

Degrees of artificiality

Larry Sultan:
Photos gaze
at staged sex
and suburbia

By Charles Desmarais

She is a goddess, or at least a queen, and her mastiffs grovel in subjugation. Bouffant teased hair, kohled eyes, Greek nose. Jeweled fingers. Regal gait. She is seen in a terraced garden, a pool of gleaming turquoise at middle ground, cedars in the distance.

We are looking at a photograph, encountered midway through the exhibition "Larry Sultan: Here and Home," opening at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art on Saturday, April 15, and running through July 23.

Sultan made the picture in 1999. It is just one of many that demonstrate the acuity of his observational and descriptive powers. There are others that could serve equally well as fulcrum of the show's

Larry Sultan: Here and Home: 10 a.m.-5 p.m. Fridays-Tuesdays; 10 a.m.-9 p.m. Thursdays. Through July 23. \$19-\$25; ages 18 and younger free. San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, 151 Third St., S.F. (415) 357-4000. www.sfmoma.org

argument that the artist, who died in 2009 at age 63, was "one of the most influential photographers of his generation."

Despite the hints of epic narrative, the setting of the work, titled simply "Boxers, Mission Hills," is neither romantic nor ancient. There are clues it is an artificial moment — tripods of some sort in the foreground and elsewhere, moving blankets stacked along a wall. The tell-tale pattern of a cheap stucco job on that wall, with seams barely disguised, has Suburban Somewhere written all over it. Indeed, it is from a series called "The Valley."

The Valley — the San Fernando Valley — is where Sultan grew up, we learn from a wall label. But let's rely on our eyes,

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Larry Sultan's 1999 photo "Boxers, Mission Hills," from the series "The Valley."



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Additional exhibitions: Tribute to '83 project explores fake news

By Charles Desmarais

The tight and transcendent exhibition of the life's work of Larry Sultan at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art had to leave some things out. But the artist's significance and his popularity in the Bay Area led to a desire to fill out the story elsewhere.

Two exhibitions at Minnesota Street Project attempt to take up that slack.

"Fake Newsroom" extends upon "Newsroom," a project Sultan and Mike Mandel, frequent collaborators, presented in 1983 at what is now *Galleries continues on E2*

Fake Newsroom: 11 a.m.-6 p.m. Tuesdays-Saturdays. Through April 29. Free. Minnesota Street Project, 1275 Minnesota St., Gallery 200, S.F. (415) 243-0825. www.fakenewsroom.org

Larry Sultan: Editorial Works: 11 a.m.-6 p.m. Tuesdays-Saturdays. Through June 10. Free. Casemore Kirkeby, 1275 Minnesota St., No. 102, S.F. (415) 851-9808. <http://casemorekirkeby.com>

This Sultan-Mandel billboard can be seen at both SFMOMA and the Minnesota Street Project.

ARTS & ENTERTAINMENT

Unreal glimpses: staged sex, suburbia

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and not the text, for a while longer.

The series displayed here together, with its imagery of sliding glass doors, knotty pine kitchen cabinetry and subtropical landscaping, would feel familiar to anyone who knows Southern California. The bland point of view is more snapshot confidential than exotic.

Images of casual nudity, amped by glimpses of what looks like real sex, throw us off but also intrigue us. In a picture titled "Sharon Wild" (2001), a woman with the sensual features and makeup styling of Marlene Dietrich sits on the corner of a bed in her underwear. First, we survey her limbs, folded protectively. Then we spot those platform pumps so often meant to signal something kinky. Only gradually does the tattered and filthy condition of the mattress come to consciousness. This is, literally, a dirty picture.

"The Valley" series started with an assignment from the magazine Maxim to document the pornographic film industry centered in the Los Angeles suburb. At SFMOMA, it is exhibited in a room where it ends just a head turn away from Sultan's series "Pictures From Home" (1983-92), his famous examination of American life based upon his own family and upbringing. These are the images that prompted his father to say, "You tell people that that's not me sitting on the bed looking all dressed up and nowhere to go, depressed. That's you sitting on the bed."

The museum's overlapping installation of the two series implies, astutely, that the artist's work describes a continuum: from home life as defined by accrual of certain supposed hallmarks of success, to the hollow pleasures of simulated love.

Among the "Valley" pictures is one titled "Suburban Street in Studio" (2000). Much of it is a very convincing photograph of a row of houses at dusk, until the edges give it away as a backdrop, hung in what is likely someone's basement. Just like the images of the faux queen and the actress/character Sharon Wild, it is a picture about the idea of picturing.

The exhibition — like all retrospectives, a stand-in for



Photos © Estate of Larry Sultan / Courtesy Casemore Kirkeby and Estate of Larry Sultan

Larry Sultan's "Canal District, San Rafael," from the series "Homeland" (2006).

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the artist's career — is a house of mirrors. It has us turning here and there, jumping forward and falling back. That might sound dizzying but, in fact, the experience is more like the satisfaction of solving a complex puzzle.

The show opens with three collaborative projects Sultan shared with the artist Mike Mandel, whose own SFMOMA show will be unveiled next month. All three make use of found photographs in ways that may not seem as stunningly innovative today as they did four decades ago, simply because the way cleared by Mandel and Sultan



"Sharon Wild" (2001) is from "The Valley," which started with a magazine assignment to document the porn industry.

has been followed by so many others.

The most noted of these is "Evidence" (1975-77), which siphoned enigmatic images from official government and

corporate photo archives and presented them, uncaptioned, in the artists' own quirky and poetic new sequence. The malleability of photographic meaning, an obsession of crit-

ics and theorists of the day, was never more entertainingly, more visually corroborated.

The last works in the SFMOMA show are from a series Sultan called "Homeland" (2006-09). For these photographs, Sultan hired day laborers as actors, asking them to play mundane and apparently aimless roles in settings on the edge of nature — beside a stream or crossing a field, perhaps, in places just beyond bordered backyards.

Lush in color and in landscape, the pictures at first seem very different from the black-and-white documents of "Evidence." But the unsolved mysteries they describe bring us back to the artist's first work, reinforcing an idea of a world where so much is visible but little is known.

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