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Karyn Lovegrove Gallery

INVOLVED: Jeff Whetstone took the approach of participant in his photos, as evidenced in "Self Portrait With Catfish."

The meshing of man and nature

Combining formal elegance with plain-spoken sociological insight, the photographs in the West Coast debut of Tennessee-born, North Carolina-based **Jeff Whetstone** at Karyn Lovegrove Gallery present a rich portrait of the relationship between man and nature in today's rural South. Composed in a manner reminiscent of the 19th century Hudson River School paintings and printed in the muted black and white of survey photographs from the same era, the works have a classical tone.

However their milieu — the world of hunters, fishermen and off-road vehicles — is decidedly contemporary. Whetstone approaches it with familiarity and affection, as a participant rather than an observer. One of the show's most indelible works depicts the artist, bare-chested and muscular, holding the thick, glistening body of a catfish up for the camera.

Whetstone came to the gallery via Catherine Opie, a mentor at Yale who is credited with curating the show, and he shares Opie's deep-seeded sensitivity to the dynamics of place. Particularly notable in his representation of this world is an absence of the sort of fetishization that often characterizes liberal, urban notions of nature.

Tire tracks circling off a back country road, power lines slanting through a foggy wood, a hunter sleeping in a field of tall grass, a boy with a water snake slithering out of his swimming trunks, a fresh grave in an open field — each image speaks to the relationship of man (and these are virtually all men) and nature as an entanglement, a meshing. Whetstone's subjects are never detached from the landscape. Rather, they appear to fade in and out of it, clothed — whether literally or psychologically — in varying degrees of camouflage.

These aren't flashy photographs, but subtle, confident, deeply personal works. They unfold slowly and quietly, transporting viewers to an arcadia that feels worlds away from the smoggy, self-important bustle of the gallery's mid-Wilshire surroundings.

Karyn Lovegrove Gallery, 6150 Wilshire Blvd. No. 8, Los Angeles, (323) 525-1755, through April 15. Closed Sundays and Mondays. www.karynlovegrovegallery.com

by Holly Myers