

The focus cleverly blurs in 'Soft Target' at M+B



ANDREA GALVANI / M+B GALLERY

Andrea Galvani's "A Few Invisible Sculptures #1" (2012).

BY SHARON MIZOTA

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In photography, targets are high-contrast printed patterns or color bars that help achieve the hallmarks of a “successful” image: sharp focus and accurate color. In their group exhibition “Soft Target” at M+B, curators Phil Chang and Matthew Porter (both also artists who make photographs) set out to trouble such certainties.

Featuring pieces by 30 artists — most working in a photographic vein — the show celebrates “softness,” or the moments when art blurs or reconfigures the lines between figure and ground, inside and outside, nature and artifice or any other opposition you can conjure.

Sometimes it’s a literal softness, as in Adam Putnam’s murky image of measuring tools scattered on the ground or Shannon Ebner’s blurred close-up of the letter A on a lighted sign.

Elsewhere, it’s the idea of camouflage, as in Andrea Galvani’s photograph of a motocross biker so covered with mud it’s nearly impossible to distinguish figure from ground. Conversely, Dan Torop pokes fun at color targets and camouflage by holding a red piece of paper behind some red flowers. It’s unclear (and immaterial) which red is the “right” one.

David Goldes’ elegant black and white photograph of sugar crystals forming in a glass explores the line between foreground and background more metaphorically, as liquid becomes solid. Barney Kulok’s “Untitled (Councilwoman)” approaches the problem from the opposite direction, depicting a public figure as a near-black silhouette: nothing but a boundary line.

Another tactic employs the cutting and suturing of an image in unexpected ways. Julie Cockburn takes a found black and white portrait of a woman and explodes pieces of her face into a lovely chrysanthemum-starburst. In Soo Kim’s works, different photographic moments occupy the same space as she excises parts of one print and lays it like a doily over another.

Similarly, a mesh of black triangles partially obscures Hannah Whitaker’s portrait. It’s not actually a cutout, but the pattern does shift the placement of eyes and other parts as if it were.

Asha Schechter photographed a beautiful, opalescent abstraction made from strips of film, a piece of a jigsaw puzzle and a ping-pong paddle, but if the title didn’t tell you this, you would never know. And Richard Caldicott’s tiny, strikingly reductive piece juxtaposes a simple, geometric photogram with its cutout paper negative. It’s a wondrously simple meeting of object and image, a condensation of the photographic process in which light, guided through an aperture, makes an image.

Chang and Porter have curated this show as artists would, tracing visual and conceptual themes through disparate works without the benefit (or encumbrance) of historical context or artist’s intention.

Surely, not all of the included works operate solely within the frame in which they are presented in “Soft Target,” but that is largely the point. The show emphasizes the impossibility of ever achieving an exact or precise focus: An artwork’s meanings are always multiple, open to interpretation, bleeding softly out of the frame.

M+B, 612 N. Almont Drive, L.A., (310) 550-0050, through Aug. 30. Closed Sundays and Mondays. www.mbart.com