

DOUG HALL

RENA BRANSTEN GALLERY, SAN FRANCISCO

Is anything spectacular anymore? Or has every natural vista and architectural masterpiece been reduced, in our age of skillful and omnipresent mechanical reproduction, to a screen saver, postcard, or billboard? Doug Hall's large-scale color photographs often seem both to ask and answer these questions. Previously, his carefully tuned images of natural and constructed spaces exhibited a clear affinity with the work of Andreas Gursky, Candida Höfer, and Thomas Struth. But his most recent images reveal a subtle, ironic humor that sets them apart from those of his German counterparts.

Depicting subjects that range from the natural (the Grand Canyon and Yosemite National Park) to the architectural (the Guggenheim Museum and the Eiffel Tower), Hall's scenes often have the sentimental artificiality of theater stages or movie sets—in part because they appear to be as much about people as about the places in which we see them. His deft photographic manipulation of the figures seen milling around in the majority of the thirteen works shown here only enhances this impression. In *Mount Rushmore*, 2004, for example, few visitors to the monument are actually looking at the four presidents carved out of the mountain in the background. Instead, they pose for pictures, talk, or simply stand around looking bored. Similarly, in *Guggenheim Museum, New York*, 2004, the Brancusi sculptures on display are dwarfed by the building's spiraling interior and seem all but irrelevant to most art lovers' "museum experience." And in *The Eiffel Tower*, 2004, all we see of the titular structure is its immense base framing an oblivious crowd. Even the pigeon in the central foreground seems to ooze ennui.

It's not surprising, then, that the famous view featured in *Glacier Point, Yosemite*, 2004, takes up less of the two-panel composition than the scenic over-look in the foreground. Situating the viewer at the back of this space rather than at the railing at once emphasizes the immensity and grandeur of



Doug Hall, *Mount Rushmore*, 2004, color photograph, 49 x 64 1/2".

the site and reduces it to a commercial. Interestingly, the tourists' shadows fall in different directions, a visual anomaly that both reveals Hall's process of digital alteration and suggests a reason for it. Much as French Rococo painter Hubert Robert carefully positioned the tiny figures in his images of magnificent ruins, Hall meticulously arranges those in his pictures: He makes several exposures from the same vantage point and selects the final cast of characters from those who wandered into view.

In this way, Hall's project recalls that of two mid-nineteenth-century photographers. Oscar Gustav Rejlander and Henry Peach Robinson created convincing images by juxtaposing multiple negatives to make a single contact print. In contrast to the then widely held belief in photography as an accurate record of the truth, Robinson once asserted, "Any 'dodge,' trick, or conjuration of any kind is open to the photographer's use," further noting that "a great deal can be done by the mixture of the real and artificial." Perhaps the common ground between the spectacular world described by Hall and the scenes conjured by Rejlander and Robinson is a willingness to reinvent reality for rhetorical purposes.

—Maria Porges