr. Baldessari paid tribute to the puckishness of Magritte, Mr. Demand appreciates his more arcane, cryptic side. In his catalog essay Mr. Demand calls Magritte “probably the artist whose works children most often first perceive as art, and whose omnipresence in the museum shops of the world has almost obscured the unique nature of his pictures.”

He has named his show after a strange little journal Magritte published during the 1950s and early ’60s. It took the form of postcards mailed to fellow artists and writers, and included drawings, snippets of poetry and short stories (including a Surrealist take on pulp fiction, “Nat Pinkerton,” that’s reproduced in the catalog).

The Magrittes (two from the Menil Collection, one from a private collection in Italy) may get top billing in Mr. Demand’s “Carte,” but the photographs of Mr. Ghirri, 60 in all, drive this show. Their views of truncated, mediated and sometimes wholly artificial Italian landscapes give credence to the idea that, as Mr. Ghirri put it, “photography is already surreal.”

In his images foregrounds of real vegetation give way to crudely painted backdrops. Potted plants stand in for trees, lawn ornaments for classical statuary. In a wonderful series taken in the Rimini theme park, "Italia in Miniatura," Mr. Ghirri gleefully skewers the sublime, showing tourists wandering among, and looming over, the park's miniaturized mountains.

His photographs are very much at home next to two Magritte paintings, ["In the Airy Glades"](#) (1965), with its nested steles set against fluffy white clouds, and "The Universe Unmasked" (1932), of a roofless house open to an eerily architectonic sky.

And sometimes they look more Magrittean than the Magrittes, as in an image of bowler hats on display in a Parma shop window. Photographed from the inside of the store, they appear to hover over the plaza outside.

Mr. Demand's film choices are just as inspired, ranging from Tacita Dean's meditative sequences of pears fermenting in a glass jar and magpies rustling bare tree branches, to Ger Van Elk's wonderfully perverse ["Well-Shaven Cactus."](#) Best of all is Mr. Graham's ["Phonokinetoscope."](#) a drug-enabled idyll that's accessible to the sober; its Syd Barrett-inspired soundtrack echoes through the galleries.

But it's the mix of work in "La Carte d'Après Nature," more than any individual piece, that's truly eye opening. In one gallery Chris Garofalo's recent glazed-porcelain sculptures of invented botanical specimens cross-pollinate with a cubist tree designed in 1925 by the brothers Jan and Joel Martel. In another, Kotsch's photographs of cellar doors become portals to the underworld when shown alongside an object commissioned, for this show, from Mr. Affutu, a Ghanaian coffin maker.

Along the way you may find yourself asking: What does all of this have to do with Magritte? But just as he tells us ["This Is Not a Pipe."](#) Mr. Demand quietly puts forth the idea of landscape as the ultimate "treachery of image."

"La Carte d'Après Nature" continues through Oct. 8 at the Matthew Marks Gallery, 522 West 22nd Street, Chelsea, (212) 243-0200, matthewmarks.com.