

Lorie Novak sets a mood

NEW COLOR PHOTOGRAPHS BY LORIE NOVAK - At the Thomas Segal Gallery, 73 Newbury st., Tues.-Sat. 10-5:30, to Feb. 29.

By Kelly Wise
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There are those who by their very nature evoke the strange in art, the unsettling, the starkly personal, or hard to conceive. I think of F. Holland Day, Clarence John Laughlin, Diane Arbus, Minor White, Jo Ann Callis, and Anne Noggle. Something in each of these photographers yearns for the sudden and wild embrace of the unknown. And there are those who dabble in the arcane - mindfully or unwittingly - whose engagement is a fitful act of will and intellect, springing neither from deep need nor from instinct. The work and imagination of Lorie Novak lie somewhere in between these poles.

The props and studio arrangements of Novak are fairly constant: a pillow and bed in a deep studio room, a bed and chair or two chairs face to face in the same room. With the supplement of colored light and projected slide imagery she gives up her dream imagery. Often the conjunction of projected and studio reality is intriguing. Mood is altered and amplified by the odd placement of a chair, the orchestration of orchid or vermilion light, or an image of youths in bathing suits, whose forms are elongated as in a fun-house mirror.

Those images of Novak that come off second rate are ones in which the mingling of studio setup and projected imagery seems at best haphazard or improbable. No dream state is evoked, no mystery beheld or courted. The photographs are merely clever or cluttered and sport telltale lapses, like the image of bathers sunning themselves down on a beach sewn like an applique onto the foot-end of a bedspread.

But with certain of these studio interiors, Novak strikes gold. In one, the predominant hues are gray and purple. Into an empty bedroom are projected two women waving at something unseen, a vista of a wharf and ships in the harbor beyond, and at the corner of the image, a man in dark glasses, whose immobile form is incalculably sinister. The power of this photograph stems from its vivid uncertainty. In it, I sense departure, a vague threat, and the ache of some painful secret. The glass of the tall studio window in another image is tinted an icy blue. Inside the room, two chairs, perhaps 15 feet apart, face one another like estranged friends, conversing. The back of the nearest chair is painted an undulant turquoise design. On the floor, wires disclose the off-stage rigging for colored light. Both of these fine images, plus a few others in this tight exhibition, establish a mood that is compelling, hermetic, and uniquely strange.