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An up-close look at life in cultures afar



"Juggling" by Rania Matar is in the "Three Concerned Women" exhibit at Griffin Museum.

By [Mark Feeney](#)

Globe Staff / December 3, 2009

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WINCHESTER - The main show at the Griffin Museum of Photography, "Three Concerned Women: Photographs by Susan Bank, Stella Johnson, and Rania Matar," has been organized by Constantine Manos. An award-winning member of the Magnum photo agency, Manos is perhaps best known around here as the photographer for the mid-'70s multimedia show "Where's Boston?"

THREE CONCERNED WOMEN:
Photographs by Susan Bank,
Stella Johnson, and Rania Matar

MONIKA MERVA: City of
Children

ROBERT WELSH - CHINATOWN:
Metaphor and Memory

At: the Griffin Museum of
Photography, 67 Shore Road,
Winchester, through Jan. 10. Call
781-729-1158 or go to
www.griffinmuseum.org.

Bank, Johnson, and Matar are socially aware documentary photographers who take black-and-white pictures in foreign lands. They all also studied with Manos.

An able photographer, Manos would also seem to be a gifted teacher - certainly he is if these three former pupils are any indication. He's no curator, though. The photographers' work is hung discretely with an extensive artist's statement (so far, so good). None of their images is titled or captioned, though - this despite the fact that in their books the photographers have titled them.

We are meant to experience them as parts of a whole.

The result is that these images, full of incident and personality, can only be experienced visually. This does the photographers, the images, and even the people in them a disservice. The documentary impulse is only one strand in photography. But even in this age of image glut and visual overload it remains a worthy, noble, and necessary element in the medium. Certainly, there are formalist photographers for whom titles and captions are superfluous, or even

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detrimental, to their purposes. That is not the case here. There’s no way, for example, that Susan Bank wants us to experience rural Cuba as a vehicle for purely aesthetic concerns.

Cuba is one of those subjects that can make alarm bells go off for a viewer. Will the approach be ideological? Or perhaps overly romantic and sentimental? Bank avoids such temptations in her pictures of the agricultural community Campo Adentro. She neither defends nor attacks the revolution and offers up no “Campo Adentro Social Club.”

“I had no political agenda,” she writes. “I had no intent to disturb life in *el campo*. I did, however, have to guard against drifting into a romantic vision of a way of life that on the surface appeared to be exotic and perfectly harmonious.”

The key phrase in the previous sentence is “on the surface.” Harmony isn’t necessarily congruent with subsistence. Bank’s 22 images present a hard-worn life of rural work. Hands are gnarled, expressions downcast. A little girl stares into a cistern - not exactly a wishing well. A man carries a dead pig. Bank presents her subjects modestly, with seeming artlessness - until you notice how often she finds a window or door to use as a framing device.

Johnson teaches at the Art Institute of Boston, Lesley University, and Boston University. Her 20 pictures, which she took in Cameroon, Mexico, and Nicaragua are big - just under 2 feet by 3 feet. She shares a subject matter with Bank: hard, often grinding dailiness. Yet there are intimations of transcendence, too: hands pressed against the flanks of a horse; the delight on the face of a girl hanging upside down from a tree. [Continued...](#)

Single Page 1 2 Next



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