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## A Tale of Two Cities Made One

Goethe-Institut Offers A Close Look at Berlin

By Jessica Dawson  
Special to The Washington Post  
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Imagine a picture of a city street, with its rows of variously fashioned facades, some balconied, some sheer, some overlaid with grids, all rising behind the sidewalk. So far, so normal.

But these facades stand in [Berlin](#), circa 1999. Each measures just inches thick. Steel clamps mount them to concrete pedestals like set pieces dotting a [Hollywood](#) back lot.

Captured in a photograph by artist Stefanie Buerkle, these odd fronts turn out to be sample cladding intended to cover the Federal Press Conference building, a soon-to-be-important monument to the "new" Berlin. You can just imagine the architects mulling their options: Will grids appear too severe? Balconies too domestic? Choices like these were made every day during the radical 1990s building boom. (And the grid won.) When the Wall fell, architects slapped a new identity onto the city's East zone, refurbishing prewar buildings and erecting brand-new ones. The radical facelift aimed both to graft the decades-lost East to its Western half and to transform a formerly dead city through urban planning. Yet no facelift can erase history. Shifting core identity takes much, much longer.

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Caïtlin Phillips's weak "Tea Party," in "sub-text" at Randall Scott Gallery. (Randall Scott Gallery)

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At [Goethe-Institut](#), Buerkle's telling images hang among those of 10 other artists, most working with photography, in "Portrait: Berlin." Taken together, their pictures -- many of which don't involve architecture at all -- unite in a nearly seamless exhibition examining the complicated psyche of the most interesting city of the late 20th century.

Daniela Comani explores relationships and gender politics in her narrative photo series, "A Happy Marriage," which itself conjures Berlin's conjoined status. The artist appears in each photo twice: once as a woman playing a wife, and once dressed as a man playing her husband. Together, the fictitious couple stroll the beach, work alongside each other or lie together in bed.

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With her pixie haircut and strong features, Comani's an androgynous-looking woman. Still, despite wearing thick-rimmed glasses, a bulky jacket and pasted-on facial hair to play her alter ego, Comani's "he" hardly projects convincing masculinity. Adding a mustache and glasses can't change a female's core identity.

In the context of "Portrait: Berlin" Comani's play on gender roles mirrors Berlin's own conflicts. So does marriage's metaphor of the unification of opposites. Berlin's East zone wears its mustache in the form of high-end retail stores and edifices power-washed to prewar glory. But the city will never fully shake its past. Like a troubled couple, East and West have weathered a massive separation and are now negotiating a coming together after many years lived apart.

Christian Rothmann's pictures explore the idea of doubled identity, as if to offer resolution to the split. In his pictures, the artist again appears twice. First, he's the man behind the camera -- invisible, but a presence nonetheless. Second, he appears in a photograph of himself that he's asked strangers to raise up in front of Berlin tourist monuments. Rothmann's head floats in the hands of happy visitors to the Reichstag roof or the Brandenburg Gate. By occupying two places at once, he can evade normal boundaries and give visual representation to identity split.

The single jarring note in this otherwise cohesive show comes from Gerhard Kassner. His studio portraits of megawatt movie stars who've come through town on promo tours are blown up poster-size, dwarfing the show's other images. A-listers such as [George Clooney](#), [Nicole Kidman](#) and [Jack Nicholson](#) stare out from massive prints shot against generic studio backdrops. In an exhibition so firmly rooted to place, these otherworldly stars floating in a studio vacuum represent all that is detached and placeless. They are, most definitely, not Berliners.

#### **Group Show at Randall Scott**

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Some pictures in "sub-text," a Randall Scott Gallery group show, are making me wonder. Can an image be Photoshopped into irrelevance?

That and other provocative questions about the state of photo-based artwork emerge in this five-person group show. The Photoshopping issue comes to us through Lindsey McCracken's hyper-manufactured landscapes where cows at pasture stand alongside massive stone bridge supports marching through the landscape like invaders from an industrial planet. A meteor shower rains from the sky above.

The attempt, I assume, is some science-fiction style contrast of nature and culture. Yet such extreme pastiche comes off as two halves not amounting to a whole. McCracken's agility with a mouse is flimsy glue for an artwork. Technology is a means -- not the end.

Alejandra Laviada takes photography's unreliability as her subject. The artist enters an abandoned office building and rearranges the furniture to her liking. Then she documents her own interventions. We all know that a photographer's eye mediates what appears in her frame. Here, both the image she captures and the capturing of that image are the artist's own.

Two female artists produce the show's most dismaying images. Both capture young women in much the same way that today's fashion rags do: inert, comatose and doll-like.

Leafing through the September Vogue made me yearn for supermodels sporting shoulder pads. Now that women have made strides in the working world, must they appear mute and immobile? Female artists, I put the same question to you.

At Randall Scott, Caitlin Phillips's work proves particularly enervating. She's an attractive woman, slender and young, and she takes pictures of herself. In one picture she wears a simple dress and cute shoes and holds a tea set while looking blankly at the camera. In another, she stands on a beach, masked and perfectly still, dressed in a flowery shift. In a third, she's nearly naked, in curlers and hose, pouting for the camera.

What possesses a woman artist to denigrate herself like this? Photography, in its many forms, dominates artmaking. But can artists use it wisely?

*Portrait: Berlin* at Goethe-Institut, 812 Seventh St. NW, Monday, Tuesday, Thursday, 9 a.m. to 5 p.m., Wednesday, 9 a.m. to 8 p.m. Saturday, Sept. 15 only: 11 a.m. to 5 pm., through Sept. 27. <http://www.goethe.de/washington>.

*sub-text* at Randall Scott Gallery, 1326 14th St. NW, Wednesday-Saturday, 11 a.m. to 6 p.m., 202-332-0806, through Sept. 8. <http://www.randallscottgallery.com>.

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