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THE SURREAL AND THE REAL OF PARKEHARRISON PHOTOGRAPHS

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Something clicks when you look at photographs by Robert and Shana ParkeHarrison. Their work will be exhibited in an upcoming show at the Silvermine Guild Arts Center, "Robert and Shana ParkeHarrison: Selected Works."

The impact of the imagery skips past the threshold of perception and the viewer gets it in a drumbeat. The rush of wind caught in a billowed curtain, the echoed slap of a bird's wings, the tingle of a leaf's edge touching flesh, the thud of shoes dancing over a mountain of rubber tires. Tactile, aural, visual -- all feed into a deep sensory flash that is an allusive overture to what is happening in these artistic photographs.

It's the next instant that the real fun begins.



Visually, much is going on. In "Harbinger" the blurred rush of movement is threefold: a man's legs dangle down from the top of the frame over a tumbling chair, a dark outline of a bird has flown through the window. Double exposures of the man's hands are the vibrant reaction to the flurry of bird's feathers propelled by wind rushing a silvery curtain, whose opaque edge is one of the few things in focus.

In this surreal scene the question is: Has this man just hanged himself or is he inspired by birds and attempting to fly?

"This image is playful, but it's also dark," explains Shana ParkeHarrison. "It lends itself to many layers of meaning and the title extends the possibilities."

ParkeHarrison says that "Harbinger" suggests that the birds have come in through the window freely, have partnered with the man and taken flight into a higher space. "Then the man hasn't hung himself, he has achieved flight."

The couple has collaborated for about 16 years and much of their work is about the relationship of humans to nature and technology. This theme first sprouted when they lived in New Mexico and learned of the impact on the desert from atomic bomb testing at Los Alamos.

"This war machine started out there and there has been this really amazing yet fragile relationship taking place," says ParkeHarrison. "It awakened us to investigate the way humans build up the technology but also tear down the environment."

Their work evolved and addressed issues of global warming. "Overflow" is about the aftermath of a flood, where a room is half-filled with water and buoys a lifeless arm amidst other floating debris -- a glass vase, a wooden chair -- all quietly petrified in a curiously beautiful, reflective light coming from an open window. Outside, a clear sky pushes that tension between an earthly heaven and interior hell.

"We were thinking about the ice cap melting," says ParkeHarrison. "Out the window is an eerie, beautiful landscape that speaks to the stillness after the storm. There is something horrific but beautiful after a natural disaster and we attempted to capture that beauty within the destructive quality and the deafening silence."

Over the years the ParkeHarrisons have honed in on a multilayered process to create their work.

"We really come to our imagery not as photographers, but as artists," says ParkeHarrison, explaining that both have a degree in fine art. "We do a lot of sketching, discussing, drawing and then do some research" that extends to science, literature, film and mythology. As images and ideas become formulated, sketches emerge of possible staged sets.



"We start looking for landscapes and building props," says ParkeHarrison. "We begin work in a way that allows the images to complete themselves."

Shana ParkeHarrison was a ballet dancer, a profession that helped her morph her into her role as choreographer and director, giving cues to Robert ParkeHarrison, who is in front of the camera. "I'm usually doing the directing because I have a strong sense how to place him choreographically so he is acting and believable."

Changing the photograph by painting over it furthers the artists' aesthetic sense.

"We use photography to make a believable image then we take it away from its 'photographicness' by the application of many layers of paint. That way it becomes less of a document."

The final images tug at the viewer's curiosity, which is the couple's intent.

"There is the aspect of the responsibility of the viewer," she says. "That's the difference between art and entertainment. In art the viewer has to engage and think, as opposed to entertainment, where all the information is spoon-fed. We don't want to be entertaining, we want to engage the viewer."

Concurrent with the ParkeHarrisons' exhibit are two other shows at Silvermine.

"Layers + Meaning/Order + Space" is a new collection of work by New Canaan artist Ann Conrad, who was chosen by Silvermine Gallery Director Jeff Mueller as part of the "Director's Choice" program.

"Ann's work deals with landscapes filtered through the digital camera, then etched using the sun and metal plates," says Mueller.

"The work is incredible, abstracted elements of the landscape with trees and of water."

The juried guild group show, "Elsewhere," is a yearly show for guild members.

Mueller says the works in this thematic show are visual interpretations on the word "Elsewhere."

The ParkeHarrisons are the show's jurors and will choose about 50 works out of the 100 submitted.

All three exhibits will open Friday and run to March 13. A talk will be given by Robert and Shana ParkeHarrison on Feb.8 at 3 p.m. The opening reception for all three shows is on Feb.22, 2-4 p.m.

The Silvermine Guild Arts Center is at 1037 Silvermine Road, New Canaan. Call 966-9700 or visit www.silvermineart.org/index.cfm.