

**The world has an uncanny theatricality for photographer Anne Zahalka.**

The world has an uncanny theatricality for Anne Zahalka. Looking at her photographs, you can't explain why or how the environment is so staged-looking. The whole of nature is a cultivated spectacle for sightseers, vulgar and beautiful at the same time, which yields a peculiar remoteness.

Each of Zahalka's photographs is distinctive. *Strangers in a Strange Land, Pinnacles Desert* shows three Asian women dressed in Oriental costume amid the surreal landscape of sharp peaks rising out of the sand. The foreground is filled with bright yellow glare and the figures cast sharp shadows. You intuit that the air-conditioned bus is revving nearby. You don't experience the landscape as sublime, but rather a funny place commissioned for spectacle. In fact, it's a sacred place now co-opted by an industry.

The three figures look anomalous only because you think of the desert as extensively empty or sparsely populated by exceptional people with bush knowledge. Now that there are three richly attired urbane women in the field, you're reminded that all strange or picturesque locations belong to the economy. It's big business out there, serviced by luxurious transport and monitored by experts in quality control.

Most of Zahalka's locations are artificial and only deal with nature as a decorative fantasy. This is the case with *Enchanted Forest, Fox Studio*, a sweet picture of a child, Teddy in elbow, who wanders through a snowy coniferous grove. It's already bedtime, because the night sky sparkles with starry radiance and the child treads as if without gravity. This exaggerated environment is set up for fun and photographic capture; it isn't natural except as an illusion, evoking a land of myth rather than reality.

Zahalka doesn't really try to persuade you that the enchanted forest is real, just as no pretences are made on behalf of St Nicholas in *Natural Wonders - Santa's Kingdom, Fox Studios*. The fond family visitors aim to be seduced by the lights and the expectation of Christmas; and all but the children know that the charm is make-believe.

Rich corporations who run shopping centres and hotels are more likely to spend money on nature than on art. The relief provided by reedy ponds and stunted trees is seen as a symbolic gesture of faith towards the natural order. An example of this pious largess by real-estate developers is in *Orchid Garden, Singapore Airport*. A child sits by a pool jumping with fish. Perhaps she's just thrown some food into the water. The sight of the fish is hypnotic, yielding a whole world for otherwise bored eyes.

Nature is dwarfed by the concrete around it. The order of things is a bit depressing, but also quite wonderful. The child who encounters a garden at an airport isn't necessarily conscious that there's something unnatural or absurd about it. The little boy who rides his bike in the background of *Natural Wonders, English Garden, Weston Park* doesn't think that there's something contradictory about kangaroos in a European park.

In fact, some of the urban environments provide what has been called "new nature" by theorists - urban places where things grow that might never have been able to survive. Certainly, the winged creatures in central Sydney have a habitat, just as their mates have in Melbourne. They can still be authentically zoological, even if their haunts are super saturated in human intervention.

Talking of intervention, I wasn't so sure of a couple of photographs which seem more conspicuously manipulated. The creatures installed in incongruous landscapes weaken the air of naive experience that animates the figures on-location. The assurance that the place is more or less as shown in the photograph is a part of the wonder.

I can share the magic in *Enchanted Forest* because I trust that the stars (albeit feigned) are really in the ceiling for the child to see. Similarly, if the lights weren't on for the guysto enjoy their Christmas, but were only inserted in Photoshop, say, the *Santa's Kingdom* wouldn't have the magic that it earns as a narrative. For the story to work we have to believe the narrator.

And this is especially the case with anomalies, such as the tourists in the Australian landscape, where the implicit presence of a coach relies upon your belief in the scene. Even when it's a fib from beginning to end, photography gains some of its magic from a truth-claim. In most of her works, Zahalka manages truth and magic in one.

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