

Larry Sultan in Disneyland

It takes an artist to photograph a fantasy

By Edgar Allen Beem

In 1977, photographer Larry Sultan in collaboration with artist Mike Mandel, published *Evidence*, a carefully sequenced book of appropriated photographs from business, industry and government that graphically demonstrated how “objective” images, the original purpose of which was simply to provide a visual record (evidence), could have a metaphorical life of their own when placed in a different context. *Evidence* made the epistemological point not only that meaning is relative but also that it is not inherent in objects but a function of human perception.

Since that time, Sultan, who teaches at the California College of the Arts, has established himself as a kind of suburban myth-buster, creating two highly acclaimed bodies of work that explore illusion and reality in the prosperous suburban tracts of the San Fernando Valley where he was born.

Pictures from Home (1992) was a ten-year project that explored ideas of home and family, domesticity in the late 20th century, through a focus on Sultan’s own family environment. *Larry Sultan: The Valley* (2004) extended Sultan’s investigations of suburban myths and illusions into the realm of sexual fantasy, focusing on how the pornography industry appropriates homes in the San Fernando Valley as weekend sets for skin movies. *The Valley* took the idea of “home” into the dangerous terrain of desire where the real homes of doctors and lawyers become the “realistic” settings for film fantasy romps.

“To me the suburban home is a kind of projection screen for fantasies,” Larry Sultan has said. “It’s rich for storytelling.”

Many of Sultan’s elegant, large-format color photographs have the edgy, faux look of staged scenarios, an element of style that adds irony to the sincerity of the scenes he depicts. Indeed, Sultan’s visual research into the suburban mythos has even led him to collaborate on the site-specific installation of a store in a Stoneridge shopping mall in order to photograph the phony commerce that drives the malling of America.

More recently, Sultan has taken the next logical step, and a daring one at that, of extending his documentation of how a consumer society constructs its myths into the “real” Fantasyland – Disneyland.

One might not expect to find an artist of Larry Sultan’s seriousness and stature shooting pictures of Cinderella and Dumbo, yet just as architect Robert Venturi

found important clues to the symbolism of American architecture in the garish precincts with Las Vegas casinos (*Learning from Las Vegas*, 1972), Sultan is able to use the marketing of fantasy that is Disneyland to deconstruct the myth of happiness.

The Disney empire jealously guards against any attempt to pierce its elaborately staged fairy tale illusion, permitting no photographs or film of its back-stage and below-decks enterprise, so anyone aware of Larry Sultan's unique ability to picture the hollow core of America would be loathe to let him into Disneyland with a camera. When the chance presented itself therefore, Sultan jumped at it.

It seems that a former photo editor at *W*, for which Sultan has created at least three haunting fashion narratives ("Arabian Nights," "Set for Seduction," and "Unfinished Business"), had taken a job at a children's magazine called *Cookie*. She needed someone to photograph Disneyland, so she called Larry Sultan.

Just as *Evidence* demonstrated the duplicity of depiction in photographs, Larry Sultan's photographs of Disneyland were able both, in the context of a children's magazine, to "objectively" illustrate (sincerity) the famous theme park and, in the context of Sultan's own art (irony), to depict a bankrupt illusion of happiness and goodness. It takes a true artist to photograph a fantasy.

Of *The Valley*, Sultan has said, "I'm interested not in pornography, but rather in dismantling it, in exploring domesticity, the construction of desire."

And just as pornographers trespass in suburbia, Sultan was a kind of trespasser in Disneyland, there on a legitimate assignment to celebrate the illusion yet also able to see through it. Finding a fresh approach to photographing such an iconic landmark could not have been easy, but Sultan has a subtle way of dealing with artifice.

Sultan's photograph of Sleeping Beauty's Castle, for instance, sets up a chromatic tension between the blue glow of the castle and the crowd of tourists who seem to be bathed in sulfurous crime light. His photograph of the Dumbo ride almost seems to set the mechanical elephant free to truly fly. In photographing a gondola entering the red maw of the Monstro the Whale attraction, Sultan shows paying customers compliantly sailing into the belly of the beast, a truly rich metaphor resonant not only with Pinocchio but also Jonah and Ahab.

What gets pierced in Sultan's Disneyland is the illusion of innocence. His photograph of the backs of the heads of two blond youngsters looking up in purchased awe as fireworks explode over the fake peaks of the Matterhorn is a powerful commentary on just how far removed from Nature we have become. A young girl in the cup and saucer of the Mad Tea Party seems wary and

vulnerable, as though she has begun to intuit how she is being served up. But the most priceless photograph in the Disneyland series might be a rare backstage glimpse in which a black man wearing a security badge and headset pulls back the curtains to reveal a set in the Princess Fantasy Faire.

Pay no attention to that man behind the curtain. Pay no attention to that man behind the camera. Brilliant!