

Quiet drama

Dark studies from south of the border

By Tony Ozuna
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Even though Alena Kotzmannová is one of the most acknowledged and respected contemporary photographers on the Czech scene, she still seems reluctant to showcase her photos on their own. As a traditional photographer working predominantly in black and white, she appears to be at loose ends in a contemporary art scene that favors video, installations, conceptual art and, recently, even paintings.

For instance, in her solo exhibit "It's Starting Again" at Old Town Hall last summer, she included a playful video installation that looped Hollywood film studio logos, displayed mock film posters and combined wall projections with her photos. She has also shown her work in collaboration with other artists, including Jiří David and Michael Pěchouček.

For her current exhibition at Hunt Kastner Artworks, Kotzmannová invited the young Czech painter Lenka Vítková to contribute short texts that serve as a complement to her large, unframed black-and-white photos.

The exhibition "Olive in a Martini" includes 14 haunting photos seemingly shot in exotic Latin American locales, though the artist does not specify the location of any of the photos, nor are any of them titled or dated. The scenes resemble withering places in Mexico more than anywhere else.

Several of the photos were shot in a hotel, and some refer specifically to the "Hotel del Centro." But we don't know where the hotel is, which gives the works (and perhaps the artist) an independence of sorts. Vítková's 14 texts (most in Czech, with a few in English) are scattered among the photos. Some are close enough to serve as anchors for the images, though seem only tangentially related.

Beneath a hazy photo of a Chinese restaurant lobby, with a painting of a Buddhist garden and a reflection of the Hotel del Centro's name visible in the image, there is a text that says, "And now I am big, blonde and beautiful."

Beside a photo of a hotel lobby with a window looking into a stark parking garage, there is the text, "This is what people do in novels; now we do it." And beside an image of a lone cactus in the middle of the desert, seemingly shot in motion from a bus on the road, Vítková's text reads, "Only ending is easy." The olive in a martini is the last morsel to chew after having enjoyed the cocktail. It has absorbed the taste of the gin (or vodka) and vermouth; it is the savored aftertaste. The "Olive in the Martini" of this exhibit could be the Hotel del Centro, especially if it is indeed the building at the center of the largest and final photo. That image shows an overhead view of a large white hilltop building that stands out among the winding dirt roads and smaller, rundown buildings in a small-town barrio.

However, it isn't certain that this is the hotel. And Vítková's texts remain oblique. The nearest one says, in Czech, "Americans have their faults, but at least they keep their word." English text beside this says, "hip shoes, my blues." So perhaps Vítková's loose fragments of prose are the symbolic olive in the classy cocktail.

In addition to being a painter, Vítková is also a curator, arts writer and translator, currently serving as the Czech editor of *Umělec* (Artist) magazine, one of the longest-running (and the only multilingual) arts publications based in Prague. In this exhibition, she literally has the last word.

Transcending the texts, however, are three standout photos, which, in contrast to the others, are digital prints. These show the lobby by the parking garage, an old telephone and a Hotel del Centro sign overlooking a dimly lit street at night. They are printed on matte paper, with the darker sections so deep and luscious that you can almost feel their texture, like black velvet.

Overall, there is a reticent quality to Kotzmannová's photos. They are most captivating on close examination.

There is one outcast photo, showing dark curtains partly drawn to reveal a view of the street outside. But, since it is raining, the windows are fogged and the street beyond is blurry. At first glance, the hotel room curtains resemble the curtains of a cinema or theater in the midst of either opening or closing. The blurry scene in the window is the gradually appearing or disappearing screen or stage.

At their best, Kotzmannová's photos in this exhibit all seem to have this effect of drama just about to begin or end.



photo by Alena Kotzmannová
Aside from the hotel's name, Kotzmannová deliberately keeps the location unclear.

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