

Review of 2009 show “Photographs” at the Phantom Galleries

SHAPESHIFTERS

Vy PhamWed. September 16

Jeff Atherton’s focused lack of focus

Jeff Atherton’s work (up now at one of the many Phantom Galleries sites unwrapped this week) feels like a scene snagged from some familiar late-night adventure, in which you’ve found yourself stumbling onto dim avenues lit only by a misty glow from street lamps. In the same way that objects lurking in the sinister shadows of such a moment are as indecipherable as those sitting in the brightly lit areas, so too are the subjects of Atherton’s images. Sullied by a foggy haze, Atherton’s smoky, black-and-white photographs—a wide-ranging series of silver gelatin prints—encourage obscurity.

Pulled from three different projects—The Figures with Attributes, The Eumenides, and The Hell Series—Atherton’s prints hang like haunting and enigmatic snapshots of ambiguity meant to, as the artist says, “displace the subjects from their everyday place in the world.” If we focus enough on these faintly out-of-focus prints, we’re enraptured, trapped in what seems to occur in the contrasting positive and negative spaces. Here is where Atherton’s work seems to garner most of its force. Signal, part of The Hell Series, is an image of a ladder situated in darkness. It leads both up and down into luminous glow; and like the cryptic subject matter of the other photographs in this exhibition, you cannot discern its setting. This otherwise ordinary object, now ethereal and unearthly, is without place—or even time. Similarly, the man depicted in a large, grainy nine-print, nontraditional portrait, is unidentifiable and faceless (literally), perhaps robbing you of the ah-ha! moment we all love.

Atherton’s show keeps us aptly disoriented. The objects—Greek statue heads, tree branches, shark puppets, sewing pins, hands—and people transformed in his photographs cannot be situated. We, as viewers, struggle to place them into a context and, in the process, lose ourselves—not only in the photograph, but in our imaginations as well.

JEFF ATHERTON: PHOTOGRAPHS PHANTOM GALLERIES LA LONG BEACH • 390 E THIRD ST, LONG BEACH 90802 • PEDESTRIAN VIEWING 24/7 • GALLERIES OPEN BY APPOINTMENT • THROUGH SEPT 30 • PHANTOMGALLERIESLA.COM/LONG\_BEACH