

AROUND
THE GALLERIESClever
fakery
in keen
focus

BY LEAH OLLMAN

The authority we invest in a photographic image and the veracity we assign to it aren't newly slippery issues, specific to the age of Photoshop. They are as old as photography itself — a medium that emerged (going on about 180 years) with simultaneous claims on both scientific accuracy and artistic license. Photography has always had a complicated relationship with truth, and different generations have probed the nature of that bond in different ways, with a range of tools and a variety of slants to their questions.

Enter Noah Doely, a young artist who turns Steve Turner Contemporary's small upstairs gallery into a visual and intellectual resonating chamber on the theme of authenticity. His images greet us immediately with a lie but a delicious and seductive one, an act of fakery akin to fine theater.



Steve Turner Contemporary

NOAH DOELY uses 19th century processes to create his photographs.

Made using 19th century processes — tintype and ambrotype — the photographs announce themselves as old, originating in another era. Characters, costumes and settings too. But as in Stephen Berkman's work, which Doely's closely resembles, the past is filtered

"The Expanse of a Fact" is a tight group of images centered on visual exploration of the cosmos. In one fantastic triptych, Doely presents a moonscape of milky craters shot, it seems, from close to the surface. Bracketing the picture is another scape, showing an older man studying that same surface, which is actually a model, and another, showing workers in the process of fabricating it.

In an equally intriguing diptych, Doely pairs a portrait of the old astronomer beside his telescope, noting observations, with an image of two craftsmen standing on stools, chiseling the crusty, cratered shell of a miniature moon. In a joltingly ambiguous grid of nine photographs (evocative of a Vija Celmins drawing), all that can be seen are stars against darkness, which we know from the surrounding images to be deliberately applied freckles of paint.

Throughout "The Expanse of a Fact," earnest inquiry merges with radical manipulation. The deceptions are half-naked and wholly compelling.

Doely, who earned his MFA last year from UC San Diego, is as much DIY theater director as photographer, creating all the sculptural and scenic elements that make up these fictive documents. He has a keen eye for period detail and texture. The pictures also seem steeped in a patience and restraint that come with the 19th century territory and distance them further from the accelerated pace and instant gratifications of the now. What goes into knowing what we know is a complex process, braiding together hope, sensory experience, wonder and trust. Doely's work activates them all, employing obsolete methods to ask timeless questions.