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## What Is Real?

By David Gonzalez Feb. 6, 2013

Rocio Aranda was combing through the archives at El Museo del Barrio when she found an arresting image of a blurry waterfront skyline. Peeking through the vignette oval was a girl's shoe and dainty white ankle sock.

"That was a fantastic photo," Ms. Aranda said. "That's the only human element in it. That's all you see, her wearing Mary Janes and white socks. The absence and presence of her tells you a lot about the shot."

That image (*Slide 1*) — by a photographer known only as L. Morales — is among some 80 images in "superreal: alternative realities in photography and video," which opens today at El Museo in East Harlem. Culled mostly from its permanent collection, it is El Museo's first major photography show in years. It comes under the watch of Margarita Aguilar, who took over the helm of the museum in 2011, bringing with her a considerable background in photography.

The works on display — from artists like Adál Maldonado, Andres Serrano and Tania Bruguera — range from documentary scenes of musicians, parades, and cityscapes to surreal tableaux like those by Las Hermanas Iglesias. The sisters had their mother knit "nude suits," which they embellished with scars and tattoos, then photographed themselves wearing them while cavorting in the wilds of Tasmania.

"I started with the idea of the photograph and the way it was conceived and created as being an image of what supposedly took place," said Ms. Aranda, the show's curator. "Now we know everything that is there comes from the artist's side and postproduction. But what is real in the photograph, what led to the altered reality and the reality invented in photography and video?"

Some of the images in the show, although taken with a documentarian's eye, provide a sly comment on where and when they were taken. John Albok, who owned a dry cleaners in East Harlem, took pictures of the neighborhood, and a series of pictures from the 1963 Puerto Rican Day Parade are part

of El Museo’s collection. In one (*Slide 6*), a float had parade queens dwarfed by a gigantic Singer sewing machine — the kind most likely used in the factories where their mothers worked to feed their families.

“It’s important to the history of the neighborhood, and these photos capture a moment of celebrating Puerto Rican pride,” Ms. Aranda said. “At the same time, it’s surreal because of this outsized Singer sewing machine and the queens.”

A more contemporary artist went back to some basic roots for his photographs. Alex Guerrero (*Slide 9*) has been making his own pinhole cameras out of peanut tins and Ikea containers, which he has used to photograph Washington Heights.

“Pinhole photography has been important for him,” Ms. Aranda said. “It’s craft in the digital age.”

For her, the show is also about attention spans in the digital age. She said that although 42 artists are in the show, some with multiple pieces, she went for a spare-looking installation, lest people be overwhelmed or distracted.

“It’s important to take a little time and look at a photo,” she said. “This one with the little’s girl’s foot is such an amazing image. If there are a lot of things on the wall, it gets complicated. We’re hoping to get people to look a little bit longer at the photo and think about how it was created.”

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