

PHOTOGRAPHY REVIEW

PHOTOGRAPHY REVIEW; A Landscape Worshiper in Bali, Exploring the Mysterious Power of Light

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"Bali," an exhibition of Rena Bass Forman's photographs at the Bonni Benrubi Gallery on the Upper East Side, has nothing to do with the Indonesian island as tourist hot spot and everything to do with a place where the equatorial light is mysterious and sometimes surreal.

A photograph of a well-kept temple surrounded by a dense assortment of trees looks as though it had been taken in the late afternoon, with the long shadow of a tree cast on the ground in front of the surrounding temple wall. But the sky is black and the fronds of a tall palm tree appear to be emitting white smoke.

Ms. Forman prefers to work in late-day light, just before sunset, and usually she has a good hour of it. But in Bali, she found, the sun dropped so quickly that day became night in a matter of minutes. This happened while she waited for the right moment to take the picture of the temple, when a puff of white cloud moved behind the palm tree, giving it an unexpected glow.

Ms. Forman didn't always wait for such Magritte-like moments. The eight 30-by-30-inch prints in the exhibition and a portfolio of 9-by-9-inch prints selected from her Bali project, also available for viewing at the gallery, reveal a landscape photographer with a finely honed eye for the sumptuous contrasts in the Balinese landscape, as well as for the alchemic power of light.

In another image in the exhibition, a mountain that has been turned into a sculptured, terraced rice paddy has the aura of an ancient temple, surrounded as it is by lush foliage and palm trees, the palm fronds glinting like delicate, polished gold. Here, the orderly horizontals of the terraces are nicely balanced with the unruly profusion of trees and above them, huge roiling clouds.

Ms. Forman lends her prints a pronounced sepia tone, which has the effect of accentuating Bali's unusual light. This toning also highlights the pictures' subtext -- that nature and man-made structures need not war with each other but can coexist in lovely harmony.

In this, Ms. Forman's photographs call to mind the work of Toshio Shibata.

In his elegantly detailed images of Japanese public works, he captures that marvelous Japanese propensity for imposing exquisite visual order on nature. But while Mr. Shibata's black-and-white studies are coolly cerebral, Ms. Forman's photographs, taken with a 2 1/4 camera and richly toned, often reflect the less well-ordered but no less fortuitous meeting of man and nature.

An ancient seated stone Buddha with a piece of fabric draped over one shoulder and present-day offerings on its lap bears the marks of time and the elements, as though it too were part of the natural landscape. Conversely, a sliver of a waterfall cutting through thick foliage looks as though it might have been the result of human intervention.

Although the maturity of these images suggests that the photographer has been engaged in large-scale landscape photography for some time, Ms. Forman, who is 44 and majored in art history at Hofstra University, spent a decade after finishing college as an arts administrator in New Jersey and Massachusetts, devising art and educational programs for

schools and museums.

Given a 35-millimeter camera on her 18th birthday, Ms. Forman immediately drove out west from Manhattan and fell in love with the landscape. As arts administrator, she documented her projects with photographs and did landscape photography in her spare time. The works she admired were mostly by 19th-century or turn-of-the-century landscape photographers: Carleton E. Watkins, William Henry Fox Talbot, John Beasley Greene and Gustave Le Gray.

She stopped working as an administrator in 1984, after her two daughters were born, and began doing watercolors and collages, including photography, in 1984. She preferred to work small, her pictures usually no larger than 5 by 5 inches. She didn't start on her present body of work until 1993, when a fire in her studio in upstate New York, where she lives, destroyed all her earlier work. After her studio was rebuilt, she decided to go from small to big.

In 1990 she had begun to tone her prints, bleaching her black-and-white prints and then redeveloping them in a toning bath. For her larger work the toning became much more complicated and painstaking. She began to travel to more exotic places, including the John Day Fossil Beds in Oregon, the grassland and mountains of Turkey, and the Isle of Skye in Scotland, with its calm seas and skies full of clouds.

Always, she would bring back tangible reminders of her trips -- a rock or earth -- to guide her in the toning. Her Oregon images are selenium toned, her subjects elemental: massive, curvaceous forms. In Turkey, she photographed abstract rock and volcanic formations against a cloudless sky, her prints again subtly toned. In Bali, where the light was unlike any she had ever experienced, Ms. Forman has produced her most complex, evocative work -- deeply toned.

"Bali: A Visual Offering" remains at the Bonni Benrubi Gallery, 52 East 76th Street, Manhattan, through May 30.

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