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Is there truth in photography? Larson's display at Weston tries to find out

BY SARA PEARCE | SPEARCE@ENQUIRER.COM

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Nate Larson's "Miracle Pennies and Other Stories" exhibition at the Weston Art Gallery has a disquieting, "Twilight Zone" quality.

Strolling from one photographic montage to the next, viewers feel as though they're witnessing situations that couldn't be real, yet appear to be just that - leaving lingering questions of whether they are.

These are first-person stories told via photographs and text about seemingly ordinary events that evolve into something else.

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Larson hears, for example, that it's possible to win the lottery by playing the numbers printed on the fortunes tucked into Chinese fortune cookies. So, he spends a few dollars on tickets, and wins. Not big, but enough to be credible.

He receives an e-mail from another Nate Larson, then hunts down more men with the same name and creates a gallery of him and his doppelgangers.

In the title sequence, also published as a book, he receives a mysterious letter. The return address bears the name "Prophet Peter Popoff."

Scrawled across the front of the envelope, in red, is this message: "God wants to give 'you' two special miracles. Open now. Urgent!"

We follow his response to the letter, which requests that he take the five coins enclosed - the "Miracle Pennies" - and complete a task with each.

He's told that if he obeys, he "shall eat the good of the land."

It's an obvious send-up of chain letters, sweepstakes and other entreaties promising a bountiful reward in return for completing a seemingly small act, even one that appears ridiculous.

For example, he is asked to throw one penny into a body of water that contains fish and to put another in a dish into which he has poured oil.

At first, the series appears glib or cynical or, worse yet, gimmicky. But the Chicago artist turns it into a thoughtful exploration of trying to construct meaning in contemporary culture, and does it so effectively that you're compelled to find out what's next.

But the exhibition serves another purpose: examining the tenuous relationship of photography to the truth.

When viewed without the text, the photos appear to document reality. In a sense, they do. He does dip one penny in oil and throw another into a lake.



PROVIDED

Artist Nate Larson stands against his "The Burden of Proof" series. His photography is on exhibit at the Weston Art Gallery through March.

Two looks at landscapes

Two other photography exhibitions take different directions in their exploration of landscapes near and far, real and imagined.

1305 Gallery: In "Backyard," Rachel Girard Reiser captures a cycle of seasons in the backyards of friends and acquaintances.

The photographs were made in Tempe, Ariz., but it could be a host of other places, because her tight, abstracted images are universal. Twigs floating in a pool. Pieces of discarded wood tossed onto a bed of dead leaves. They are, she says, "microcosms for the larger world." As with any seasonal project, they touch on life, death, renewal.

The images are beautifully printed with matte finishes and extend to the frame, giving them the appearance of paintings.

11 a.m.-3 p.m. Tuesday-Saturday, or by appointment. Through Feb. 23. 1305 Main St., Over-the-Rhine. 513-659-4987; www.1305gallery.blogspot.com

Fitton Center for Creative Arts: There couldn't be a better title for Chas. E. Martin's exhibition than "Folding Space." It encapsulates his technique of manipulating his images so that the landscape bends, curves and morphs in astonishing ways.

In the process, imaginary forms emerge as part of the real landscape. His work strives to feel eternal, sacred and monumental." It does, as iconic Western and American Indian creatures and symbols materialize before viewers' eyes.

9 a.m.-8 p.m. Monday-Thursday, 9 a.m.-5 p.m. Friday, 9 a.m.-noon Saturday. Through March 7. 101 S. Monument Ave., Hamilton. 513-863-8873; www.fittoncenter.org

Yet in another montage, a hand holds four bullets and next to it is a photo of Larson's bare back. He appears to have four bruises. The night before, he says, he dreamt that he was shot four times.

Even from its earliest days, photography skirted the boundary between reality and fiction. The darkroom has always been a place where lines could disappear from a face, shadows could be added to a landscape and people could be conveniently cropped out of a picture.

But as the darkroom has given way to the computer and as digital techniques have become more sophisticated and widespread, it's never been harder to discern what's real in a given photograph. No matter what the viewer believes.

Through March 30. 10 a.m.-5:30 p.m. Tuesday-Saturday, noon-5 p.m. Sunday. 650 Walnut St., downtown. 513-977-4165; www.westonartgallery.com.

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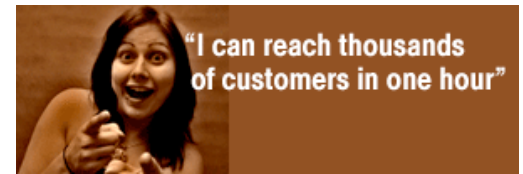
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