

Romaine Orthwein at the Miller/Geisler Gallery. Below: "Untitled" from the "Looking Glass" series, Orthwein, 2002.



Spirit of St. Louis



NEW YORK — Watching photographer Romaine Orthwein stand in the center of her exhibition, "Presence," at the Miller/Geisler Gallery has the dizzying effect of walking through a set of fun house mirrors. In every direction, the artist's eerie images surround her.

There's Orthwein prostrate on a glass dining room table or peering out of a television set or scampering across a boulder toward a chapel or gazing out steadily from a portrait that hangs in a bedroom. Though the show, which runs through March 22, features two series of her work — "Spirit," self-portraits of the artist at sacred sites, and the "Looking Glass," photographs of lavish homes in which she digitally places herself — the message is clear: a haunting sense of displacement and alienation.



"There's definitely a sadness in the work," the tiny and intense artist admits, as she walks through the gallery. "I'm really attracted to displacement as a subject matter. It resonates with me." Although she hails from St. Louis' most prominent family — her late grandmother is Clara Busch — the brewery heiress, now in her mid-thirties, had a tumultuous upbringing. She lost her mother, Lady Milford-Haven, to cancer at nine and bounced between the family's homes around the country before heading to boarding school at age 12. "We lived in New York for a while. We lived in Palm Beach,

then we lived in St. Louis, and we lived in Rhode Island during the summers," she says. "After being at boarding schools for six years, home felt like it wasn't home anymore, either."

Thus, Orthwein has always been fascinated by other people's homes. For the "Looking Glass" series, she selected affluent residences of friends and family and snapped their mahogany-paneled living rooms and antique-laden bedrooms from the outside looking in — be it through a windowpane or doorway. "Never inside the home," she says. "I chose homes that were similar enough to the kind of environment I grew up in because the work is so personal." She then photographed herself separately and positioned herself within each picture, building a narrative by her placement within the home — is she a beloved daughter, a mistress or a long lost relative?

While Orthwein's work raises questions of identity and what it means to belong, one has to wonder if her heritage is more burden than blessing. "I think I always felt like a little bit of an oddball in the family, the eccentric one," she says, adding that her four half-siblings have followed more traditional paths, entering the business world. "For me, it was more about being a creative and theatrical personality."

So where does the artist see herself fitting in now?

"Nowhere!" she cries out, cracking a rare laugh. "But I feel most at home in New York!"

— Alison Oneacre