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Nikki Renee Anderson puts the stories in pictures

Some images tell us clearly what is going on, while others leave the interpretation up to the viewer

By Lori Waxman, Special to the Tribune

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Somewhere out in the mossy tumbles of an Icelandic meadow, a mischievous creature has popped three bulbous blue heads out of the earth, bobbly unicorn horn first. On a nearby hillock, other alien forms bloom: a pale family of pointy teardrops and an elegant bird-thing with light jowls and a round beak.

I know of these peculiar emergences because Nikki Renee Anderson displays photographs of them in her solo exhibition at Dubhe Carreno Gallery. Anderson is a nimble ceramist who created the odd clay objects in this series of images set in the mythological Icelandic landscape, home to ice trolls, rock people and all sorts of elves.

Iceland's scrubby, cratered fields could not be more welcoming to her fanciful sculptures, but Anderson could instead have set them on the floor of the gallery, or perched them on pedestals. She could even have hung them on the walls as if they'd grown there. She does as much with the other ceramics on view in "Secret Bodies," plump pastel marshmallows that charmingly belie the hardness of their medium.

If Anderson had simply shown her sculptures in the gallery, their make-believe Icelandic genesis would be unknown. It might not even exist.

Words tell stories, of course, but photographs possess a unique narrative force all their own. They can give an entirely believable, utterly new life to the objects captured by their lenses. When this happens to inanimate objects, like Anderson's strange sprouting shapes, it is as if the dead thing has — click goes the camera — come to life, set amid the greenery of a breathing landscape. When it happens to people, it is another kind of story entirely.

Consider "Anna & Eve," a beguiling exhibition of photographs by Viktoria Sorochinski at Catherine Edelman Gallery. Sorochinski has been taking pictures of this young mother and daughter since 2005, when Anna was 23 and Eve was 3. Though just 16 images are on view, there must be many more — they suggest days spent in search of poignant moments and poetic scenarios.

Anna and Eve intrigue because they reverse the typical roles of a mother and daughter. At their kitchen table, 3-year-old Eve sits stout and clear-eyed in the foreground, a coffee mug by her side; Anna fades into the background, lost in a muddle. In the sauna, 4-year-old Eve bathes her mother, who shrinks herself down into a wet ball. Anna shivers by the side of a road, wrapped in an immigrant's babushka, while her 5-year-old daughter proffers an apple.

Dressed in black capes, perched in a bare tree, Eve observes Anna, who looks ready to fly. Sharing a pomegranate, daughter eyes mother, who spills ruby seeds everywhere. Fierce and knowing, little Eve watches over her ethereal mama, making sure she does not float away into thin air, or crumble down to the ground.

A few solo portraits of Eve stage playful scenes around a pensive girl, as if to prove that she really is as knowing as she seems. The one exception, the exception to everything, is the most recent picture. Nude, just barely veiled by a sheer yellow curtain, Eve appears as fragile and wistful as her mother. Is she pretending to be her, or finally able to relax into vulnerability because of her absence?

What is staged? What is real? Can a picture be both? Sorochinski isn't shooting documentary images of Anna and Eve, nor is she making them into something other than what they are. Through an intimate, responsive process, the photographs isolate, illuminate, symbolize and embellish two very real people and their very real relationship. We can't know Anna and Eve, but we can tell stories about them because of the way that they give themselves over to the camera.

Paradoxically, the very medium that is meant to tell stories about real people — home movies — can also be the least revealing. At ThreeWalls, Laura Mackin has assembled an exhaustive body of work based on 60 years of found footage shot by a man named Dean. After sorting his 104 hours of film and video by type, she combined these into sped-up videos and gridded stills. Dean recorded 24 sunsets. He drove endlessly and got nowhere. He zoomed in on everything from a cruise ship to an ice crevice to a bunny, but never quite arrived.

Mackin flashes Dean's life before our eyes, and it is nothing but a life rendered into empty, dizzying visual data. It's a horror of a life, this life as she tells it. And it's exactly what life ought never be. That's our job as we picture it, live it and reimagine it. To never let it come down to 24 sunsets, 2 minutes of driving, and 21/2 minutes of looking through a zoom lens.

"Nikki Renee Anderson: Secret Bodies," through Feb. 11 at Dubhe Carreno, 118 N. Peoria St., 312-666-3150 or dubhecarrenogallery.com; "Viktoria Sorochinski: Anna & Eve," through Feb. 25 at Catherine Edelman, 300 W. Superior St. or 312-266-2350; edelmangallery.com; "Laura Mackin: 120 Years," through Feb. 25 at ThreeWalls, 119 N. Peoria St., 312-432-3972, or three-walls.org

Lori Waxman is a special contributor to the Chicago Tribune, and an instructor at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago.

ctc-arts@tribune.com

Twitter @chitribent

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