Delving deeper
Lost stories in public landscapes

By MARY BIRMINGHAM
JOURNAL CORRESPONDENT

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EMMA WILCOX setting up a shot under the Pulaski Skyway.
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INFO: Through Aug. 17: Wednesday and Friday 11 a.m. to 5 p.m.; Thursday 11 a.m. to 8 p.m.; Saturday and Sunday noon to 5 p.m. Call 201-413-0303 or www.jerseycitymuseum.org.

While her haunting photographs may seem uninhabited, there is always subtle evidence of a human presence, sometimes only implied.

In trying to incorporate the "lost stories" embedded in these places, Wilcox conveys a sense of mystery and magic. To whom do the tattered high-heeled shoes half-buried in the dirt in "The Field (Malquilladora)" belong, and where is she now? What else is buried in that dirt, just below the surface?

Wilcox explains: "I am less interested in what a view looks like than what it is made out of. In Jersey, as in most places, this means dirt, ashes, stones, maybe Chevies, maybe bodies, but mainly stories. All kinds."

The intermingling of public spaces and private stories fascinates Wilcox. She notes that the places she photographs belong to everyone and no one. What she views as an intriguing landscape could be someone's "bedroom." A stack of empty pint bottles punctuates one of the more abstract images, like the tag of an anonymous graffiti artist.

When Wilcox lost her Newark home to eminent domain, her artistic response was to paint a line, paraphrasing Agha Shahid Ali's poem "Farewell," in giant letters on the building's roof. Her photograph, "Eminent Domain No. 3," taken from a helicopter, reads, "My memory gets in the way of your history," integrating her own story into the fabric of the community.

Her father, a self-taught carpenter, is a master of salvage. He instilled an early respect in his daughter for fixing broken things. Wilcox still harbors the heartfelt belief that rescued and rehabilitated objects are somehow enhanced by their history, and are in fact "better than new."

This preference also informs her choice of equipment — a refurbished vintage Linhof Technikardan camera. Not surprisingly, she chooses subjects that reveal the beauty of overlooked and forgotten places. Wilcox works slowly, methodically, and almost exclusively at night. With her periodic revisiting of the same places, and her repeated rituals — setting up the tripod, loading and unloading the camera, contemplating the shots — her artmaking is an almost meditative practice, and her pictures quiet meditations on place.

Emma Wilcox loves the expression "bringing something to light," and it is with that goal in mind that she creates her photographs. As a result, her dark but richly nuanced works are visual poems.
Maria Adelaida Lopez, 2004
Doll House covered with vacuum cleaner dust.

Gallery partners

Evonne Davis and Emma Wilcox co-founded Gallery Aferro, an alternative art space in Newark. The name Aferro, from an idiomatic Portuguese word meaning “bound or chained to an insane idea, or an idea that is difficult to achieve,” was a strangely prescient choice. While far from insane, the gallery’s evolution has certainly been problematic.

f.y.i.
WHERE: Our Man in Havana: The Vacuum Cleaner in Art Gallery Aferro, 73 Market St, Newark.
INFO: Call 646-220-3772 or www.aferro.org

Seeking to participate in what they perceived as a vibrant and burgeoning artistic community, in February 2003 Davis and Wilcox signed a five-year lease for the top floor of a converted factory building in Newark’s Ironbound section. They spent 18 months renovating the neglected space into living quarters, eight artist studios and a 3,000-square-foot gallery. Then, after a prolonged struggle they lost the space through the process of eminent domain — the power of the government to take private property for public use.

Gallery Aferro survived and is presently operating in a four-story building on Market Street in the Downtown/Arts district.

Aferro’s current show, curated by Emma Wilcox is “Our Man in Havana: the Vacuum Cleaner in Art.” In this exhibition, 14 contemporary artists find unexpected relevance in dust, dirt and the vacuum cleaner.

The show was initially inspired by the work of Maria Adelaida Lopez, whose “dust houses” replicate those of former employees from her student/housecleaner days.