



Home is where the Lens Is

Peggy Levison Nolan at Dina Mitrani Gallery

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Peggy Levison Nolan likes a beautiful landscape just as much as the next person. She just doesn't like to shoot it - or anything else classically easy on the eye. "I was staring at a stunning mesa once," she recalls about that flat-topped formation particular to the American Southwest and a favorite focal point for photographers, "and I just put my camera down. That's not why I photograph." Nolan prefers to capture the ordinariness of life - she'll leave the sunsets to others.

But her first gallery solo show at the newly opened Dina Mitrani Gallery is anything but ordinary. It's a soft, subtle, gorgeous collection of photographs that span her quite extraordinary life, and refreshingly, feels worlds away from the forced, cutting-edge shows from emerging artists that populate Wynwood. These are intelligent, dare we say "mature" pieces of work.

And while Nolan may have "emerged" to a Miami audience with this "People, places, things" exhibit, the mother of seven has clicked her way through a world far removed from the confines of art school, and in fact didn't come to art until she started to focus her lens on her children, her house, her sink, her socks: the detritus of everyday life.

In her own bio she describes her early foray into photography this way: "Got married raised seven kids lived in the projects stayed home cooked and cleaned dreamed of making art started photographing shoplifted film learned to print shot a lot of pictures stole more film...."

When Nolan did start taking snapping professionally, it was as a wedding photographer, "you know, somebody else's personal life," she says while walking through the gallery, explaining what has always been the focus of her art.

The results of the special attention Nolan has paid to everyday life and everyday things now are on delicious display on Mitrani's walls. The simplicity of the subjects, the quality of the light, the observant eye for the average turn these photographs into masterful still-lives in the very best sense of the word.

The first set on the right-hand wall is all places and things - specifically the house, and small things within. Like in *Dead flowers*: Think a garbage bin and chipped cupboards aren't a beautiful subject for a beautiful print? Think again. With what looks (feels?) like late afternoon sun brightening part of the room, there is a sense of utter serenity about the image, in its glorious mundaneness. The same is true of *Flowered curtain*, with its stained, white coffee mug, small red flower and rich shadows on the curtain, it feels like home - a comfortable, cozy home that is loved, not a cold, decorated showroom. Pull that thread through the rest of the series, through the hairs on the floor, the rumbled bed, the cat-scratched chair, the crack in the window, the pet's chewed toy. The stand out may be the photograph of what appears to be rain on a window, but is condensation on the glass door of a stove.

Take out the superfluous, leave aside the sexy and spectacular, concentrate on the small things in daily life, and you have Nolan's M.O. "That's what grounds me, that's what motivates me to pick up a camera." Photographs don't document, she explains, they instead "produce an emotional response."

This series of household items is the highlight of the exhibit, but there are other amazing images hanging in the gallery (which, happily, will be devoted entirely to photography for future shows as well).

The "People" part of the exhibition includes photos taken at the Lotus House Women's Shelter in Overtown, where Nolan works. Again they are very intimate, very personal "tales" of an individual's everyday life. Then there is the lone group photo, with a man's back to us and a crowd and cameras facing us - funny how recognizable former president Bill Clinton is even from behind. Nolan says she stumbled upon the scene, but instead of taking the easy picture of the president, she zoomed in on the jostling press corps and adoring audience on the other side.

On these walls too, the image of the object take center stage. There's the picture of Brighton Beach, but not of sand and sea and sun culminating in a trite beach scene. Instead, it's the somewhat lonely image of a newspaper half buried in brown sand. And then there is the photograph of a crumpled red sweatshirt, which from a distance looks like a lovely flower - a discarded piece of clothing that also is a rose.

While Nolan captures a particular light or shadow, she doesn't control the environment. These slices of real life are not posed or set up, they simply are, stripped of postmodern pretenses. No photoshopping here, no manipulation of the subject and hence the viewer. The images are immediately familiar, and they are nothing new, just as she intends them to be, sort of. This is how she describes it: "Why must we perpetually reinvent ourselves? Whatever could the next new best thing be? What if repeating the same path over and over, making coffee each morning, looking out the window for birds, feeding the dog and the cat, peering into the bathroom mirror ...what if all these reassuring repetitive acts bring us closer to our beating hearts so that every falling strand of hair could be at once old and new?" In Nolan's hands, what lovely hair.

Although this is the first solo show here in Miami from Nolan, she long ago left the realm of amateur. When she finally "stopped stealing film slowed down some started thinking more shot better pictures calmed down," finished raising kids, and eventually found herself alone in the house, she received a Master's Degree in Fine Arts from FIU, where she is currently an adjunct professor of photography. Along the way she's collected any number of awards and grants and exhibited nationally and locally in museums. Not surprisingly, she's been involved in several female-centric projects such as "For & About Women," a portfolio of 10 photographs from noted female photographer at Sotheby's, and was a featured artist in the National Museum of Women in the Arts in Washington, D.C.

And also not surprisingly, given the intimate nature of Nolan's repertoire, some of the prints are not for sale. For those that are, part of the proceeds go to the Lotus House, as her life and her art are hard to disentangle - thankfully so for the viewer who got the chance to contemplate and connect with "People, places, things."

Thanks also goes to the new Mitrani gallery, which will offer photography books, monographs, and magazines to coincide with future shows that will "include collaborations with independent curators and other art institutions in order to bring important photo-based exhibitions to the Miami community."