Photographers explore "Landscapes of the Mind"

One of the 70+ exhibitions that were part of October’s regional Festival of Arts photo fest visits around until Jan. 10 – Landscapes of the Mind: Metaphor, Archetype & Symbol at the YWCA Women’s Art Gallery.

It’s worth a look even if you have photo fatigue.

I show three photographs: Nancy Reinhart, Jud Parks and Jane Aden Stevens. The Cincinnati artists used various techniques and cameras and shuffled different subjects all 20-year intervals. But each creates documentary images that go beyond mere representation of reality to deeper meaning.

First, Reinhart’s dewy photographs of small towns and the people who live there comprise a mid-1970s body of work she called a ‘biv’. How ever, the pictures are of Southeastern Ohio where she was living at the time. For her the “sad and drizzly area” contrasted with happier childhood memories of visiting relatives in lowa.

These photographs are the first serious art photography made using a Dene camera. A “passable camera,” Reinhart bought one for a dollar in 1970, and embraced its “defects” – irregular exposures, bent perspectives and warped focus.”

The Dene “could make dream-like, and even ethereal images,” Reinhart explains. “photographed emotions of longing and urgency with a thick and gritty undertow.”

Reinhart’s haunting pictures are about 4 inches square – snapshot size – and their intensity draws you in like “Glora in the Closet, Carpenter, Ohio, 1970,” did me.

Clara is very grandmotherly or at least I used to think of my grandmother until I started seeing filming area.

The stopped woman in their sagging breasts wears a house dress. I imagine her in her tattered dress and lightly perfumed. Standing in her bedroom closet, she looks tired.

“I know,” Clara. I even recognize that antique dresser and the quilt that covers her bed. I bet you “know” her, too.

Jud Parks’ black-and-white photographs from the “City Shadow: Mythic Journey of the Hero” series, made in the 1990s, also record a “sad and gritty” era. But he focused on the urban landscape and social issues plaguing many cities.

Park documented street people and rundown neighborhoods, all very real, but that doesn’t mean they can’t be romantic and manipulative.

How can you not be affected by “Penny and Ralph”? Cradling a dog, a homeless man is asleep with his cheek on a scrawny three pillow.

“Vampire Girl is lighter in tone, verging on the comic. Here are women in evening oversize blouses and an animal stand in front of Mexican Delires at the husband’s exaggerated church door. Two young women with their Hawaiian vampire bangs band look over her flapping shoulders. One smirks menacingly but her partner seems to smile. This is not a hostile takeover.

You can escape the city in Jane Aden Stevens’ recent “Secrets this Land: Told Me.” color photographs of the apple farms of northern Japan and the anonymous people who tend them. The subject sounds mundane but the photos are poetic.

“this landscape spoke to me where none other before,” Stevens explains. “I sang of passion, temptation, fertility and desire. It sighs of death and endings as the seasons turn and, at the same time, the hope of renewal.”

Having read a 1995 article in “The New York Times” about apple growing in Aomori Prefecture, it took until 2010 for Stevens to get grant money and time to undertake this project.

Growing these apples – Fuji is the best-know variety – is
The outer bag is light tight and sometimes soaks open before being removed when the apple matures. The inner bags are translucent wax paper to prevent the fruit from being sunburned. When they are taken off, the apple turns red within 24-36 hours.

In Red Inner Bag #1, Fall, 2010, Stevens has photographed a bag, which looks like a tulip against a field of green grass. Although it has a simple, almost sublime beauty, the discarded bag served an essential purpose and will be burned with trimmed branches and leaves to replenish the earth.

Each of the artists approached the exhibition’s themes of metaphor, archetype and symbol through their own personal lenses, and then invited us into their worlds.