



ROBERT BERMAN GALLERY

7x7SF

Fellini Meets Lewis Carroll at E6 Gallery



Vegas & Altair, 2010; Jeff Charbonneau and Eliza French's Playground Series



Conjure up memories of lonely Alice finding her way through an unfamiliar magical world in *Alice in Wonderland*, or relive James Henry Trotter's surreal, peachy adventure with strange insects in Roald Dahl's *James and the Giant Peach*. Now, hold tightly onto that vision, and take a gander at the images here by LA-based artistic duo **Jeff Charbonneau and Eliza French**. The similarities are striking, so much so that *Photograph* magazine referred to their work as "Fellini's take on Lewis Carroll."

Now's your chance to step into this fantasy land as the two bring their whimsical photographic narratives to San Francisco for the first time in "Circumspect" at **Robert Berman/E6 Gallery**. The show features 20 large-scale photos from Charbonneau and French's Playground and Massillon series. And unlike many photographers today, these two go sans Photoshop, using medium- and large-format cameras and traditional darkroom techniques to create their elaborate

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stories. "We are interested in capturing a real moment in time and adhering to the sentiments of traditional film-based photography," says Charbonneau.

Both Charbonneau and French come from pedigreed backgrounds—Charbonneau with a 20 years of experience in photography and motion pictures (he even worked on the hit TV series the *X-Files*!) and French with degrees from NYU's prestigious Tisch School of the Arts and UCLA. Not that you needed any more convincing to check out this incredible show. And if you're really into it, check out the opening reception on Saturday, 7/30, from 6-8 p.m., where you might even get to meet the artists themselves.

"Circumspect" at E6 Gallery, Sat. 7/30 – Wed. 9/14; 1632 Market St. (at Franklin), 415-558-9975, e6gallery.com

By Allison McCarthy on July 28, 2011 11:36 AM
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San Francisco Chronicle

'Circumspect': Artists push fantasies to extreme

Kimberly Chun, Special to The Chronicle
Thursday, July 28, 2011



"Starfield" by Los Angeles artists Jeff Charbonneau and Eliza French is among the "Circumspect" works on view at E6 Gallery.

Lewis Carroll- and Sergei Eisenstein-inspired fantasies about those close to home - and celestial bodies out at the edges of a solar system - fuel the photographs of Los Angeles artists Jeff Charbonneau and Eliza

French, on display for the first time in San Francisco at E6 Gallery in "Circumspect."

The couple's series "Massillon" is triggered by the sad tale of French's great-grandmother, who lived and died in an insane asylum in Massillon, Ohio, then takes off on a flight of dark fancy. French poses as her forbear - dark hair covering her face as if she were the enigmatic, spooky descendant of the "Ring" ghoulish girl and Cousin Itt - and plays off symbols a la clocks, irons, a baby carriage and a doll house, creating a nightmarish vision of woman's world gone awry.

"We fantasizing about her suffering and how she ended up in the insane asylum," explains French, who works under a pseudonym, unlike her partner. "We were hoping that in an oppressive situation like that, at turn of the century, someone can have a fruitful fantasy life."

With "Massillon," the two attempted to stylistically mimic the tableau vivant and pictorialist approaches of the period. Using large and medium-format cameras, the

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collaborators worked in the darkroom to achieve their desired smoky, moody effects, exposing, say, the paper through textured Japanese washi.

Traditional landscape photography and '50s and '60s architectural imagery provided the reference point for "Playground," the other Charbonneau and French series in "Circumspect."

"It's our contrived vision of the universe," deadpans Charbonneau, who also works as a music editor in the film and TV industry. "Our vision of the solar system and the universe based on a very simple idea: How would you view it as a child or see it in a tangible form that you can interact with?"

For these more logistically complicated photographs, French spent more time behind the camera than in front of it while the twosome shot models and 10- to 20-foot-diameter spheres over the course of six to eight months at various locales, including a Los Angeles water spillway, a barren, sandy expanse and a fog-dappled orchard.

"We had to experiment with the helium formulas to get the spheres to be the right size and not have them shoot out into space. We tethered them to invisible fishing lines and had to deal with environmental issues," Charbonneau says. "And every place we shot we had to deal with the same things. It was intense."

The hope is that the appearance of one of those giant spheres at the opening of "Circumspect" will be less tricky, yet convey the emotionally loaded fantasy of the couple's images.

"When I was a child, my father worked in atmospheric research, and he used to bring home weather balloons and I would play with them all the time," Charbonneau says. "I was always fascinated by them and to me (these photographs) were a fun idea of pushing that to an extreme."

Reception 6 p.m. Sat. Through Sept. 14. Noon-6 p.m. Wed.-Sat., noon-5 p.m. Sun. E6 Gallery, 1632 Market St., S.F. (415) 558-9975. www.e6gallery.com.

E-mail comments to 96hours@sfnchronicle.com.

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