

Mysterium Tremendum

THE DARK VISIONS OF TOM CHAMBERS

A barefoot young girl in a lacy prom dress lies elevated on an arrangement of crossed sticks, reminiscent of a American Indian burial structure. Her back is arched stiffly. Her head and arms hang limp. Overhead a threatening sky shadows the sage desert that stretches beneath the girl's lonely body.

The artist who created this ominous and seemingly real image is Richmond photographer Tom Chambers, a surprisingly normal-looking guy, with wire rim glasses and a day job designing packaging for Hamilton Beach. In his off hours Chambers turns into a digital sorcerer, layering photographs, adjusting light and incorporating subtle effects to conjure dream-like visions fraught with impending disaster. Asked what he hopes to evoke in viewers, he says, "I'm aiming for the emotional reaction.

Originally from Lancaster, Pennsylvania, Chambers grew up in a family of artists on a farm set amid

religiously conservative Amish and Mennonite communities. At 18, his world view permanently darkened when he served a year aboard a Navy patrol boat in Vietnam. After returning home, he spent five years doing odd jobs and hitchhiking around the U.S., Canada and Mexico. He took a stained glass class in the late 1970s in Florida and made church windows professionally before majoring in photography at Ringling School of Art and Design.

Chambers originally came to Virginia as Richmond magazine's art director, but he's spent the past 17 years at Hamilton Beach, which is how he discovered Photoshop. "I just started playing around with it using vacation shots," he explains. "Most of the images were southwestern, so they fit together as a series."

Since his first exhibition in 1998, Chambers has refined his technique, plotting shots in advance as he calculates how to create the desired



impact. His most recent work, featuring disturbing, fairy tale-like images of children and animals, is inspired by Mexican devotional paintings—ex votos—expressing gratitude for averted catastrophes. Chambers recalls, "When I saw those, I thought, 'This is really cool. Maybe I can push my images to be more like these ex votos, push them to have this spiritual, religious slant.'"

"Tom's work is emotional, graphic," says Crista Dix, director of Seattle's Wall Space gallery, which showed Chambers' images in September. "It elicits an experience, a moment when that viewer connects, and the story comes from them—who they [are], what they [are] feeling..."

A former Virginia Museum of Fine Arts Fellow, Chambers was also a featured artist at the prestigious Santa Fe Photo Arts festival last summer. This month, his work is on display at the George Billis Gallery in Los Angeles.

Lately, Chambers has started exploring images involving Civil War re-enactors. He's also planning a series around large objects, tentatively titled "Leviathan." Whatever uneasy visions Chambers offers, they will no doubt prod viewers to discover dark stories within themselves.

TomChambersPhoto.com