

Art in America

Elizabeth Bryant

SolwayJones

Art in America, October 2008, p 200

By Constance Mallinson

Over the last decade, Elizabeth Bryant has been questioning photography's ability to convey the complex relationship between the image and the natural world. In the mid-'90s she was incising diagrammatic, often labyrinthine, patterns of European and Asian garden layouts into kitschy postcard-type prints of snowcapped mountains, waterfalls and autumnal forests. Her 2004 exhibition at SolwayJones included kaleidoscopic photo-collages of mass-media nature images that she had cut, shaped and arranged in patterns borrowed from ornate Chinese window tracery. Among the many implications of those earlier pieces are that idealized landscape photos are as perceptually controlling as window frames that limit our view of the outdoors

Her current work referencing ikebana flower arrangements similarly centers on an experience of nature that is mediated by the formalities of craft. Most of the inkjet prints here contain stylized fruit and flower arrangements set in amusing handcrafted ceramic vessels that were retrieved from the trash of the ceramics department at the university where Bryant teaches. Clunky pastel dinosaurs, grinning tiki heads, pigs, dogs, human limbs, and strange and grotesque hybrid creatures become containers for equally alien-looking lumpy gourds, succulents, blooms, roots, and vines. Bryant shoots these still lifes in lush outdoor locations, often in front of a semi-transparent scrim that partially obscures the surroundings or in front of or behind commercial posters of waterfalls, flowing streams, grassy fields, geese-filled skies and ferny dells. Sometimes shaped holes are cut in the posters, creating apertures through which the arrangements or snippets of actual landscapes are visible. The result is a seamless collage of floating images that effects confusion between the reproductions of nature and the real environment. Occasionally, in pieces such as *Pine Meadow* (2007) or *Spotted Dinosaur* (2008), she discloses trickery and artifice by exposing backdrop's edges, revealing it to be yet another object inserted among the natural specimens and ceramic sculptures.



Spotted Dinosaur, 2008, archival inkjet print, 33-1/4 x 25 inches.

Ultimately the success of Bryant's pictures depends on a series of small failures: the laughable rescued pots, pastoral fantasies poked full of holes, hackneyed mass-produced nature scenes and photography's unreliability as a depiction of fact. Collectively, these suggest that the natural is increasingly difficult to ascertain in our modified and mediated world.