

**Photographic Duality:** Every photograph constructs an impossible opposition between presence and absence.

The photograph makes unspoken promises—that it will tell us what happened, what was there, what is true.

Yet it offers only approximations, reminiscences, reckonings. For the real that it pursues can never be captured; it is always already gone.

Cindy Bernard's compelling new work at Richard Kuhlenschmidt Gallery enacts this photographic duality, inserting the viewer—quite literally—somewhere between truth and fiction, memory and fantasy, suspension and death.

Two large photographs hang upon opposite walls of the gallery's long, narrow space. The images are similar—both winding roads high above an unnamed city, both deserted, both suffused with the hazy light of late summer.

The strangely vacant images, however, don't tell us everything they know. What they conceal (as divulged in the gallery's press release) are two highly resonant spaces—one, the serpentine road down which Grace Kelly sped in Alfred Hitchcock's 1955 classic, "To Catch a Thief"; the other, the site of the princess's fatal car accident nearly 20 years later.

Here, Bernard continues the conceptual project she began with "Ask the Dust," a series of photographs each depicting a single shot from a well-known American movie—John Ford's "The Searchers," Roman Polanski's "Chinatown," Dennis Hopper's "Easy Rider," and so on.

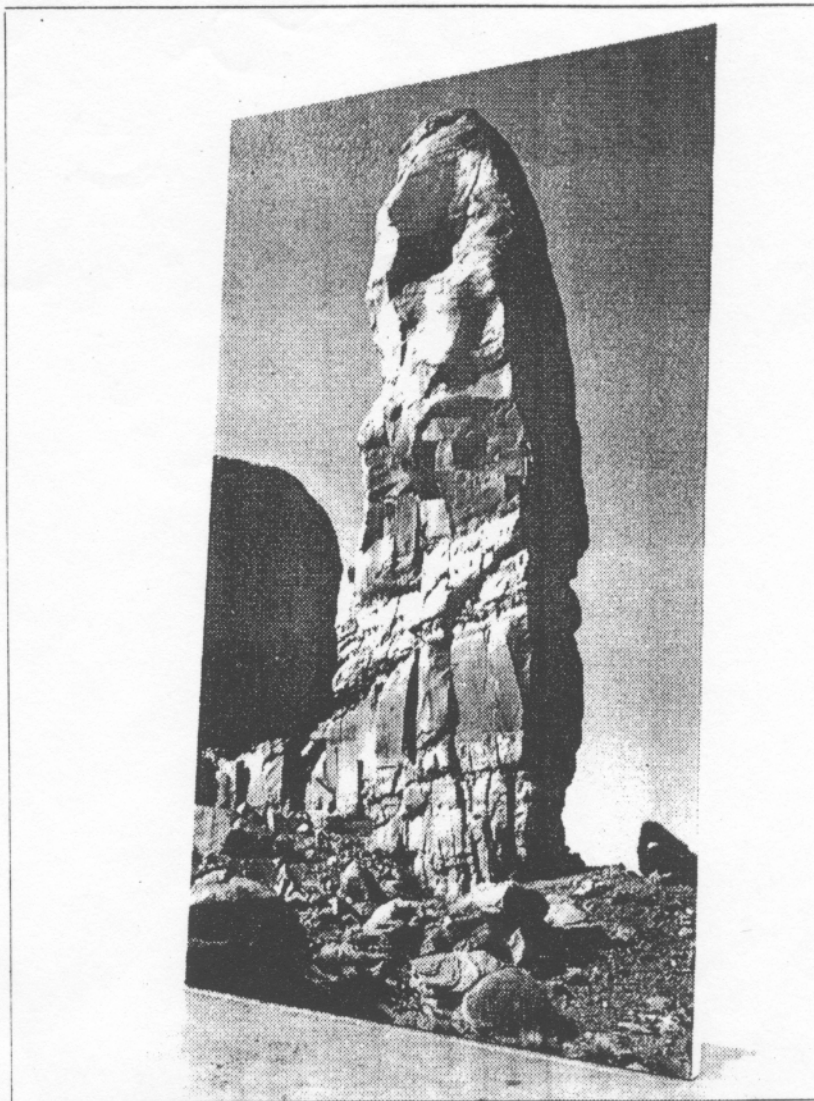
Despite locations, exposures and aspect ratios identical to those used in the shots from the films, the images that make up "Ask the Dust" are profoundly anti-nostalgic. For what is lost between the "original" and Bernard's carefully researched re-presentation is the fantasy of wholeness, present-ness and inevitability nurtured by Hollywood in specific, and the photographic apparatus in general. What remains is a startling vision not of the American landscape, but of the

transformative spaces of memory and desire.

If "Ask the Dust" deals obliquely with the difficult relationship between art and life, the new work does so more insistently. Here, art is not envisioned as a crystallization of life—more full, more complete, and more lasting; rather life emerges as the (perfected) imitation of art.

Turn to the left, and encounter the specter of Grace Kelly, actress, speeding about the French Riviera with paste diamonds twirled around her delicate neck; turn to the right and the reality is even more picture-perfect—Princess Grace of Monaco, presiding at charity balls with her own multi-million-dollar tiara on her head.

Yet what is the nature of this "perfection" if it has no power to forestall death? What is the nature of fantasy once it has been played out for "real"? What the installation creates is an eerie set of resonances between image and reality—the images winking at each



Cindy Bernard's "The Thumb" is at Richard Kuhlenschmidt Gallery

other over the viewer's head, the images half remembered from an old movie, and the reality of the death of a fantasy.

Also included in the exhibition is the first of a collection of photographs of natural phenomena that will be used as installation elements. "The Thumb" depicts a rock formation in the Arizona desert—a hypertrophied vertical thrust set against a bright blue sky. Nature has long been gendered as female; the phallic immensity of this rock slyly suggests otherwise.

Yet it is difficult to tell where or how far Bernard is going to take this. Here, "The Thumb" works as a one-shot joke, or, alternately, as a straight landscape photograph. Since neither meaning accords with Bernard's larger strategy, one suspects that the image has been exhibited prematurely. It is, in any case, distracting in the context of this very provocative installation.