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## Arts Publications

# Michal Rovner at the Art Institute of Chicago and Rhona Hoffman - Chicago, Illinois - Review of Exhibitions

[Art in America, May, 1994](#) by [Susan Snodgrass](#)

Although Michal Rovner's atmospheric photographs of solitary houses and human figures are bathed in a spiritual calm, she shuns any romantic notion of humankind in harmony with nature. Instead she fuses the ethereal and empirical worlds to address issues of human mortality.

Twenty-four works from Rovner's "Outside" and "One Person Game Against Nature 1" and "II" series (1992-93) were gathered at the Art Institute in this artist's first solo museum exhibition. The smaller survey of 13 photographs at Rhona Hoffman served as a companion show, and in its diversity proved more interesting. The gallery selection included examples from all three series represented at the Art Institute, as well as early works such as Earth Dog and Landscape Dog (both 1987)--William Wegmanish portrayals of the artist's black mutt, Stella--and Decoy #12 (1991), a disturbing image of soldiers in a field of fiery orange, taken from television coverage of the Persian Gulf War.

Rovner puts considerable emphasis on process. In some cases, she shoots from video stills; in others, she uses a Polaroid camera judiciously jiggled so that her subjects appear to be in motion. The prints are then rephotographed, colored and enlarged. The final images appear hazy and unfocused, so that a veil of mystery and emotional distance infuses them with a strongly metaphorical weight.

The isolated image of a small house is the repeated motif in the "Outside" series. Like Monet's paintings of the Rouen cathedral, these photos are made distinct from one another by subtle differences in color and light, meant to evoke various times of day and different seasons. In fact, though, this desolate scene was shot in Rovner's native Israel; perhaps it symbolizes the artist's own ambivalence toward her country as a place of both refuge and oppression.

In the "Nature I" and "II" series the artist sets individual figures and groups afloat against monochromatic fields of color. The site is the Dead Sea, a place rich with historical and religious meaning, and here, too, her landscapes are shrouded in a suggestive haze. The artist's interests seem largely formal in the "Nature I" series, as she explores the relationship of figure to ground. The "Nature II" series, though, is more complex, its darker landscapes invoking a macabre otherworldliness that transforms her amorphous figures into soaring angels or fallen corpses. Here, Rovner succeeds quite dramatically in elevating the ordinary to the sublime, as she explores the fragile, and often blurred, line between life and death.