

ART REVIEW

A sense of the familiar

Photography, 'smoke paintings' at C. Grimaldis Gallery challenge viewers

BY TIM SMITH

The Baltimore Sun

Works in living black and white provide fascinating experiences at the C. Grimaldis Gallery. Two artists working in different media are highlighted in an exhibit that challenges the way we see familiar images — or what we assume to be familiar images.

Dennis Lee Mitchell, receiving his first solo show at Grimaldis, employs smoke to create pieces that exude, simultaneously, remarkable calmness and volatility. The technique involves lighting a torch and applying the resulting carbon wafting away to paper.

The description may sound gimmicky or forced, but these "Smoke Drawings" are anything but that. Although the exhibit's mostly untitled items, produced over the past three years and priced from \$2,000 to \$18,000, are essentially abstract, they also take on curiously recognizable shapes.

There are mysterious, eye- or flower-like openings that pull the viewer in; embryonic forms that seem to be slowly moving and intertwining, as if struggling to get past the edges of the frame. A group of four small pieces suggest different angles of exotic mountains that jut and swoop with balletic grace.

The drawings, with their gradations of black smoke on white paper, are neatly paired with a display of photographs by Alexey Titarenko. He is known for adding provocative layers to what might otherwise be ordinary urban scenes, blurring human figures in the shot to give them spectral qualities that turn the pictures into questions.

Last year, Grimaldis offered a collection

of Titarenko's eerily beautiful black-and-whites of St. Petersburg. This summer's display features pieces he produced over the past dozen years that focus on a grand tourist mecca. It's not easy to capture Venice from a fresh angle, but Titarenko's

print is eye-grabbing — a calm, narrow canal with a few boats tied up alongside rows of dark, quietly elegant buildings; a tower rising nobly in the distance, light intensely glowing from inside the bell chamber, reflected on the water below.



An untitled work is part of "Smoke Drawings," an exhibit by Dennis Lee Mitchell at the C. Grimaldis Gallery.

If you go

The exhibit of "Smoke Drawings" and "Venice" runs through July 6 at C. Grimaldis Gallery, 523 N. Charles St. Call 410-539-1080 or go to cgrimaldisgallery.com.

photos, priced from \$2,500 to \$15,000, do so in often striking ways.

"Bell Tower" is a case in point. The painterly composition of this silver gelatin

print is eye-grabbing — a calm, narrow canal with a few boats tied up alongside rows of dark, quietly elegant buildings; a tower rising nobly in the distance, light intensely glowing from inside the bell chamber, reflected on the water below.

It's a photograph that looks a century and a half old, a time-frozen slice of Venetian beauty. This ability to conjure the past is likewise illustrated in "Laundry," an exquisite exercise in light and shadow that gets its vibrancy from the shapes of clothes hanging on the line and, especially, from the fuzzy form of a figure (or is it two?) scurrying across a small stone bridge.

Some of the scenes are what any awed visitor to Venice might snap a picture of, or what Canaletto painted so vividly in the 1700s. But Titarenko's subtle eye invariably takes his work beyond the merely picturesque.

In one photo, it might be the cloud-shrouded sun that changes the whole atmosphere; in another, angles from a shaft of light hitting upper floors of structures give the scene palpable intensity.

Time and again, Titarenko provides something emotionally stirring. In "Gondolas," the vertical lines created by poles the vessels are tied to complement the slender form of a woman standing with one arm shielding her eyes from the sun.

In "Circles," a woman seems to be surrounded by a hula hoop-thin band of light. Other such rings spin through the photo, like the trail of some other-worldly visitors darting from spot to spot, giddy from having discovered the magic of Venice.

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