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ART REVIEW BY HOLLY MEYERS, NOV 10, 2006

Arceneaux's flights of fancy the benefit of the doubt.

If comedy is an alchemical process, what Arceneaux attempts here is something like the reverse: the elaborate dissection of something magical — a good joke — into its composite parts. The result may sound tedious, but what he reveals has its own fascination.

Suzanne Vielmetter Los Angeles Projects, 5795 W. Washington Blvd., Culver City, (323) 933-2117, through Dec. 2. Closed Sundays and Mondays.

The haunted faces in troubled lands

The young photojournalist **Jehad Nga** has seen a lot in his still relatively short career. In the last four years alone, he's covered the war in Iraq, drought in Somalia and Kenya, the Liberian civil war, the Darfur conflict, illegal immigration in South Africa, a beauty contest for HIV-infected women in Botswana, Ghanaian economic reform, Syrian political reform and the conflict in the Middle East.

His pictures, which have appeared in this paper and the *New York Times*, among other publications, are confident and engaging if fairly traditional expressions of the genre, in which background and foreground are held in a conscientious state of tension, with sweeping views of these volatile landscapes balanced against sensitive portrayals of the individuals who populate them.

For the work in his first gallery exhibition, however, at M+B, Nga has stripped this familiar formula down to just the latter component, depicting in each image a handful of anonymous figures — all of them cafe patrons in unspecified regions of Kenya and Somalia — illuminated by a single beam of light cast through the door of the cafe.

The images are haunting. The darkness surrounding the beam is pure black, and Nga's dark-skinned subjects float in and out of it like ghosts. They are young and old, male and female; some are wrapped in colorful robes, some carry machine guns. Some smile; some have a pensive, con-

templative air; some look away.

The profound simplicity of the arrangement speaks volumes: about the devastating effect throughout Africa of violence, poverty and AIDS; about the view we have of these issues as Westerners looking in; about the role of photography in communicating them to the world; and about the relationship, ultimately, of the individual face to the sweeping currents of history.

M+B, 612 N. Almont Drive, Los Angeles, (310) 550-0500, through Nov. 22. Closed Sundays and Mondays.

Casinos and myth of the frontier

"The New Frontier," New York painter **Lisa Sanditz's** first exhibition in Los Angeles, at ACME, takes its name from an old-school Las Vegas casino that recently underwent what the artist characterizes in the show's statement as a largely futile face-lift. "It defends its prime real estate location on The Strip," she writes, "but can't hide the fact that it is a dinosaur. The frontier myth of eternal abundance has rendered this casino a mere building, while the newer casinos spread out as modern temples of the Entertainment Industry."

This sort of architectural disjuncture is clearly of great interest to Sanditz, many of whose past works incorporated references to garish Midwestern tourist attractions. The paintings in this show revolve loosely around the concept of the casino, exploring the role that gambling palaces have come to play in the social and geographical landscape of the American West. It is an easy subject to caricature, particularly by someone from the Northeast, but Sanditz pushes past the obvious to reveal a subtle pictorial complexity. Though fanciful in many ways, the paintings capture precisely the quality that Western cities such as Las Vegas have of floating on the surface of the landscape, as if not completely fixed to the Earth.

On a formal level, there's a dazzling ugliness to the work that makes it unexpectedly absorbing. Sanditz paints in brash,