

# VISUAL ARTS

## Holly Andres and Lori Nix: photography that plays with reality

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There are dozens of ways for a photographer to approach photography. But the two most basic are 1) to use your camera to document the sights you see or 2) to stage scenes specifically for your camera.

Two new photography exhibits, “Holly Andres: The Homecoming” at Photo Center NW and “Lori Nix: The City” at G. Gibson Gallery, fully embrace the “staged scene” approach.

Portland photographer Andres’ beguiling show uses live models and artfully tweaked domestic settings to create a strong, surreal sense of narrative. The exhibit was selected from a bigger show Andres had at Hallie Ford Museum of Art in Salem, Ore., earlier this year. It draws from five different series created over the last six years.

“Sparrow Hill” is the most enchanting and unsettling of them. Taking its cue from Nancy Drew mysteries and Lewis Carroll’s “Alice in Wonderland” (Andres’ website, [www.hollyandres.com](http://www.hollyandres.com), greets you with a “Drink me” message on its homepage), it depicts young girls on the verge of adolescence investigating household mysteries.

Subtle in their execution yet playfully suggestive in content, the “Sparrow Hill” photographs seem always about to enter some secret realm of

intimacy. In “Outside the Forbidden Bedroom,” for instance, two girls, one with a large brass key in hand, hover in a hallway next to a closed door. Their hand placement, facial expression and stance are meticulously choreographed, while Andres’ masterful handling of lighting and composition steers the viewer’s eye directly to the key about to enter the lock (in sharp focus). The outer reaches of the image, in contrast, speak of a gauzier girlhood world.

Allusions to Carroll seem even more overt in “The Secret Portal” where three girls find their ways into an attic and a crawl space concealing who knows what. In other shots from the series, a lost mitten, a dangling locket or a rather severe family portrait hint at mysterious or ominous undercurrents in the girls’ reality.

Andres’ other work focuses mostly on younger children, both female and male. The tribal feel of childhood worlds is vividly evoked here, without quite tipping over into the surreal. In a different vein, a single photograph from her “Backseat Vanitas” series, of groceries messily spilled over black-vinyl car seats, is a sly mix of contemporary detail with a centuries-old still-life concept.

Lori Nix ramps up the artifice several stages further by constructing elaborate miniature sets



COURTESY OF THE ARTIST AND PHOTO CENTER NW

Holly Andres: “Outside the Forbidden Bedroom”

which she then photographs. Some of her work from a dozen or more years ago makes no bones about its fakery. But the eight from her recent “City” series are more deceptive.

Look at them casually, and you might at first think they document real situations of urban catastrophe: a library with its domed ceiling caved in, a beauty parlor with its windows blasted open, a botanical-garden conservatory where the flora (especially the carnivorous plants) have gone wild.

These photographs, however, are of scale models whose detail can be astonishing. “Anatomy Classroom” (2012) is packed with anatomical models, specimens floating in murky liquid-filled jars, shelves full of skulls, a poster illustrating the structure of the eyeball, along with books, overhead lamps and classroom furniture. All are coated in dust from the shattered windows on the left, and you can practically smell the mold in the damp-stained ceilings.

“Circulation Desk” (2012) is an even more persuasive wreck. All the paraphernalia of an old-fashioned library — shelving carts, step-stools, card catalog, hundreds of books — are adrift in the ruins, with a lurid sunset sky visible through the shattered dome ceiling providing a final realistic touch.

Brooklyn-based Nix says her aim is simply to ask, “What would our city look like if humankind were to disappear?” The answers are arrestingly on display in this show — and in greater detail in a new coffee-table book, also titled “Lori Nix: The City,” published by Seattle’s Decode Books (76 pp. \$60).

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COURTESY OF THE ARTIST AND G. GIBSON GALLERY

Lori Nix: “Circulation Desk”

### EXHIBITION REVIEW

#### ‘Holly Andres: The Homecoming’

11 a.m.-10 p.m. Mondays-Thursdays, noon-8 p.m. Fridays-Sundays, through Dec. 15, Photo Center NW, 900 12th Ave., Seattle (206-720-7222 or [www.pcnw.org](http://www.pcnw.org)).

#### ‘Lori Nix: The City’

11 a.m.-5 p.m. Wednesdays-Saturdays through Nov. 23, G. Gibson Gallery, 300 S. Washington St., Seattle (206-587-4033 or [www.ggibsongallery.com](http://www.ggibsongallery.com)).