

texas

**Nic Nicosia**

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Inasmuch as the title is a contradiction, Nic Nicosia's "Real Pictures" (a series title and that of this two-gallery show) are, in fact, quite real; that is to say, his photographs and films are actual objects. Though this is usually sufficient to establish authenticity in painting and sculpture, photography and film are saddled with an extra burden of proof. Because audiences are still so ready to identify with and accept the "truth" of photo-based imagery, the extent to which photographers and filmmakers manipulate their subjects continues to be an essential point of discussion in these genres, an irony not lost on this Dallas-based artist. Illusion is both friend and foe to

Nicosia, whose 20-year retrospective of photography and film organized by Houston's Contemporary Art Museum displays the artist in tireless pursuit of the oxymoronic "real" picture.

Grouped by theme and form, many of the early photographs are of stylized tableaux in which flattened environments and controlled time indicate the artist's hand in posing his subjects. The "Domestic Drama" series combines actors with *trompe l'oeil* sets to convey recognizable narratives (i.e. a family morning routine, a couple arguing over house plans). Less successful, the "Near (modern) Disaster" photographs are near-cartoons staged to suggest perilous situations frozen at climax: a family on a storm-tossed boardwalk, a cocktail party disrupted by a laser beam. These faux, stop-motion scenes strike the postures of play without feeling playful, their illusionary effects as transparent as the feigned conflicts. Despite the high-key lighting and bright palette typical of 1980s MTV, these images are locked in mid-gimmick and surprisingly dead.

Later series abandon color photography and the studio for less controlled settings. Nicosia also lets go of simple illusions in favor of the more complex manipulation of

mystery. The "Real Pictures" and "Sex + Lust" series catch a variety of open-ended dramas *in medias res*. Cropped bodies and loaded stares activate these narratives. This ambiguity is most effective in the "Untitled" series, where light and shadow are used to suggest relationships between figures in rich compositions. In *Untitled #2* from 1991, this strategy emphasizes adult feet, a thumb-sucking child, and a male silhouette, encoding a benign living-room scene with chiaroscuro drama. Nicosia is often discussed in terms of domestic story-telling, alluding to his frequent use of kitchens, bedrooms, and suburban gardens to communicate narrative information. But the compositions work best when constructed around people in space and the sight lines that do or do not connect them, communicating more about these subjects than their settings.

Regrettably, Nicosia's films are 1980s throwbacks in which visual and narrative content feels too two-dimensional. The relentless, forward tracking shot in the 1997 film *Middletown*, which was also included in the 2000 Whitney Biennial, is about as interesting as what it depicts in umpteen trips around the same suburban block. The film's numbing boredom is intensified with each revolution's repetition of characters and vignettes that play out flatly on the surface of the screen. The same flatness plagues *Moving Picture* and *Middletown Morning*, though the latter makes poetic use of jump cuts and animated shadows that extends beyond technical bravura. As his photographs from the 1990s indicate, Nicosia is most effective when he foregoes staged trickery for the more primal suggestiveness of composition, proximity of bodies, and the real, old-fashioned gaze.

*John Ewing is a writer living in San Antonio.*

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*Love + Lust #11*, 1990. Silver gelatin photograph with oil tint, 30" x 37". Courtesy of Austin Museum of Art.

