



Family participates in compelling images

By Gayle Clemans / Special to The Seattle Times

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In your family photographs, there are probably lots of smiling faces, some vacation scenes, kids playing and important family events. In Tim Roda's photographs of his family, there are hints of danger, layers of meaning, fragmented narratives and a collision between fact and fiction. Roda's recent large-scale, black-and-white photographs, on view at Greg Kucera Gallery, are beautiful and alarming.

It's not always entirely clear what's going on in Roda's photographs. At first, some of them seem like enlarged, candid scenes from the Roda home - in one photograph, Roda's son, 7-year-old Ethan, sits on the floor of his room playing with little figures of knights and dinosaurs and castles and ... a crucifix? And whose big bare feet are hanging off the edge of the bunk bed? Incongruous elements fill Roda's images, making us aware that these are actually staged events - conceptual and visual installations, filled with props and symbols, constructed for the camera.

Usually Roda assembles his sets in a day, filling them with materials such as concrete blocks, scrap lumber and various household items - the interplay of these materials is visually engaging and often mysteriously symbolic. After the installations are ready, Roda's family members perform a generally preconceived event or moment, which is photographed by Roda's wife, Allison.

It's good that the sets and props are often very obviously artificial; otherwise, you might wonder how healthy it is for Ethan to participate in these quasiperformances. In one photograph, Ethan wields a pair of large hedge clippers as his dad holds out the grossly elongated neck of a very fake-looking clay bird. Even with the staginess, the suggestion of violence can be disturbing. None of the family members seems particularly happy in these weird and wonderful images. Roda has placed himself in similar territory as Sally Mann, who was criticized for years about her practice of photographing her children in seemingly inappropriate situations.

As with Mann's work, there is also a larger conceptual framework supporting these occasionally disturbing family images. Roda has written that his work is "filled with reverberations of [his] own memories of childhood and family traditions." Roda uses multiple, vaguely symbolic props and familiar settings to encourage you to connect with your own family memories. Like memories, the images are narrative but not completely so; they're filled with sharp visual moments and elusive, fragmented meanings.

Based on the immigrant background of Roda's grandfather, there is a strong current of working-class imagery and tone. Roda often takes on the role of laborer or hunter-provider; we see him with a shotgun, with welding tools, hauling things on his back. Seen in this light, the menacing image of Ethan poised to decapitate the fake bird suggests a tradition of a father passing skills of survival down to his son.

The works are also visually stunning. Roda makes very effective choices in composition, texture and lighting that both compliment the gritty character of the subject matter and that create pleasing, elegant effects. Even the more deliberately gritty scenes contain formal elements - such as a balanced composition or a pleasing repetition of cylindrical forms - that soothe the eye. One image in particular stands out as a stunner: Roda, in black formal attire, and Allison, in white, dance in a long, empty, run-down loft. Again, there is an undercurrent of potential danger - the graceful couple is barefoot and the wood floor is strewn with rough boards and debris.

Roda's technical process is appropriately slapdash and abrasive. He roughly cuts the borders of his images so that they look torn and abused and he allows or even creates chemical splashes and other technical flaws. This treatment of the pictures adds to the atmosphere of his working-class environments and handmade props. Much like the piling up of props and the multiplicity of narratives, the idea of labor is layered into the photographs.

But the overall allure of his images is their strangeness and their familiarity. You can identify with the household settings or familial moments, and you can begin to piece together meaning. But the symbolism seems personal to Roda and the possible meanings are endless and precarious.