

Stranger than fiction

Contributed by Kris Vagner

'Abraham' by David Muskin

All the world's a stage in David Muskin's photographs

By Kris Vagner

12/20/06

"Did you say you're trying to record truth?," a museumgoer asks.

Reno artist David Muskin is giving a lunchtime talk about his black-and-white photographs at the Nevada Museum of Art in Reno.

"Sure," says Muskin quietly from behind a graying wisp of goatee and John-Lennon spectacles. "I'm always trying to create truth."

Wait, was that "record truth" or "create truth"? Was that nun in the picture already poised in front of that larger-than-life Pepsi logo, or did Muskin design the shot in advance? Was that inebriated man in the wizard hat already standing in the

laundromat quoting Shakespeare when the photographer walked in, or is he a pal who offered to model? Was that sad-eyed girl already standing in that man's tattooed arm, or did Muskin ask the tough-looking biker to stand closer to his young daughter for the camera?

A little bit of each. The look of these pictures is part-photojournalism, part candid, stark, street portraiture, with clear references to the work of Diane Arbus, who photographed human oddities and the oddity of humans. Some of the shots are obviously staged, such as one in which a former neighbor points an arrow at his own head, but, as Muskin points out, all photographs everywhere are part truth, part fiction. In his world of gritty, unforced glamour, the boundary between the objective and the fantastic is permeable. His subjects look a little like they might have been dressing up and playing a role, but they're not dressing up for the camera; they were already wearing that wizard hat or sporting that ominous scarecrow tattoo when the photographer showed up to translate the ambient light into a flattering, Hollywood glow. His respect for and fascination with the stories of the slightly off-kilter—casino waitresses at the end of a shift; a skinny, tough-looking biker who's been cured of deafness—comes off as somber compassion.

Muskin takes the elements of the everyday as he finds them, maybe moves something a little to the left, maybe asks the ranting thespian outside the laundromat if he'd mind stepping inside for a photo shoot. He might set the shutter speed to blur the laundry in the drier for a little extra visual flourish. But for the most part, he calls things as he sees them, recording them in black and white with a balance of dark realism and the everyday wonderfulness of small details.

"It's cool to create your own stage," Muskin says. He's speaking literally as well as poetically. All the world is a stage to begin with, and Muskin also owns his own entertainment venue. He's proprietor of Davidson's Distillery, a gritty biker bar and outlaw-music spot in downtown Reno.

"It's kind of neat to have this den of iniquity," he says. It's not clear whether he means the bar or the world outside it. Probably both.

Exposed Dialogues: Photographs by David Muskin is on exhibit until Jan. 6, 2007, at the Nevada Museum of Art, 160 W. Liberty St., Reno. For information, call (775) 329-3333 or visit www.nevadaart.org.