



DAN RACICOT/FOR THE SUDBURY STAR

Toronto artist Joan Kaufman's exhibit, entitled *Sure Sign*, has a haunting and timeless effect on the viewer, all captured in black and white.



Haunting images that speak to the viewer

There is a perceptual abyss between Gary Blundell's exhibit hanging on the lower floor of the Art Gallery of Sudbury and the upstairs display by Toronto artist Joan Kaufman. Colourful and abstract, Blundell's work strongly contrasts with the hush of the ethereal presence in Kaufman's black and white photos.

In a companion statement, these photos, set in the ancient Roman baths in England, "blur the boundaries between illusion and reality." Despite recognizable forms — people on beds, interior scenes from antiquity — there is much room for interpretation.

Is one image the depiction of a man lying on a metal-framed bed, or is he climbing a ladder through a concrete shaft?

Is it even a man? Could it be a woman, her head shaved, desperately clutching the metal structure in an attempt to flee her cold, forbidding environment?

Are her surroundings even physical, or does the indistinct background mirror an emotional and spiritual decay? We never really know, partly because of the artist's skill in distorting conventional perception, and partly because of our own views, associations and feelings.

But one thing is certain. Kaufman's exhibit, entitled *Sure Sign*, is guaranteed to affect the audience

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in ways that will surprise, as it did for this viewer whose personal connection with the subject matter of these works bridged a gap of time and space back into a faded personal memory.

In one striking Kaufman photograph, a young girl appears suspended on what might be stilts or crutches, her facial expression tentative, her form engulfed by a background that fades into blackness.

The haunting and timeless effect captured in black and white, coupled by the impression of an innocent life corrupted by suffering and possible doom, brought to mind permanently etched memories of a concentration camp in Poland.

The most striking artifacts at the Majdanek site, where an estimated 235,000 people died at the hands of their Nazi captors, are the original crutches and shoes worn by the men, women and children who

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lived and died there. Now a museum, visitors can walk freely through the abandoned wooden barracks, once the last refuge for victims who were later killed and burned.

An eerie and bone chilling silence pervades the emptiness of these buildings frozen in a loneliness that lingers, as if the ache of living souls who perished remains fixed in the current of time.

Indeed, the fusion of passing time overlaid with eternal presence also resonates in Kaufman's exhibit.

Despite the peripheral darkness that threatens to engulf its human subjects, light dominates their

more immediate surroundings. In yet another unnamed photograph, two young girls share a moment of solitude while sitting at opposite ends of a single bed. Even here the persistent struggle to survive, evident in one of the subject's sad and shadowy expressions, is emphasized by the presence of light that presses in and down into the darkness.

Kaufman's deft manipulation of these features, symbiotically coupled, presents a metaphorical feast. Is the light an external influence or an internal force? Are these shafts shooting down from the sun or rising up from the soul?

Another work depicting a young girl — obviously a favourite subject for the artist — sitting at the edge of a table is similarly bathed in a column of luminescence that stretches vertically from the top of the print to the bottom.

Though her tentative look that mirrors this moment of uncertainty calls us to question her state of being, we are reassured that the light is there to

guide and protect, as much for her sake as our own.

These digital manipulations on paper demonstrate effective techniques that convey an impression of ambient flavour and timelessness by virtue of the blurred images that result. To get this effect, Joan Kaufman enlarges the images beyond the limits of resolution, thus creating a convergence of illusion and reality that calls us into a contemplative consideration of moments both fleeting and eternal.

■ Read Marek Krasuski every Saturday in *The Star*. news@marekkrasuski.com.