

# TIF SIGFRIDS

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Things Fall,' but not quite together

ART | REVIEW

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Joe Sola, Studio Visit, 2005, video

In its title, at least, the exhibition "Still, Things Fall From the Sky" pushes all the right post-9/11 emotional buttons. It conjures a sense of tenuousness and random tragedy. The show itself, encompassing the work of 12 photographers, sculptors, painters and installation and video artists at UC Riverside's California Museum of Photography, ends up evoking randomness, all right, but not of a productively destabilizing sort. What seems to have fallen from the sky is the show's curatorial integrity, slight and scattered as an off-season drizzle.

When an artist's work is taken out of its evolutionary context and asked to serve a curatorial theme, new light can be shed on the art -- or, as is largely the case here, the new context can pull a shade down over work that might have been quite luminous on its own.

Take, for example, Janice Kerbel's entry in the show: a crisply rendered, Audubon-style gouache of a hummingbird, annotated with handwritten stats about the bird's markings, habitat, diet and behavior. An audio component periodically pipes in the bird's shrill calls.

Yes, birds do take to the sky, but other than that obvious link there seems to be no rationale for including in the show what appears to be a straightforward take on taxonomic illustration. With just a single work on view, the motivation behind Kerbel's larger project (the documentation of a fictional, natural utopia) is lost, as is the connection between the promise of that fabricated world and the vulnerability of our own.

At the other end of the spectrum, Chad Gerth's work relates simplistically and quite literally to the exhibition's theme. His photograms of cracked car windshields illustrate the impact of those things that do, indeed, fall from the sky. The images are mildly mysterious but ultimately mundane.

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Vulnerability and disorder factor into most of the works, but connections are frail and little of the art stands well on its own. Amir Zaki's photograph of two Case Study homes perched precariously over a hillside, their supporting posts digitally erased, conjures a classic Southern California image of living on the edge. Christine Tarkowski's nylon, zippered version of Ted Kaczynski's backwoods cabin feels gratuitous and absurdly out of place.

Rob Fischer's photographs of abandoned trailers and mobile homes, painted over with flames and smoke, are puerile exercises in image tampering. A constellation of tiny photographs of mating flies, by Cristian Silva, appears either incomplete or simply indulgent. Brian Kapernekas' glossy brown "Quicksand Pit," crafted from cardboard and packing tape, is resourceful but utterly inconsequential.

Two short video pieces capture performances that upend our conventional pacts with gravity and rationality. In Joe Sola's "Studio Visit," the artist suddenly interrupts discussion to leap out of his window. Another amusing one-liner is "File Cabinet," Euan Macdonald's footage of a wooden file cabinet. Its top drawer, pulled open, emits gusts of papers that swirl upward and float back down into a puddle of disarray.

Three artists address the wonders of the cosmos itself, with more engaging results. Scott Roberts' sprawling "Maquette for Black Hole," constructed of triangles of cardboard taped together, looks like the ambitious project of a starry-eyed geometry student. Joel Tauber's multimedia chronicle of his quest for flight, achieved with the help of bagpipes and balloons, is charmingly anachronistic. And Ken Fandell's "The Sky Above Here (Seattle, WA, May 2003)," a 5-by-9-foot, digitally manipulated montage of hundreds of pictures of the Seattle sky, is a rapturous, technologically pumped-up descendant of Alfred Stieglitz's meditative cloud studies.

Ciara Ennis, the Museum of Photography's new curator, stretched too far and grasped too little with this show, but concurrent exhibition helps restore some focus. "Sachigusa Yasuda: Flying" contains just eight compelling, deliciously disorienting photographs and a video by the Japanese artist now resident in New York.