

A wanderer's illusions

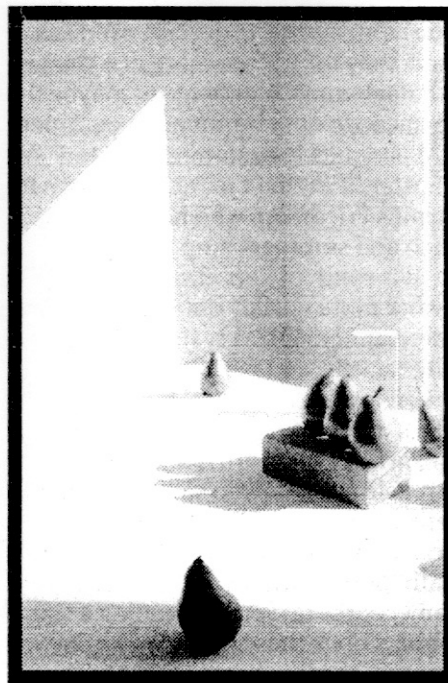
BY JOHN EWING

A coincidence in Ecuador years ago is the root of Neil Maurer's still-life photography. Disinterested by the quiet street scene outside the house where he was living, the photographer's curiosity was drawn indoors to the dining table and a group of objects the cook placed there after every meal. A bottle of ketchup, a cup and saucer, the objects would change daily and Maurer photographed the accidental tableaux as they appeared. Then, one day, he set up the scene himself.

"It sounds dumb, but that was my break from street photography, and the traditions of documenting, to arranging and constructing fictions," recalls the UTSA associate professor, whose exhibition "Photographs and Other Acts of Deception" shows this month at the Center for Spirituality and the Arts as part of Fotoseptiembre. Many of the black-and-white images were staged in a small, tabletop theater in Maurer's sunny studio on the San Antonio River. Conceived in series, the photographs include still lifes with fruit, flowers, sticks, rocks and geometric pieces of acrylic. The objects themselves are either unremarkable or vaguely ritualistic, such as the Venezuelan "Brother Gregory" figurines of his "Clay Man" series. But objects are rarely the subject of Maurer's work. What makes the images intriguing is the interplay of light and shadow and Escher-like shifts in perspective that keep the viewer guessing.

In one series, a stick balanced on the corner of a table spars with a rectangular pattern on the wall behind, activating a floating, optical illusion. In another group, Maurer combines four materials — cloth, stone, string, and a pole — to compose exquisitely balanced abstractions of line, shape, and texture. Other images use reflections, shadows, and the visible grain of the film to mystify the viewer's sense of space and volume. All of the images are composed with the edge of the frame in mind and suggestively reach beyond it with one or more elements into infinity. That, too, is an illusion.

"Most of the images can't be seen if you just walk into the studio and look at the set-up. I'm really arranging for the viewfinder," says Maurer, who anchors the camera and adjusts his components accordingly,



Pears and Sunlight, a silver gelatin print by Neil Maurer

often shooting at different times of the day to catch varying patterns of light and shadow. Maurer might shoot several rolls on a single compositional idea and still not achieve the effect or feeling he's after.

"The challenge is knowing to quit when you're repeating yourself," says Maurer, a former Washington Post reporter, Peace Corps volunteer in Peru, and two-time Fulbright recipient. A vigorous life of exploring and exposing has focused his criticism of his own efforts. "Sometimes the pictures aren't any good because you haven't done it enough or worked through the problems. People can say they don't like what you're doing, but what they can't tell you is whether you should quit now, or try harder," comments Maurer. The artist's meticulous illusions suggest he knows the difference. ■