

Art review: Experimental photography on display in joint exhibits at MECA

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By Jorge S. Arango

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Installation of “Tory Fair: Portable Window” at Maine College of Art. *Photo by Joel Tsui*

The most universal experience of the COVID pandemic has been one of waiting: waiting for the chance to touch each other again, for test results to relieve or affirm our dread, for restaurants to reopen and life to resume, for a vaccine, for it all to be over. We wait inside our homes peering out our windows at the landscape, or through the “window” of a computer screen on endless Zoom calls that look into the landscapes of other people’s lives.

IF YOU GO

WHAT: “Tory Fair: Portable Window” and “Parallax/Geography”

WHERE: Institute of Contemporary Art at Maine College of Art, 522 Congress St., Portland

WHEN: Through Feb. 28

HOURS: Noon to 5 p.m. Wednesday through Sunday

ADMISSION: Free

INFO: (800) 639-4808, meca.edu

A joint exhibition at the Institute of Contemporary Art at Maine College of Art – “Tory Fair: Portable Window” and “Parallax/Geography” (through Feb. 28) – plumbs the longing and emotional vagaries of this sense of stasis through the lens of photography, offering new takes on landscape as viewed through the camera frame. Don’t expect traditional images. The artists employ a panoply of analog and experimental photographic techniques and aesthetic approaches to evoke something more interior, and at times transcendent, than our enforced current-day voyeurism.

Boston-area artist Tory Fair was inspired by the work of ecofeminist artist Mary Miss, whose installations and sculptures, often interactive, sought to connect viewers to the landscape so they might reclaim it or contemplate how it figured in their lives. Fair reimagined Miss’s “Portable Window” of 1968 into an enormous plywood wheel resembling a large cable spool that could be rolled through neighborhoods and landscapes. A camera attached to one flange of the spool captures images through a window carved into the other flange on the opposite side of the central barrel.

The resulting videos and stills frame views that are constantly changing. The rolling device (also on exhibit here as sculpture) turns the world literally upside down and sideways. It’s an apt metaphor for a year that saw the constant spinning of “truth” and the movement to upend our stubbornly intransigent socio-political status quo. A miniature portable window on a track allows viewers to create their own topsy turvy visual record of Congress Street with their phones.

In the second, larger show, artists employ techniques that are complex and innovative and, unfortunately, not explained on wall plaques (though the artists’ statements are posted). This means that works can be indecipherable, which may madden some viewers while intriguing others. The plaques’ mention of the type of photo paper used in Amanda Marchand’s images, for instance, will simply confound most people. It is meaningless except to photography students and professionals who understand that each kind of paper has a specific chroma (purity and saturation of color) that Marchand exploits by allowing or limiting its access to light.



Tad Beck, “Lovell-08.28.18” from the series “Blanks”, 2018, 24 x 24 inches, Archival Inkjet Print. *Image courtesy of the artist and Grant Walquist Gallery, Portland*

Of course, these works can be enjoyed simply for their aesthetics and the emotional responses they elicit. A beautiful case in point are four “Blanks” by Vinalhaven artist Tad Beck. There is something dreamy and ethereal about these photographs that we can intuit at a visceral level without knowing a thing about how they are made. Yet understanding Beck’s process, at least for me, greatly deepens the lyricism of (and my admiration for) these works.

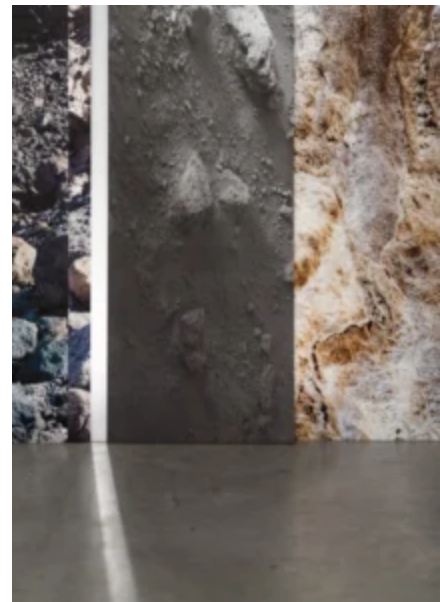
Beck often employs re-photographing to expand the limits of the camera, which conventionally freezes only a single moment in time. For these, he explained in an e-mail: “The series is entitled ‘Blanks,’ because the original subject is a blank piece of glossy photo paper. I am aiming the camera at the blank paper and capturing the reflections on it. I then

make a print of that photograph and aim the camera at that, which results in reflections layering on top of reflections. I repeat these steps until a new abstract space is created in the photograph. Each piece is made in a specific space and in one day.” Beck lays glass over the photo paper to heighten the reflections, and sometimes sprays white paint onto it to create still more layers.

We can discern windows and even buildings in some “Blanks.” But they mostly appear as blurry, enigmatic images in the process of coming into focus. Beck is inspired by experimental composer Alvin Lucier, whose sound works seek to capture the resonance of a space. Knowing all this, and the technique Beck deploys, suddenly reveals them to be sublime meditations on light and the passage of time. And yes, they capture the ephemeral atmospheric feel of the room, which a conventional photo simply could not.

Sage Lewis’s quasi-sculptural pieces also aim for something beyond mere representation. Each brings together images culled from different landscapes. A single work will juxtapose pictures of the Mojave Desert, Death Valley’s Ubuhebe Crater and Amargosa Range, and Chryse Planitia, an equatorial mountain range on Mars. (The latter come from reels of silver gelatin prints taken in the 1970s by Viking Landers.) Essentially, Lewis, who splits her time between Vermont and New York, is visually exploiting geological synchronies between Earth and other planets.

The eerie otherworldliness of these inhospitable terrains creates a disorientation that Lewis magnifies by mounting the horizontal images onto board and leaning them vertically against the wall. The world is literally turned on-end. Yet, at another level, the similarities between earthly and Martian topographies convey the interconnectedness of all things and all worlds.



A detail of “Grounded Lightbox No. 2” by Sage Lewis. *Photo by Joel Tsui*

My favorite Elizabeth Atterbury photos use strips of corrugated cardboard to conjure M.C. Escher-like compositions that make us question what is coming to the surface and what is receding from the picture plane. The cardboard forms complex networks and shadows, which she likens to the evolution and transformation of language (both visual and verbal). The Portland artist is primarily a sculptor, and that sense is palpable here, as well as in “Black Beach,” a photo of what looks like carved pieces of black foam arranged in sand.



Elizabeth Atterbury, "Logogram I," 2016 silver gelatin print, 20 x 24 inches *Image courtesy of the artist and Document Space, Chicago*

And then there is New York artist Marchand. "Timeline (Dusk)" and "Timeline (Sunset)" look like nothing so much as paint swatch strips from a hardware store, but in blown-up proportion. Fascinatingly, however, they actually chart the ascent and descent of sunlight, which she records by exposing sections of photo paper to that light intermittently a few minutes apart, basically "burning" the particular gradations of light into the paper. Inspired

by literature, she does the same in “Event Horizon (Violet),” this time using a book to progressively block exposure of paper to light diagonally across the image. There is digital photography involved as well, but in the absence of explanation, I’m not quite sure where it comes in.

Photography has clearly come a long way since Louis Daguerre. But, like him, these artists are pioneers of the medium whose exciting work is consistently groundbreaking.

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