

ALTMAN SIEGEL

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art press

The Movement of Memory An Interview with Sara VanDerBeek

By Etienne Hatt
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Installation view, Hammer Museum, Los Angeles, 2011

Etienne Hatt: Does « abstraction » make sense in photography, generally speaking, and in your work?

Sara VanDerBeek: I visited an incredible archive recently at the University of Texas, Austin that has a significant photographic collection including what is considered to be the first photograph by Niepce. I was there to look over a number of early salt prints by William Henry Fox Talbot as well as a small group of manuscripts by EE Cummings. The images were gauzy, and ghost-like. Things were not fully legible at first, nothing was immediate, the forms, the subject, and the spaces depicted arose slowly to the surface and I began to think about how at its foundations – such as the fixing of light or the framing of the world – photography is inherently abstract. Abstraction and/or the abstracting of a subject is innate to the photographic process even if it is the sharpest, largest most legible digital image possible such as the one released recently by NASA of Andromeda. The question of abstraction is challenging. I enjoy it because it pushes me to consider further what is involved in the act of creating a photograph. I consider abstraction's different

definitions in relationship to my work, and probably lean most towards the idea of an image as an abstract of a larger whole. I am less interested in defining a stance on abstraction than in considering how an image can reach a balance of the actual and the imagined.



Installation view, Metro Pictures, New York, 2013

EH: In recent shows such as a solo show at Metro Picture in 2013 or Ancient Objects, Still Lives at Altman Siegel in 2014 you exhibited together representational (for instance ancient sculptures) and non-representational pictures. All of them had not naturalistic colors. Are manipulated colors a mean to reach this balance of the actual and the imagined?

SV: Color, and manipulating certain colors within my prints was especially important for the two projects you have mentioned. I work with the existing or ambient light for most situations I photograph including when I work in the studio. When photographing the ancient figures in Europe, many of the collections in which they were displayed had mixed lighting so I was able to remove the yellow from the display lighting during printing to push the sculptures to a pink tone reminiscent of what I imagined was their original polychromatic state. In doing this, my hope was that my photographic image would rest simultaneously between multiple states of being. It was captured in the present, and created using a mix of contemporary film and digital imaging practices to emulate something ancient. I was also interested in the photographs resting somewhere between image and object. I saw the original painting of the ancient sculptures as an act of communication – of ideals, and of reverence – drawn out on marble bodies that have since been dispersed throughout the world in their physical form and through a multitude of depictions over the course of thousands of years.

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Installation view, *Ancient Objects, Still Lives*, Altman Siegel, San Francisco, 2014

The images in *Ancient Objects, Still Lives* were created in response to my work in South America with the fascinating pre-Columbian collection at Casa del Alabado in Quito. I had a similar intention to conflate multiple times/experiences at once. Additionally the coloring within these images was inspired in part by the vibrant textiles and architectural details I experienced during my time in Ecuador. More importantly within two works, *Ancient Solstice* and *Shift*, the bright flare of pink was meant to speak to the other states of consciousness in which many of the ritual objects I was studying were meant to aid or guide their user towards. I also saw this flare as symbolic of the great change that occurred within the pre-Columbian world with the arrival of European colonists. The color is like a rupture, a mark of an event flashing across the structures.

EH: How would you define your connection to Barbara Kasten's work?

SV: I admire Barbara Kasten's work immensely and equally I am inspired by her practice and her continued experimentation with various forms of photographic capture, printing, installation and performance. I especially enjoy her recent works *Scene* and *Studio Constructs*. Glass, mirrors, light, and screens accumulate into these compelling compositions of actual things – you can tell these are objects creating the patterns shapes, and shadows – yet the final resulting images feel more mythical or deeply internal like depictions of a psychological space. Or perhaps to say it more succinctly, the images feel elemental. They remind me of Talbot's salt prints in their simplicity of recording light, shadow and form but they are dynamic with sometimes jagged edges and scratched surfaces that speak very much to a contemporary existence. It is one most likely lived in a city filled with fractured planes. Her recent images speak of the fragmented lives

we live now yet they also recall earlier histories. Within Barbara Kasten's work there is a sense of a continuum, a connection to the past and a reflection of the present. I connect to this. In many of her still lives, there is an incredible attention to detail, every element feels deeply considered and composed yet there is also a great sense of movement and freedom – and again experimentation that I admire greatly. I hope to achieve a similar result within the photographic images I create as well as the overall installation of images and objects within an exhibition space.

EH: How would you explain you enlarged your practice by combining prints and sculptures? What are the spatial and phenomenological relations you are looking for with these combinations?

SV: I studied at a school that encouraged a cross-disciplinary approach to art and worked under some teachers who had studied under Bauhaus professors. I admire the Bauhaus as well as other modernist movements and schools such as Black Mountain College for their attempts to integrate various ways of working into a more total and expansive practice. I think this has had a continued impact on my practice. I began making images by creating assemblages that were mixes of materials and found imagery. There was a performative aspect to this process in that they were created for the camera and then destroyed – they were also made with the camera's perspective in mind. The studio table became in some ways like a small theater and the works were theatrical in ways with strong lighting and bright colors of late 20th century reproductions.

I think a lot about time as well as language and in particular poetry and how my practice could emulate a poet's economic use of language, as well as their intent consideration of structure, phrasing and rhythm. Poetry is also a very acute observation of the world. My most recent projects have been working in response to a particular place or experience. I am very much grounded in the studio but often go outside of it to begin a project. I photograph a large number of images and bring those images back into the studio to work from – some become inspirations for sculptures and others become final images.

I think my interest in creating arrangements of images and objects in an exhibition space is an attempt at transposing my original experience as well as that within the studio -mixed with an interest in poetry and performance – to create a final resulting installation that is again somewhere between the actual and the

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imagined. I mention poetry because I would like the movement between the images and the objects to be focused and considered like a phrase in a poem. And also like poetry, I would like my work to encourage observation and to cause the viewer to think about observation, experience, memory, time and being in the present.

EH: Your next main show will open in Baltimore (Baltimore Museum of Art, April 12-September 2015). Does the city where you were born belong to the particular places you just mentioned? How will the city appear in the show?

SV: Yes, it is a city in transition and it has been interesting and moving to revisit Baltimore having moved away from it nearly 20 years ago. There are constants and there are elements of significant change. Sometimes as I was going around the city it felt as though I was navigating a dream.

The city will appear through certain reoccurring materials such as marble and concrete that overlap between the sculptures and the photographs that will be on view. Mixed into this will be images of dancers that I am revisiting from an earlier project I captured in Baltimore three years ago. I have been inspired recently by dance and minimalism and was interested in drawing a connection between found movement and found materials in my exhibition after finding *Minimal Art: A Critical Anthology* edited by Gregory Battcock in Baltimore during one of my trips in which Yvonne Rainer published her well known text "A Quasi-Survey of some Minimalist Tendencies in the Quantitatively Minimal Dance Activity Midst the Plethora, or an Analysis of Trio A".

Overall the installation will be loosely arranged around an idea of staging or interpreting the movement of memory – as a distillation of the chance, process, physicality, reflection and recollection involved in the creation of the exhibition.

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