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ART REVIEW

Two 'Hide/Seek' offshoots in Seattle, at Greg Kucera and Photo Center NW

Two Seattle galleries build on the themes of "Hide/Seek: Difference and Desire in American Portraiture," the Tacoma Art Museum exhibit on the gay and lesbian presence in modern American art.

By Michael Upchurch
Seattle Times arts writer

In a move to build up some synergy with the Tacoma Art Museum's "Hide/Seek: Difference and Desire in American Portraiture," two Seattle galleries, Photo Center NW and Greg Kucera Gallery, are hosting shows that highlight the gay and lesbian presence in modern American art, with a special emphasis on local talents in photography.

At Kucera, "Under the Rainbow: Images by and about Gay Men and Women" was assembled by Kucera and gallery owners James Harris, Gail Gibson and Stephen Lyons, working with local art collectors. It's a packed and lively show, featuring both big-name artists and lesser-known quantities.

Classic shots that will seem old friends to photography lovers include Berenice Abbott's black-and-white 1920s portraits of poet Edna St. Vincent Millay and philanthropist Dorothy Whitney (both sporting male drag), and a pair of color photos by Annie Leibovitz — one of diver Greg Louganis making a balletic underwater tum, the other of painter Keith Haring naked and paint-daubed so as to disappear into his own artwork.

There's a lovely watercolor-and-chalk drawing by Guy Anderson, "Man and Circle," in which an arched male nude hovers airily over a plain white circle, and a seductive Duane Michals black-and-white photograph from 1986, "The Most Beautiful Part of a Man's Body," that doesn't focus on the bit you might expect — and explains why in comments scrawled on the print.

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Rafael Soldi's "I'm Here, You're There" (2011).

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EXHIBITION REVIEW

'Under the Rainbow: Images by and about Gay Men and Women'

10:30 a.m.-5:30 p.m. Tuesdays-Saturdays through June 2, Greg Kucera Gallery, 212 Third Ave. S., Seattle; free (206-624-0770 or www.gregkucera.com). Note: contains nudity.

'Author and Subject: Contemporary Queer Photography'

Lesser known but striking talents include John O'Reilly, whose photo montage, "Clouds," pleurably conflates masculine flesh with sky and trees. Geoffrey Chadsey's "Boys in the Band" (watercolor pencil on Mylar) is a creepily colorful take on testosterone-triggered games (or threats).

Among the locals, photographers Steven Miller and Rafael Soldi make big impressions. Miller's "Proof of Homosexuality in Nature," thanks to digital tricks, depicts a whimsically raunchy fantasy in which two male models dressed in bunny-rabbit costumes get up to a whole Kama Sutra of tricks on what looks like Alpine meadowland in the Cascades.

Soldi's "Embrace" is utterly opposite in mood, capturing two men — tender forms in bright window light — wrapped around each other, eyes closed, in a pose that's more about soulful connection than lust.

Miller (collaborating with Adrain Chesser) and Soldi are also featured in Photo Center NW's "Author and Subject: Contemporary Queer Photography." Miller continues in a cheeky vein with "Will Work for Hone" and other fanciful explorations of the gay "bear" scene, both spoofing and celebrating hairy plus-size men.

Soldi again waxes poetic, especially in his protest against distance, "I'm Here, You're There," with its overhead view of a man's hands frustratingly scrunching up the opposite corners of a National Geographic map of the United States.

Chesser's solo work, "I Have Something to Tell You," brings a wrenching twist to otherwise routine headshots. Chesser invited friends for photo sessions, during which he disclosed he'd been diagnosed with AIDS.

Two series of five shots capture the moment-by-moment shock of the news registering on two friends' faces. It makes for a curious tension to have the true subject of these seemingly straightforward portraits be completely off-camera.

Seattle photographer Molly Landreth has a virtual one-woman show within the group show, taken from her series "Embodiment: A Portrait of Queer Life in America." Although she's working in color, Landreth's images call to mind Diane Arbus' work with its emphasis on lives on the margin.

Shot all across the country, Landreth's candid portraits are variously wistful, defiant or exuberant. "Cooper, Oakland, 2007," in the latter category, is pure carnival festivity.

While there's naturally some lesser work in both shows, there's plenty that feistily complements the offerings in "Hide/Seek."

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11 a.m.-10 p.m. Mondays-Thursday, noon-8 p.m. Friday-Sunday, through May 27, Photo Center NW, 900 12th Ave., Seattle; free (206-720-7222 or www.pcnw.org). Note: contains nudity. Artists Steven Miller and Adrain Chesser lecture 6:30 p.m. May 4, \$8-\$10.

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