

## Jeff Charbonneau and Eliza French: *Massillon*

Robert Berman Gallery, Bergamot Station, Santa Monica

**S**eemingly on a quest to construct an eighteenth-century aesthetic, artists Jeff Charbonneau and Eliza French collaborated on a series of large-scale black-and-white photographs.

This venture into conjuring old-world authenticity extends to their charming and challenging abandonment of digital technology. Instead, they opt for the bizarre miasma of dangerous chemicals and darkened rooms.

Trained as an anthropologist/musician (Charbonneau) and an art historian (French), this duo apparently shares a fascination with the Victorian era and all things gothic. Somber and ethereal, the painstaking and laborious use of medium- and large-format film and traditional black-and-white darkroom techniques combine to stunning effect.

This moody series apparently pays homage to the life of "ancestor" Zeta Eliza Woolley, with each photograph part of an unraveling narrative derived from the memories and dreams inspired by Woolley's life and death in Massillon, Ohio in the late 1800s.

Research reveals that the mainstay activity of the town of Massillon at that time was sheep grazing. Nowadays the town lies in the center of the manufacturing heart of America, some 54 miles south of Cleveland and 100 miles west of Pittsburgh.

This hardly seems a venue of "fairy-tale suffering and unpredictable beauty," yet the artists' handle on Surrealism seems to make the premise work, along with the resourceful use of some cute models, stunning natural scenery, and antique props and costumes.

Still, a haunting and hefty polemic permeates the romance of these images. Amid the traditional American landscape of a barren field, blunt and stirring metaphors question the drudgery and isolation of eighteenth-century farm life. In *Traction* a woman carries a miniature farmhouse on her back. Burdened by the physical strain she crawls on her knees, her head bowed, hair flailing in the savage wind.

Cynicism aside, the photographs are truly stunning and lush, serving more as documented installations than as mere photographs.

—Craig Stephens

