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Keith Cottingham

Ronald Feldman Gallery
31 Mercer Street
SoHo
Through March 27

The various appropriation artists of the 1980's, who were said to make rather than take photographs, confirmed that photographs can lie. In the 90's it is being proved that photographs can say just about anything you want, thanks to digitalization. As a result most people now approach any photograph hanging in an art gallery with suspicion, combing the surface for telltale clues to truth or fiction.

Keith Cottingham's first New York show invites such combing. In one room images brim with the gray grainy light of 19th-century vintage photographs. Themes of the period — colonialism, slavery, scientific and geographical exploration — are evoked. Images include a quasi-Assyrian sculpture of a lion, a black woman in profile, a Chinese junk drifting along a placid river and a close-up of a sprig of leaves.

In the other room are three large color portraits of one, two and three bare-chested teen-age boys shown against black. In addition to looking almost like clones of one another, they have a slightly android artificiality to their handsome faces and thick brown hair.

Nearly nothing is real in either series. The junk, for example, is a three-dimensional model with details digitally added; its background was lifted from various 19th-century photographs and fused into one landscape, also on the computer. The Stepford Boys, whose artificiality is more available and disturbing, began with a life-size head sculptured by the artist, which was then scanned into the computer for further work.

To make sure the viewer doesn't miss a trick, the exhibition includes a statement by the artist detailing his nearly invisible technique. This has the effect of reducing the show to an extremely familiar formula: the co-dependent image and text of Conceptual Art. It all becomes more interesting to think about than to look at.

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