

John Opera

ANDREW RAFACZ GALLERY

835 West Washington,

September 5–October 11

In his new body of work, the Chicago-based photographer John Opera skillfully and conspicuously leaps from landscape to abstract photography. When creating works in the former category, Opera nearly takes an ironic jab at the genre's tropes but ultimately smartly reworks his references, particularly in the show's centerpiece, *Zoar*, 2006–2008. Shot from across a meandering stream at Zoar Valley in upstate New York, the artist captures a solitary man—a hippie, perhaps—with his shirt off and his hair long and tousled, sitting next to a fire while peacefully smoking a joint. The piece alludes to the biblical story of Zoar—the city God spared while destroying its four neighbors, including Sodom and Gomorrah—and specifically suggests a lone man's evasion of apocalyptic doom. As such, Opera captures both a moment of salvation and a figure completely unaware of his own mammoth importance as a survivor of divine wrath. The piece provides a much-needed break from the recent proliferation of art that addresses end-time fears. Opera continues his trek through the forest with *Meadow*, 2007, a larger-scale photograph of a severed, phallic tree trunk poking up through an open green space; the artist slyly pairs this piece with *Forest*, 2008, in which a passageway through trees curls into a concave, vaginal-looking tunnel that leads deeper into never-ending wooded territory. Nearby, a duo of unrecognizable images of blackout curtains, each created with an eight-hour exposure, seems to revoke the representational interests of the softer landscape photographs. The two abstract experiments with light and color look like slices of the starry night sky, adding a delicate, minimalist edge to the exhibition.

— Alicia Eler



John Opera, *Zoar*, 2006–2008, color photograph, 46 x 59".