

PATRICK NAGATANI

"My work is a never-ending search for magic," says Patrick Nagatani, and indeed, his wizardry is evident throughout his remarkable career. Part magician, part earnest documentarian, Nagatani uses artifice to expose real issues of our time.

In the 1980s, he began creating theatrical tableaux as a ground for the photograph. Through inventive scenes of biting irony, Nagatani and painter Andrée Tracey explore society's collective fear of nuclear annihilation, capturing the precise moment of apocalypse with a 20" x 24" Polaroid camera. *34th and Chambers* presents the scenario, *What if the bomb hit while you were riding the New York subway?* Objects like food wrappers and spray paint cans levitate, suspended on the artificial magic of visible filaments like our suspended disbelief. The artist appears among cutout figures and painted backdrops, expressing wide-eyed surprise.

With *Nuclear Enchantment*, a brilliant exposé of New Mexico's marriage to the nuclear industry, he adds the element of documentary to his stage. He photographs the Trinity Site (home of the first atomic blast), uranium mines, and Native American land sacrificed to nuclear waste. Layering metaphor over fact, he floats cutouts and model aircraft and saturates the prints with radioactive colors. The title for the series and accompanying book plays off New Mexico's nickname "Land of Enchantment" and comments on society's numbness to nuclear issues.

Next he employs the magic of fiction, toying with and ultimately shattering the role of photographs as proof. *Ryoichi/Nagatani Excavations* is a narrative in which the Japanese archaeologist Ryoichi (Nagatani's alter ego) unearths artifacts of the automobile industry at famous dig sites—a Bentley at Stonehenge, a BMW in Chaco Canyon—thus questioning the assumption that history is linear. By photographing scale models and contriving bogus journal entries, soil samples, and site plans, Nagatani "scientifically" validates this alternative past.

Returning to life-sized stage sets in *Chromatherapy*, Nagatani focuses on the magic of healing through light and color. These cinematic "medical charades" seem especially poignant after his own bout with colorectal cancer in 2005. The self-portrait *Ryoichi and Sid* is a daring, even shocking, revelation of the artist's vulnerability and willingness to believe in the power of light—and therefore art—to heal. Always the trickster, however, he also pokes fun at society's fascination with esoteric healing techniques.

Today with his *Tape-estry* series, Nagatani has reinvented himself anew through a different kind of magic: total absorption in the act of creating not the components of a photograph but a singular work of art. He compares the process to "running 10 miles... driving from Albuquerque to Los Angeles nonstop... finding a zone of no thought." He begins with a source photograph, over which he applies masking tape, painstakingly cut, in layers and layers of varying thickness, color, and translucency—a form of "painting with tape." Where once he built material stages as the subject of the photograph, now the photograph is the backdrop, the tableau, over which he layers materials. The results are exquisite, whether bodhisattvas (enlightened beings of Buddhist lore) or characters from horror films.

Nagatani's upcoming 30-year survey exhibition, *Desire for Magic*, will open at the UNM Art Museum in March of 2009 and will travel. *Desire for Magic* is also the title of a notable *Tape-estry* piece in which a magician feels the force of electricity blasting through each outstretched finger. Perhaps this illusionist is pointing to the creative power of art to transform our world—and the power of the artist to remake himself with each new body of work.



