

**BY PETER BENSON MILLER**

Rä di Martino is repeatedly drawn to specific sites associated with cinema, just as she is to the processes and techniques whereby cinema and photography manufacture the illusion of reality. Indeed much of her work plays with the very means through which that illusion is achieved, revealing the disjuncture between the prosaic, if often voluminous and complicated, trappings of filmmaking (even though her own filmmaking is remarkably efficient) and the enduring myths generated by its final product. This ambiguity between fact and fiction animates her series of photographs of the architectural vestiges of film sets in North Africa, structures made for the filming of *Star Wars* and left to decay after filming was over. Armed, at least on the surface, with the factual authority of photography itself, these images of the ruins of a make-believe world offer concrete evidence of a place that really only exists fully in the imagination. Rather than try to resolve this paradox, Rä di Martino revels in it, offering it up as a profound reflection on cinema and its spatial and temporal dislocations. At the same time, she is drawn to the aura of faded glamour, a kind of afterglow, adhering to these kinds of sites. Between 2004 and 2011, for example, she repeatedly photographed the simple plaque marking the final resting place of Marilyn Monroe in the Westwood Memorial Park in Los Angeles. As with the *Star Wars* photographs, which provide only a partial record of what occurred on set, the nondescript tomb, despite the lipstick stains in the marble, belies the legendary renown of one of Hollywood's most celebrated superstars, whose eternal afterglow far outlives her brief, meteoric career.

In her new work, *Rä di Martino* revisits in the same spirit a site synonymous with contemporary art in Italy in the late 1960s known for its brash mixture of pop culture and the avant-garde. The Piper in Turin was one of several discothèques, along with the Nuovo Mondo in Rimini, where artists, actors, designers, and writers gathered and socialized in a hybrid, experimental space, designed by Pietro Derossi, in which art, theater, music, happenings, and everyday life were loosely intertwined. This atmosphere served as a fertile catalyst for the heyday of Arte Povera and its key artists, including Mario Merz and Michelangelo Pistoletto, among others. Working with archival photographs, *Rä di Martino* – who is currently preparing a documentary on the subject – restaged the images with extras, bringing the casual encounters captured in the images slowly to life. Like Eadweard Muybridge's photographic studies of motion or *tableaux vivants*, 'living pictures,' these videos, like so much of *Rä di Martino*'s work, blur the distinction between media, in this case, between cinema and photography, fiction and fact. Rather than treat the archival photographs as documents, evidence of transparent reality, she manipulates them to conjure up an elusive world of relationships, chance encounters, stolen glances, snippets of conversations, and improvised actions that no photograph or group of photographs could possibly record for posterity. For her, the photographic archive is not unlike the derelict film sets in North Africa; both are partial, material fragments of a lost whole, one that only really existed in the form of a series of highly contingent transactions, most of which occur, in the film and its aftermath, in the realm of the image-addled imagination. She sifts through them selectively, reenacting them in a narrative that is neither true nor false, but somewhere in between.

Other archival photographs, portraits of American women homesteaders in front of their farmhouses, and a series of floating trees, provide the means for the artist to manipulate the processes and mechanisms of photography itself, the ancestor and bedfellow of cinema. Modifying the images, and combining cropped parts of them with other photographs, she creates collages, which are then re-photographed to produce fake negatives. The history of photography is riddled with such tampering and deliberate falsehoods, although they have rarely been acknowledged this openly. Here, the artist is more concerned with these manipulations than she is with the ostensible subject, the hardscrabble life of unsung heroines like the one in Willa Cather's celebrated novel *My Ántonia*. The alterations are often absurdly obvious, at other times they are more subtle, but they are never disguised. The black and white prints in the exhibition are printed in the dark room from the collaged negatives. This recourse to a traditional process may appear to reinstate photographic authority, but it is really another form of re-enactment undermining the archive's claim to absolute or overarching truth.

Rä di Martino makes her multifaceted and interconnected investigations of architectural remnants of film sets, mythologized sites, and the operations of cinema and photography explicit by including here a reconstructed part of the façade of a homestead, similar to one in the manipulated photographs. A self-conscious fake, it emerges somewhat improbably from the wall of the gallery like a partial stage set. This semi-fictional landmark, recreated from a salvaged photograph of the American prairie, both reinforces and undermines the photographic record. It suggests both the elaborate efforts of filmmakers and

photographers to create sustainable illusions and the ultimate precariousness of that enterprise.