

Sarah Anne Johnson

'Tree Planting'

Julie Saul Gallery
535 West 22nd Street, Chelsea
Through March 12

When it comes to the choice between truth or fiction, postmodern photographers usually have it both ways, but seldom with the affecting bluntness of Sarah Anne Johnson. Where scores of other photographers fuse elements of real-life and set-up photography until you can't tell actual from contrived, Ms. Johnson keeps them separate but equal. She alternates between them, mixing them only at the end, when she arranges the images together on the wall. The tension between the two modes is just about perfect for the coming-of-age focus of her soulful solo debut.

The artist, who has a graduate degree from the Yale School of Art, lives in Winnipeg, Manitoba; her show recounts the experience of one of the tree-planting summer camps to which thousands of young Canadians flock each summer. They pursue this national rite of passage partly because it pays and gets them away from home, but mostly for the experience of living rough, working and playing hard, communing with nature and with others who, like themselves, are emerging from the cocoon of adolescence.

The combination of real and set-up photography creates palpable contrasts between fast and slow, event and memory, fact and feeling. The stillness of nature, for example, seems especially still when you know that everything you're looking at, from the figures to the trees to the evening light, has been painstakingly constructed. But the divisions aren't clean or simple.

The real photographs capture certain realities, like bug bites on a bare torso. But they also succumb to the superficial glamour of youth: a young man exhaling the smoke of a cigarette, a beautiful young woman in a scarf and a hardhat. The set-up images, with their stocky little doll-like figures, which the artist makes from baked Sculpy, paint and fabric, seem more idealized. Yet they reveal the childlike innocence that their real-life counterparts are trying to leave behind. The open faces of the set-up dolls also convey the blissed-out wonder that unbounded nature can invoke.

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"Morning Meeting" by Sarah Anne Johnson at the Julie Saul Gallery.

It helps the set-up shots that Ms. Johnson is a skilled sculptor, sensitive to the nuances of gesture and body language. The relaxed camaraderie of three women sunbathing at the edge of a lake feels completely right, as do the groggy postures of the tree planters at a misty early-morning meeting and their intent silhouettes later in the day, bent over shovels and seed bags.

Ms. Johnson succeeds in conveying the transformative power of nature, and the benefits of communal action. Whether her dual approach to photography will be quite as resonant with a different theme is unclear. But this show is an outstanding start.

ROBERTA SMITH