

Beneath the Beauty

Santa Barbara, California, is a beautiful town. Called the “American Riviera,” its lush, verdant mountains spill into cerulean seas, creamy beaches wind up and down rugged coastline, and Spanish Colonial architecture offers up terracotta tiles to the sun. Celebrities make their homes here, as do surfers, students, and families who enjoy the temperate beach lifestyle. Yet upon closer inspection and experience, there is more to Santa Barbara than its first blush. A darker reality of gang violence, poverty, and homelessness permeates daily life here, just under the glossy surface promoted by tourism.

Television also played a major role in cementing Santa Barbara as a glamorous destination. *Santa Barbara*, a serial drama that revolved around the enthralling lives of the wealthy Capwell family, was one of the first American television programs to be broadcast on post-Soviet airwaves. This fictional soap opera, in addition to tourism, firmly married Santa Barbara to its façade of perfection and ease.

Artist Jennifer Vanderpool makes beautiful work. Bright, precise color is coupled with exact and measured compositions that please the eye, and much like Santa Barbara, invite the viewer to stay awhile. But just as the beach town assumes an aura of perfection, Vanderpool’s work also belies the beauty found at first glance.

Super Natural, on view at The National Centre for Contemporary Art in Moscow, Russia, is a series of 26 digital postcards and multichannel video projections. The 4” x 6” postcards, hung salon style, began as multi-layered digital files. To create her maximalist, highly decorative “photographic compositions,” Vanderpool sourced her imagery from vintage postcards, interior design textile patterns, and her own photographs.

Enticed by the artistry and diminutive size of each postcard, the viewer is encouraged to look closer. And what happens when the viewer really looks? Tucked within the stratum of colored patterns, homeless figures are embedded within the otherwise perfect landscape or architectural scene. The artist’s use of layer upon layer of color and pattern, juxtaposed with this contradicting imagery, “makes manifest the hidden realities contained in the works” and urges the viewer to reevaluate their presumptions about Santa Barbara.

Vanderpool’s work is deeply informed by art history, and her knowledge can be keenly observed in her video projections. As a complement to her postcards—which clearly reference Op Art and abstraction—eleven monitors

display video imagery of the Santa Barbara landscape. One video, shot from the inside of a beach cave and looking out upon a grey ocean, alludes to 19th-century Romantic landscape painting, where the works of Caspar David Friedrich and J.M.W. Turner are recognizable in the artist's attention to painterly scenes and her use of light and atmosphere. Vanderpool's other videos, which feature interviews with everyday people living in Santa Barbara and Yalta (its Russian sister city), further drive the viewer to question their perceptions of place.

Super Natural does what art should do: it exposes truth. Vanderpool gently invites each viewer to investigate their beliefs about places and the people in them, using beauty as a guise to expose the facts behind the facade. What are the realities of everyday life, whether in Santa Barbara or any other beautiful place? What happens when we really look? By evoking a sense of nostalgia and curiosity, *Super Natural* creates a framework for reevaluating the past, and proves that no matter how beautiful the place, reality is never far beneath the surface.

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