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THE WORLD'S VIEW OF N.J.

An exciting, diverse portrait of the Garden State emerges in an exhibit of digital photographs created around the globe

Wednesday, March 26, 2008

BY DAN BISCHOFF
 Star-Ledger Staff

Folks who have never played Skee-Ball, or used a Turnpike exit number to identify where they live, think they can picture New Jersey -- even if it's from halfway around the globe.

More than 1,000 digital photographs, gathered via the internet from artists in every continent except Antarctica, showcase the popular impressions the Garden State has left on the rest of the planet in an exhibition that will open soon in South Orange.

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"When you put out an open call on the web, you never know what will come in," says curator Laurel Ptak, 32, who cobbled together a veritable avalanche of images for the show in just three or four weeks. "It's almost like a sociological study -- we have every sort of photo you can imagine, from typical landscape snapshots to family portraits to really advanced, conceptual artworks that try to capture something essential about the state."

Like the fairly amateurish snap sent in by Daniel Everett from Chicago, which shows the state's profile mapped out on an old living-room rug in stereo cord and blue masking tape. Everett said he'd tried to "reconstruct the shape of New Jersey from memory" while listening to Bruce Springsteen's "Born to Run" on his stereo. With the volume turned up to 11, no doubt.

Mathilde Roussel, a French graphic designer who's living in New York City, sent a photo of sidewalk trash crumpled up to spell out "I (heart) NJ." She's actually never been to Jersey, but felt like she had a pretty good idea of what it was like by overhearing Manhattan conversations. Her countryman, Christophe Maout, got an even better sense by surfing the web for images of Jersey City; he then rebuilt the city skyline in his Paris studio with paper cutouts and photographed it.

Or take Dominic Episcopo, who lives in Philadelphia, but grew up in Verona. Episcopo sent in a photo of a pork loin on a sheet of butcher paper that is not only shaped like New Jersey, but even has little traces of fat and gristle that look like major towns and the highways that connect them. Episcopo, as laconic as any Jersey native can be, admits the image required "some physical recutting and some digital touch-ups."

Of course New Jersey as a pork loin raises the influence of "The Sopranos" as a theme.

"Look, 'The Sopranos' has been translated into like a gazillion languages," Ptak says, "and you can almost map out the way people hook into Pop culture around the world by the way they make reference to that show."

The pictures in "Is It Possible to Make a Photograph of New Jersey Regardless of Where You Are in the World?" will be on view Sunday, April 6, through May 25 at the Pierro Gallery of South Orange. There are photos from Argentina, Australia, Cambodia, Canada, Denmark, France, Germany, Ireland, the Netherlands, Portugal, Slovakia, Sweden, Turkey, Vietnam, Wales and the United States, among others. Ptak says the images were "appropriated, scanned, screen-grabbed and Photoshopped from webcams, camera phones, and digital and traditional cameras of all sorts."

At the Pierro, which is housed in the Baird Community Center, some of the cleverer images will be enlarged and converted into giclée prints for hanging, as in a salon show. Others will be reproduced as framed digital prints measuring 5 by 7 inches, while the rest will be shown in a constant slide show on several digital monitors arranged throughout the gallery.

Besides the blizzard of photos showing "pizza, parking lots, armpits, Burger Kings, oceans, lovers, cupcakes, tattoos, laptops, mannequins, maps" and John Travolta, says Ptak, there is also the blogospheri

nature of the exhibit to consider. The curator likes the "democratic, random" way that art lives online, and tried hard not to exercise too much choice over the images. (The photos on display are gleaned from hundreds more that were sent to Ptak's blog; she says the largest single defined category, amounting to just less than half of all submissions, is landscape snapshots of sunsets and weatherscapes that try very hard to look like postcards.) The exhibit is about popular stereotypes, but it's also about the internet and how people use it.

"Inside the space of the Pierro Gallery (the show) exists as a localized representation of a globalized process," Ptak says in her catalog essay. "In many ways, it's an interesting contrast to how culture typically functions on the internet, where content is produced locally and released onto a world stage.

"Here the exhibition will by and large be seen by New Jersey residents who will get a glimpse of the way people from around the world ... understand the very place in which they exist."

Or don't understand it. Juan De Cicio of Buenos Aires, for example, sent in a series of photos of nondescript scenes from the Argentinean capital, explaining that his work concentrates on "small details of urban life that are common in any big city like New Jersey."

It's the Garden City, and it's worth a thousand words.

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