

Jon Scott Anderson's sparse Dolphin exhibit teems with ideas

Nick Malewski, KANSAS CITY STAR, January 18, 2008.

Jon Scott Anderson's pictures are big, his vision is honed and his process suggests shifts in perception of landscape as subtle as the changing of seasons.

The initial surprise of "Re-setting a Place," his exhibition at Dolphin gallery of six archival pigment prints, is the limited number of works. Nearly every piece dominates its own wall space.

A sparse display, in this case, attests to the ability of the artist to include only the works required to make his statement. According to the biography section of his Web site, these photo-based works tell a "narrative of how we see and understand place." Anderson's panoramic images depict intimate nooks - a pond, a leafy embankment, a snowy creek - found within an 80-acre plot of land south of Kansas City. At a variety of focal lengths, he takes multiple shots of his subject on medium format film and scans them into a computer to seamlessly assemble some of them into what looks like a cohesive whole.

The artist draws an association between this technique and re-setting elements, such as rocks and trees, in a Japanese garden. While interesting, this is less convincing as inspiration for the exhibition concept than the thinking behind his arrangements of close-up, medium and long shots in a particular sequence from left to right. In his opinion, our perception of place is "composed of such combinations," which is why viewers of his work accept it as a "natural representation."

Anderson may be on to something. It is easy to completely miss the photo-manipulation in "re-setting a place: creek snow" (2007). The piece presents what appears to be a masterful shot of a bland winter nature scene: a blanket of snow broken up by dark patches of uncovered soil and naked shrubbery.

The artist insists, "These are not images that can be understood within the short duration of a glance but engage the viewer over the time needed to cross the field and plane of the image."

But the average viewer may not want to spend that much time.

How important is it for a viewer to be aware of his process? Anderson's answer to this is: If the works become about the process they will lose their effectiveness. One conceivable reason he keeps his subject matter simple, as in "re-setting a place: pond" (2007), in which all but the rippled surface of the green water is cropped out, may be to avoid further complicating an already intricate process and the subtlety of its effects.

Each viewer of this exhibition, however, is left to decide for him or herself exactly what those effects are. And perhaps some of us will slow down long enough to discover there is something not so natural in these representations of nature.

Photography techniques aside, Anderson's works are most effective through their sheer enormity and capacity to engulf the visual scope of the viewer, and if they have any affinity with Japanese gardens, it would be in the idea of each picture as a separate element re-set in the "garden" of the gallery.