

# THE LOST WORLD

Anderson Scott's photographs explore the bizarre *Land of the Nuwaubians* ■ BY FELICIA FEASTER

## REVIEW

### Tama-Re: Land of the Nuwaubians

Through Aug. 4, Fri., 3-8 p.m.; Sat., 1-6 p.m.; Sun., 1-6 p.m. Eyedrum (back gallery), 290 MLK Jr. Drive. 404-522-0655. www.eyedrum.org.

In the South we have become accustomed to folk environments, those architectural flights of fancy that express their makers' unique take on Scripture or beauty. Howard Finster's Paradise Gardens is the example that comes immediately to mind, but there are plentiful examples of people whose vision is so strong it can only manifest itself in an utter overhaul of reality.

The United Nuwaubian Nation of Moors were rural architects of a different order. The Nuwaubians were a fringe religious cult that moved from Brooklyn to the rural wilds of Putnam County, Georgia, to practice their autodidactic religion.

Photographer Anderson Scott had attempted to photograph the compound while the Nuwaubians were still living there, but was "rebuffed." So he came up with a different and—considering the effect of his photographs—some might say *better* solution.

The photographs Scott has taken document what remained of the Nuwaubian utopia after the 100 or so cultists had fled on government orders when their leader, Dwight York, was sent to prison for molesting his followers' children. (*Atlanta Journal-Constitution* reporter Bill Osinski chronicled the cult in his recent book, *Ungodly: A True Story of Unprecedented Evil*.) In just a few days the Nuwaubians packed up their valuables and left everything else behind.

Armed with that knowledge of what occurred at "Tama-Re," Anderson Scott's images at Eyedrum, *Tama-Re: Land of the Nuwaubians*, are singular in their stomach-turning, haunted properties.

The Nuwaubians had a "thing" for ancient Egypt and so ornamented their slice of rural Georgia with cinder-block temples decorated with garishly colored hieroglyphics and obelisks, crudely rendered palm tree sculptures capped with carriage lights and pyramid houses accessed via wooden decks.

The effect is unsettling. Scott's exterior scenes have the eerie essence of abandoned and decrepit theme parks. His interiors feel like nightclubs during daylight hours, the atmospheric lighting and music gone and only the sad, shoddy trappings of cheaply rendered fun left behind.

Considering that in a previous project, Scott photographed abandoned steel mills, the artist is clearly attuned to the uneasy effect of depopulated places that once hummed with life, and the sense of dejection and absence when those places are vacated.

The perfect encapsulation of the look of this



PYRAMID SCHEME: A Big Wheel tricycle waits at the entrance to a Nuwaubian house.

meta-Egypt may be the artist's own: "a version of Egypt, but with the color scheme and impermanence of a Mardi Gras float." The sizzling tangerines of the walls inside one building or the pea greens and cobalt blues ornamenting another create a startlingly artificial, human-made contrast with the verdant Georgia landscape and blue skies.

Scott has a wonderful eye for dramatic juxtaposition, though the effect is never cheap or throwaway in the manner of a visual punch line done to elicit laughs.

Instead his images highlight the cruel, sad, pathetic and even gruesome distance between an imagined paradise and an actual one.

The Nuwaubian version of paradise is often a collision of the individually wrought and the mass-produced, the extraordinarily detailed construction done by cult members and the kind of cheaply manufactured goods available at chain stores. Next to the carved wooden animal sculptures and the airbrushed Tutankhamun wall art are the men's urinals, Home Depot light fixtures, crepe-paper rolls

and other totems of the store-bought and earthly.

The presence of light switches, thermostats and other ordinary objects amid the Egyptian "splendor" is as much of a non sequitur as seeing a cell phone in a movie about World War II.

It is hard not to wonder about the inner thoughts of people who spent such time working on this alternative reality. What did they think about as they were painting their 100th ankh? Were they satisfied with the way they rendered the divine, or were they left wanting? Maybe in a certain light, the effect was right. Scott's exhibition gives the strange sensation a visit to ancient ruins can produce, of wondering and speculating about the people who once dwelled there.

The lost world Scott has documented can often feel nightmarish, especially when one glimpses a child's Big Wheel tricycle or a metal slide. But one is also put into the uncomfortable position of feeling sorry for these Nuwaubians striving so fitfully toward such a dimly visualized paradise. What were they looking for?

Scott's work resonates with ideas far beyond

the documentary evidence he gives of the strange remnants of this dispersed cult. In this marvelous work he has addressed larger themes of the afterlife and how it often manifests itself in tangible ways but also in intangible ones, such as the strange echo these images give us of our own mortality.

Real ruins made of marble or stone found in Egypt or Greece give us a taste of the afterlife and humanity's ability to endure beyond the parameters of mortality.

But the ruins of chicken wire, cinder block and particleboard documented in Scott's work have the opposite effect. They are a reminder of how our own personal paradises crumble, decay and are forgotten. The images are doubly haunting because they testify not only to the shoddy production values of this creepy, dangerous cult, but to more universally recognizable instances of dashed dreams and forgotten places.

FELICIA.FEASTER@CREATIVELOAFING.COM

ONLINE: To see more images from Tama-Re, visit [atlanta.creativeloafing.com](http://atlanta.creativeloafing.com) and click on Arts.