



Still lives for an accelerated world

By ELIZABETH COOK-ROMERO | The New Mexican
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One hundred years ago, young photographers learned their trade by assisting established practitioners of the art. Today many go to colleges and universities. For such artists, the first few years after graduation are filled with tough choices. Many owe thousands of dollars in student loans and must spend more money to buy equipment that will be obsolete within three years. They need to find a studio and place to live and must start producing original work before they are deemed too old by an art world besotted with youth. Aluminum, Silver and Chrome, an exhibit running through Dec. 8 at the Marion Center Student Gallery at the College of Santa Fe, focuses on the work of five photographers who graduated between 1993 and 2000. Curator Nancy Sutor said she chose artists who had been out of school long enough to have surmounted some of the challenges young artists face.

The ambrotype process, invented in the mid-19th century, produces a glass negative. Lights and pale grays appear as a silvery coating, and when black is added to the back of the glass, the image appears as a positive. The thickness of the glass adds a sense of depth that shifts when the ambrotype is viewed from varying distances. Ake's Oregon Hill and Bighole Oregon have the feel of ambrotypes of Civil War battlefields. The images are recorded with the coolness common to early photography, a characteristic perhaps caused by the long exposures necessary with this technique. The two images nonetheless convey grief and loss. The land is a mess. The few trees seem stunned and pathetic, and rubble fills the foreground. The denuded landscapes of Oregon Hill and Bighole Oregon might have been caused by natural forces, such as fire or landslides. Yet the photographs were taken in a state where forests are battlegrounds between environmentalists and those who see living trees only as a source of profit. In Bighole, the sky's silver gray forms mottled puddles that suggest nature itself is weeping.

Jennifer Schlesinger's gelatin silver print Earth Pattern XXV shows a section of a tree. Its bark has elongated fissures that formed as it expanded and cracked to accommodate growth in the tree's girth. Schlesinger's photograph focuses on the place where the trunk divides like trouser legs. Thick encrustations of bark seem to flow over the surface and collect in the crotch as if some bits of tree bark couldn't decide which direction to take. In Earth Pattern XIV, Schlesinger shows a detail of the kind of cactus often nicknamed "bunny ears." Some cacti, like this specimen, seem to reject the form typical of their species and grow into rococo curves and bulges. The flesh is covered with circular tufts of thorns that, deceptively, appear as soft as velvet.

In Mark Mann's enlarged postcards from the 1960s and 1970s, the dot matrix used in the original offset printing becomes enlarged, causing the images to blur. Aluminum and plastic chairs arranged around a motel swimming pool and a man eating in a run-down diner resemble grainy footage taken with a security camera. Mann transforms the light-filled, bland commercialism of the postcards into subtly sinister images that hint at an invasion of privacy.

Frank Abruzzese's Sea Level series was commissioned by Ireland's Office of Public Works, the country's primary engineering agency. All of Abruzzese's images included in Aluminum are night scenes with an expanse of sea occupying the middle ground. Some skies are nearly black; one is an intense blue that seems unnatural. Abruzzese's long exposures cause the sea to appear as soft impressionistic smudges -- sometimes the color of dying orchids -- but the traces of human movement left by the lights of cars, boats, and planes is recorded with crisp clarity.

Lines of white, pale yellow, and red light bounce along the horizon and trace broken arcs in the sky. In Abruzzese's hands the camera is a seismograph that records not the movements of the Earth but the frantic activity on its surface. In one photograph, the trajectory of a plane leaves a glowing cigar shape in the sky and a white reflection in the sea that rivals the reflection of the moon. Occasionally a jetty or stones on the shore stand out in realistic detail -- during Abruzzese's long exposures, they are the only objects that have not moved. Their stillness makes the inanimate rocks seem wise.

Liz Obert photographs paint cracking and curling, perhaps because of salt air or intense sunlight; layers of torn and peeling posters; close-ups of spray-painted graffiti; and broken cement turning to powder. She covers digital printouts of these decaying surfaces with layers of acrylic medium and paint -- especially silver, pink, and blue, which have a decidedly artificial air. She then wets the paper and rubs it until it disintegrates. She's left with a flexible sheet of plastic with a photographic image embedded in it, which she attaches to canvas. Imperfection, aging, and impermanence take center stage in her work, and they make humanity's attempts to disguise the inevitable seem silly.

The five artists included in Aluminum have very different visions, but together their work captures a shared sense of uncertainty in a world changing far too fast.