

(Un)ordinary Ordinary: Esteban Pulido's *Max, Boyd Street*

Photographer Esteban Pulido finds the mundane both absurd and inspiring. Born in Venezuela, he grew up in Florida, California, and Washington, D.C., before attending film school in New York City and majoring in photography here at the University of Oklahoma. Drawn to photograph “urbania” because it is his own environment, Pulido captures the urban familiar in snapshots of streetlights, gas stations, midnight cafes, and high-rise apartment buildings. Pulido acknowledges environment and the moods it conveys to be crucial—even if unconsciously so—to his work. Art cannot merely be created, he claims, but must be experienced by others to exist. How then, do we as viewers experience Pulido’s somewhat unordinary world of nondescript street corners and empty expanses of pavement?

In the case of Pulido’s panoramic digital print, *Max, Boyd Street*, viewers must experience the image from a distance. Stretching an arm span in length, *Max, Boyd Street* is the largest photograph in the student show and the most cinematic. Observed too close, the image extends beyond our field of vision and becomes oppressive—much like a movie screen viewed from the second or third row. The head and shoulders of Pulido’s photographer-friend, Max, fills the left third of the image; a vacant rain-soaked intersection on Boyd Street spreads to the right. Odd appendages of street lamps and traffic poles pierce the misty midnight air. The mood is tense, of things about to happen.

With a tripod slung almost weapon-like across his shoulder, Max faces away from the viewer toward something we are incapable of seeing. Peer or squint as we might, the

distant forms remain illegible. We observe Pulido observing Max observing ... what? This unsettling haze of buildings, light, and something—or nothing—brought mirage-like to life by shallow depth of field and inconsistent focus, is further obscured by a prevalence of murky non-colors printed on matte paper. A dismal smoke-blue sky hangs above sodden streets. Slimy olive-black lamp poles glisten with reflected light. A spattering of vivid red, yellow, white, icy blue, and cool green orbs hover in deep distance. Although we acknowledge these to be street lamps, brake lights, and traffic signals, we cannot be certain. After all, the painterly edges and startling color shifts of white to yellow and orange to olive bear more resemblance to silkscreen than crisp photography. Where print and white border meet, a jarring edge isolates Max from viewers even as our vantage point just behind his shoulder invites us into the inclement night.

Despite the formal beauty of Pulido's balanced composition so full of quavering reflections, the strength of his image lies in its ambiguity. (In fact, the intersection's universality—its strange ordinariness—might have been enhanced if left untitled.) Pulido's artist statement wisely refrains from revealing that this panorama is actually composed of five vertical photographs blended together in Photoshop, a fact accounting for the unsettling slippages of focus. Nor does Pulido claim a concrete social or political agenda, rather intending to capture “a common situation, a feeling, that [others] might relate to in a way that's not immediately obvious.”

Interestingly, as important as environment is to the interior of Pulido's photograph, location in the gallery also determines how *Max, Boyd Street* may be read. The curator's assumptions about the print are evident in its placement among works making overt political and social statements. A giant cardboard camera nearby emits a continual whistling of artillery shells and Nazi propaganda and plastic army men surround Max in adjacent works. In this

environment, Max's tripod *is* a weapon, his razored hair military-cut, the splatter of distant colors an explosion, and the ghostly buildings' blackened windows become gaping wounds.

One in a series of panoramic portraits, *Max, Boyd Street*, it seems, conveys less about Max than what this absurdly ordinary, yet unquestionably strange environment says about us. In another setting, far from the whine of artillery shells, would we cower behind Max, coveting his and Pulido's eyes to see clearly the misshapen distant forms? Might we then interpret *Max, Boyd Street* instead in terms of vision and photographic seeing? Or perhaps we might cynically conclude "there is nothing left to photograph"—except, as Pulido does, 'ordinary' street lights hanging gargoyle-like above crime scenes, vacant stretches of sidewalk at midnight, and traffic lights' eerie reflections on vaguely familiar rain-slicked streets.