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MANY VOICES, MANY ROOMS

DEPTH OF PHOTOGRAPHS GRIPS VIEWERS' ATTENTION

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Two new exhibits at Daytona Beach Community College's Southeast Museum of Photography start out simply enough. But then the two -- "Fresh Work" and "(Re)Presenting the South" -- spin off in every direction

Like neat signs, with white text on black paper, Susan Evans' three pictures in "Fresh Work" stand at the entrance to the museum's ground-floor gallery. Didactic and uncompromisingly graphic, they tell their viewers everything that photography is not; at the same time, by extension, the stark photographs open the door onto the medium's myriad possibilities.

"Fresh Work," the photo museum's biennial overview of work that challenges convention, probes those possibilities. The experimental nature of some paths is immediately evident: Glinting glass shelves in Stephen Sollins' eerie assemblage feature blurry, fragmentary faces that have been transferred to more sheets of glass on narrow, uneven strips of Scotch tape.

Nearby is "Visitor Center," a disorienting installation that Vicky Ragan built around the wallpaper-like map of Rocky Mountain National Park on one gallery wall. It's a memorial to her parents, whose ashes were scattered in the park, Ragan's wall text notes. But her

statement doesn't begin to explain the appeal of the work, which includes a table, chair, door, window and even dollhouse-like diorama neatly papered with maps.

Domestic and yet very strange, the cosmic installation might have been designed for a visitor from or to another galaxy -- or, perhaps, a life-sized, live-in version of the haunting boxes that American modernist sculptor Joseph Cornell made 50 years ago.

At first glance, works by two other "Fresh Work" artists may seem straightforward. Eight black-and-white prints in a new series by Eric Breitenbach, "Road Kill" and "Fuzzyblurry -- bushandtree," are so immense, so all-enveloping that they appear to be studies in formalism -- texture, light and shadow, line and contour. But then, in a sickening moment, each comes into focus and the subject defies any sort of cool, academic reaction.

And, while the hands Luis Mallo surreptitiously shot on New York's subways and mounted in a three-square grid, initially appear to be graceful, modest anatomical studies, they become much more after a thoughtful overview. Worn, momentarily still, severed from their contexts, they reveal worlds of experience: One pair of hands clasps a rosary, while another grasps a plastic shopping bag. We don't see a single face in "Passengers: 5, 6, 30, 64, 36, 15, 45, 25, 54"; nonetheless we're struck by the strongest sense of personality.

The most stunning piece in "Fresh Work," which was organized by museum director Alison Nordstrom, is the least tangible, and the most open to individual interpretation. "Scattering the Ashes" is a dangerous-looking pile of glass shards, powerfully lit from above to reflect off random angles -- and reveal ghostly, shifting faces stamped holographically onto the glass. Deceptively simple, Shu-Min Lin's assemblage is both a wrenching reminder of those lost to AIDS and a stark object of great beauty.

The surprises are more muted in the other exhibit organized by Nordstrom, "(Re)Presenting the South," but equally revealing. Its six artists are either from the South or work in the South, and the visions they offer mix memory and desire with a sly gothic quality.

Swimming pools appear to be the subject of Willie Ann Wright's five large Cibachrome prints -- until, that is, the peculiarity of her series of images emerges. Shot with a pinhole camera that lends quaint distortions, one picture is of a young blonde on an enormous float. Around her, watching with unreadable expressions, are people on patio furniture. The elements add up, one by one, and the result depends on each viewer's interpretation.

Wearing an astounding array of jewelry -- necklaces, rings, earrings, bracelets, even a watch, she seems at once aware of her audience and lost in her own musings, or self-satisfaction. The work's message is wonderfully disjunctive: Reclining in the posh pool, decked out as if for the opera, the young woman becomes the embodiment of endless suburbia, gleaming as she offers herself to the sun and to her worshippers.

Just as distinctive, and as disturbing, are 11 gum-bichromate images by Ann Holcomb that resurrect a bygone, turn-of-the-century South. Large, decorative, printed on luxurious papers in lush pink, her versions of old photos and letters are the opposite of William Greiner's concise, crisp black-and-whites of key sites in African-American history. Each is fascinating, each is in a format that's ideal for its content, each demands full attention.

And, like the other works in the museum's two ambitious group exhibits, each deserves that attention.