

Art: Beyond the infinite

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The most beautiful and poetic exhibition at the Institute in years.

By Mary Abbe

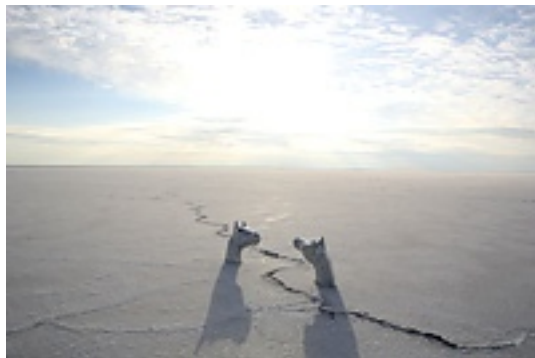


Photo courtesy Minneapolis Institute of Arts By Andréa

Stanislav

Consider the obelisk.

Since ancient times, when Egyptians placed them at temple doors, obelisks have signaled aspiration, dignity and power. Pointing to the heavens, they often bore inscriptions in praise of deities, rulers, civilizations.

The potent obelisk recurs everywhere in Andréa Stanislav's poetic installation "[River to Infinity -- The Vanishing Points](#)," at the Minneapolis Institute of Arts. The show is on view for just 11 more days, and it is spectacular, ranking among the most elegant and mesmerizing exhibits the museum has offered in many years.

For all its recurrent obelisk motifs, "River" is not merely a paean to geometric form or ancient architecture, but a lush multidimensional environment that weaves together American Indian motifs, desert landscapes and subtle allusions to astrology, astronomy, ancient myths, national mythologies, apocalypse and such pop culture icons as My Little Pony and the films of Michelangelo Antonioni ("Zabriskie Point") and Francis Ford Coppola ("The Godfather"). All that and beauty too.

From several galleries away, Stanislav's installation beckons with gleaming mirrors, twinkling light and a low rumble of thunder. On mirrored platforms, two headless horses spin slowly, their rhinestone-covered torsos endlessly reflected in immense mirrors etched with astrological charts and ghostly portraits of 19th century Indians. Clusters of little mirrored obelisks protrude from the horses' bellies, exploding like cartoon death rays from their sparkling flesh.

In an adjacent gallery, a heap of shattered obelisks lies beyond a river of mirrors that visitors may cross on silvery rocks. The horses' severed heads are tucked among the ruins of the mirror-covered columns that lie, like fallen skyscrapers or spent missiles, on a dark plain. Flanking this ominously seductive tableau are video projections in which an owl blinks and flies off as missile-like shafts materialize in a desert and explode into a luscious apricot fireball. It is an endless, lyrical loop of silent beauty and dreamlike death.

Stanislav's tableaux offer endless opportunities for viewers to spin their own free associations from her imagery. She sees the horses and shadowy images of Indians as allusions to the American myth of Manifest Destiny that justified the conquest and despoilation of the North American continent by European invaders. With their pretty torsos and silvery tails, her horses look like girlish playthings devolved from the noble steeds that armies once rode.

The astrological charts are linked to star alignments at the time of various United States wars, Stanislav said. Some viewers will see in her desert blast video the exploding ranch house at the end of Antonioni's 1970 film, while others will hear an echo of the first nuclear explosion at Alamogordo, N.M. Her pile of shattered obelisks, so suggestive of ruined skyscrapers, inevitably brings to mind 9/11 and the Iraq war.

The beauty of Stanislav's installation lies in its evocative ambiguity. It is at once precise yet poetic, lucid yet lyrical, and always richly layered with multiple allusions. There's plenty of content, but it's not a preachy piece that requires footnotes or even benefits much from interpretation. Instead, it entices viewers to sail their own rivers of the imagination to an infinity of ideas, dreams and nightmares.