

■ MILES COOLIDGE. ACME, 1800-B  
BERKELEY ST., SANTA MONICA. (310)  
264-5818. WED.-SAT. 11 A.M.-6 P.M.  
THROUGH FEB. 3.



By Lisa Anne Auerbach

Safetyville sure is creepy. Everything is scaled down to one-third of normal size, although the dirt, rocks, and saplings appear exceptionally large, the peeling paint on the buildings seems disproportionately big, and the woodgrain looks weird. A solitary cigarette butt is as big as a blunt. The town has a McDonald's and a Denny's, but who would want to eat those tiny burgers? Besides, their plywood facades suggest that nothing's cooking anyway.

Best we forget, it is Safetyville: Road markings are accurate, street signs abundant, and "Call 911" is displayed on civic buildings like a mantra. Safetyville is a real place, near Sacramento, where parents send armies of kids to learn about safety, because, of course, it's safe there. If a child neglects to look both left and right before crossing, he or she won't get creamed by a passing motorist.

Likewise, choosing Safetyville is a prudent strategy for any photographer in search of that perfect subject matter, as it has all the necessary conceptual gut-wrenchers. There's plenty of irony. (It's scary, corporate, and maybe even slightly fascist, and what's so safe about that?) The scaled-down architecture is a downsized simulation of a simulated city — real, but not *really* real. The large (thirty-by-forty-inch) photographs emphasize the point being made about scale.

With all this and more, Miles Coolidge's "Safetyville" is the photo project of a lifetime, the fabled Camelot for a certain breed of contemporary picture-maker. It's both neat and tidy, timely and timeless. This pre-



Miles Coolidge's Commercial Buildings (rear view)

cise perfection threatens to detonate these photographs into a hokey oblivion, but they are rescued by their tenderly caressed colors and sultry beauty. The subject matter is over the top, a seven-layer chocolate strudel that threatens the dessert lover with heartburn, but the work itself manages to bypass the richness and emerge unscathed.

Ultimately, Safetyville, the cockeyed landscape, takes a back seat to Coolidge, a bashful tech wizard with fully loaded semi-automatic pastel super soakers and a dead-on compositional backhand. The fourteen color prints that make up "Safetyville" are mounted behind clear Plexiglas and framed in a dove gray that matches the slightly overcrowded gallery's freshly painted floor.

Each picture takes as its subject matter a building, a group of buildings, or a corner in this constructed landscape. Scale and vantage point do not change much from one print to the next. For the most part, they are photographed from an oblique angle, which shows the bulk of each building, rather than just a facade.

Every picture includes a strip of asphalt road, ranging in color from a light, even gray to a bluish shadowed charcoal, and all are surrounded by clean, white, four-inch borders. The change from image to border is sometimes subtle, but always breathlessly pronounced. The lightest of eggshell stucco buildings or whispery gray skies stops precisely where the paper-white border begins. This movement from picture to

non-picture is absolutely devastating, at once nostalgic, moving, and oddly sad. The page was once all white, then for a moment it held a latent image, and now it's been imbued with a multitude of hues.

It takes discipline to leave room at the edges, rather than hogging all of the photographic material with that important picture. It's a kind of leisure space, gravy, not really necessary, but appreciated nevertheless. Most everything is 100 percent under the control of Maestro Coolidge, but the sneaky rebellious details announce themselves with pride.

After all, what could be more benign, yet enchanting, than all those little sapling leaves moving slightly in the breeze? Staring at the out-of-focus windblown foliage and thinking about that long exposure that gave ample opportunity for the dear young things to squirm around, as if they were unable to sit still for the camera, is a positively weepy experience. (Like Babe, that sweet little piglet, these trees are destined for the ax if they reach maturity. They'll be out of proportion soon, and Safetyville will turn into an overgrown forest.)

Photography, even in this day and age, is still not instantaneous. These moments of movement provide much liveliness to the carefully composed images. Red curbs lose detail in their reproduction and stand out as flat red rectangles. *Commercial Buildings (rear view)* features a vibrant red curb that looks proportionately out of whack, as if it has been pasted onto the finished print. The surface modulation is obliterated by the brightness of the color, which stands out on a print consisting mostly of grays, blues, a dying lawn, and a lazy evergreen. This tree, leaning sleepily against the building, looks like it's resting or maybe puking, or perhaps just dead and waiting for a visit from the Christmas tree recyclers.

There's plenty to say about how Coolidge's project fits neatly into recent photographic and art history, but this digression is a yawn. It's easy (and safe) enough to recognize the baggage, lock the suitcase, and forget it at the airport. It's the pictures that are the woozy temptresses here.