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"Surface Tension" at Center for Photography at Woodstock

Still Waters Run Deep

by **Faheem Haider**, May 30, 2012



Brea Souders, "Sunburn in Naples" 2010

The Center for Photography at Woodstock's (CPW) excellent new group exhibition, "Surface Tension," is bursting at the seams. Curators Ariel Shanberg and Akemi Hiatt fiercely unpack the proposition that photography is an inherently process-oriented, experimental, and aggressively unpredictable medium whose most interesting practitioners are now hyperaware of the exciting possibilities that abound when known orthodoxies are thrown out the window, turns defined as either right or wrong are rejected and obsolescence and failure embraced. Photography, there, is just something to which something else is done.

The show riffs on the currents that roiled painting in the 20th century, the movement we call Modernism that later mutated into the end-of-life hand-wringing we call post-modernism. Like the ragged and sometimes overwhelming history of painting—from figuration to grids and gestures to silkscreens and back again—the work at CPW asks whether the mumbled reports of the death of photography caused by digital everything can be used to derive new trajectories for the medium. The answer, the work on display suggests: yes!

Consider Christopher Colville's set of photograms made by setting off fireworks directly on photo paper. The work, its own remainder, is graceful and quiet in the way that, after an explosion, shrapnel and refuse and jagged detritus become objects of grace and contemplation. Klea McKenna's warm-red installation of photo paper exposed to a day's sunlight at an anti-aircraft lookout post in California and then folded into paper planes functions as the measure of that day. Invite a strained neck as you alternately take in Matthew Brandt's pooled embodiment of landscape and process and Marisa Baumgartner's site-specific wall installation. And that's just what you'll see within the first 20 seconds after stepping foot inside.

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Doppelgänger:01.16.07, 2007 by Cornelia Hediger.

Parting Shot

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"Upstate" New York through the eyes of a Cuban photographer. Carlos Loret de Mola's photographs will be on display through May 30 at the Center for Photography at Woodstock.

Local Luminary: Ariel Shanberg

September, 2007

September's Local Luminary, Ariel Shanberg.

And that's to the show's advantage. There's no requisite approach to photography on display here; rather, the work is the result of well-thought-out experiments that have more substance than the conceits of conceptualism. So take it all in and let the work jostle in your mind.

The more formal work on display is engrossing: Alison Rossiter's elegant, elegiac pours on expired photo paper as old as modernism itself riffs on photography's loaded history. Aspen Mays's pictures of stars are literally punched out punch-outs, a nice nod to our final comeuppance. The two broadly conceptual works on display that take off where the formal work takes a bow needs more room to breathe. Still, you'll want to pay attention to what Joseph Heidecker has to say about the "art" versus "craft," "found" versus "appropriation" models of image making. Paul Mpagi Sepuya's work twins his studio practice and literally has to be experienced for it to be seen.

CPW's other gallery holds its own stash of beauty. Consider Brea Souder's work. It toes a very thin line between photorealism's shtick and the pictorial tornado of collage and constructivism. And I dare you to deny that Meghan Flaherty's work about the studio practices that define and cage an artist looks like photographs of Cy Twombly's paintings. Mark Lyon (whose work appeared on the May 2010 cover of *Chronogram*) brings the banal photo wallpaper back into the discourse of the beautiful. I tell you painters will have a ball at this show.

"Surface Tension" is best experienced slowly or during repeat visits. I know; I've seen it twice. My advice? Approach it with open arms and a well-appetized mind. Don't think about your Weegees or Westons as you stride across CPW's threshold. Hold neither Kertesz nor Capa close to your heart. Ansel Adams? Bite your tongue! Think Mondrian and Frankenthaler and, maybe, LeWitt. And then, while looking at the work, think again.

"Surface Tension" is on view through June 24 at the Center for Photography at Woodstock.
(845) 679-9957; Cpw.org.