

BLOUIN ARTINFO

Dafoe, Taylor, "Elusive, Illusory: Q&A with Sara VanDerBeek," *Blouin Artinfo*, September 22, 2016

Sara VanDerBeek has always worked in the interstices between mediums. Previously, it was the gap between photography and sculpture that she focused on, often building and photographing sculptural objects, then abstracting the image. In recent years, she's added textiles to the mix.



Sara VanDerBeek "Pieced Quilts, Wrapped Forms," 2016

In her great new show, "Pieced Quilts, Wrapped Forms," on view at Metro Pictures through October 29, 2016, VanDerBeek's interest in textiles is at the forefront of her work. The show is divided into two sections. In the first, she presents a series of abstract photographs that adopt the vernacular of textile making in their exploration of geometric patterns, and physical and conceptual weaving. Through printing, VanDerBeek repeatedly layers her images, a process that adds dimensionality to the print, yet dissolves the planar distinctions in the image itself. In several works in the show, the print is wrapped around its substrate — yet another reference to textiles — and collaged with other images.

The second section collects a series of concrete, plaster, and wood sculptures that she's created over the last several years, but never shown. Totemic and modular, the sculptures call to mind the Minimalists — specifically the work of Anne Truitt, a major

influence for VanDerBeek. But the sculptures are familiar for another reason, their shapes having appeared in various (often smaller) forms in many of VanDerBeek's own photos. Tying up the conversation among mediums, she wraps several of the sculptures in her own textile designs, created by printing photographic images on fabric.

In advance of the opening, VanDerBeek sat down with Artinfo to discuss the new work, her recent research experiences, and her interest in collapsing the distance between "real" and "imagined" images.



Sara VanDerBeek "Pieced Quilts, Wrapped Forms," 2016

When I read that your new show, "Pieced Quilts, Wrapped Forms" was influenced by textile- and quilt-making, I started to think about how much your work already had a textile-like quality to it. There's a lot of layering involved, be it physical layering through overlapping printing processes, or conceptual layering through art historical references or the gesture of re-photographing. There's also weaving —

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the weaving of analogue and digital production techniques, photography and sculpture, and so on. Did your interest in textiles emerge from photography, or was it the other way around?

Based on past and recent research experiences, particularly during my time working with the Dunton Quilting Collection at the Baltimore Museum of Art, and the Joseph and Anni Albers Foundation I began to see that within these textile works was a meeting of form, material, image, object, and geometry. But also, at times, amongst the various pieces there would be a dynamic break from the structural patterns of their construction. It was a great meeting of all these different elements that I have been interested in for some time. For me, the practices of weaving and piecing together quilts are connected to photography in that they are all evolving technologies that are based in historical practices but are continually being adapted to contemporary materials and existences.



Sara VanDerBeek "Pieced Quilts, Wrapped Forms," 2016

In regard to the weaving together of digital and more traditional practices, the works in this show, probably more than any others, are embracing the strengths of both. I photograph using film and daylight, and I scan those negatives, but then, working very closely with

my photographic printer Julie Pochron of Pochron Studios, we create the final colors through an amalgam of chromogenic and digital processes, by using Photoshop and some darkroom techniques to push the color spectrum that is in the natural light captured by the film. We try to maintain the gradients and variation of color found within the singular images of the sculptures I photographed once they were then layered into the patterns that formed the larger compositions. Simultaneously, the color of each image is being worked throughout the printing process. We revise it several times; it's not a single pass but a continually evolving process up to the final printing. Often it begins in one place and then shifts. I enjoy this change, because it becomes a collaborative process as well. I think that ties it to quilt making — there can be many individuals involved in creating a quilt.



Sara VanDerBeek "Pieced Quilts, Wrapped Forms," 2016

There are elements of the original sculptural object within the final images as well, and so I think of these images as being a meeting of the actual and the imagined too. There is an actual object — it has depth and form and creates these shadows — but then through the capturing of it or the layering of it, the object begins to transform and change. With these works, I pushed that process so that the objects begin to shift within our sense of what

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is actual, what is spatial, what is color, pattern, and shadow.

I've heard you talk about the actual and the imagined before. Through your printing process, the object you're photographing begins to dissolve and merge with the background — it becomes illusory. In your 2015 photo "Crepuscule," for instance, it's hard to tell where the object ends and the background begins. What is your interest in collapsing those two aspects of the image, the actual and the imagined?



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My interest in that is the question of whether or not you can create an image that is continually shifting. An image that isn't so concretely defined but that, even when fixed

and framed and layered and set, contains aspects that are always changing. How can you do that with photography, which is more traditionally about a decisive moment of capture? I think that illusiveness has a lot to do with experience. I'm trying to translate to the viewer that sense of how your experience of something is always evolving. For me it's similar to the way we think about memories and how they shift and change over time. "Crepuscule," a work I made recently and which is related to these works in the show came out of e.e. cummings's poetry. I was studying his poetry and the various stages of his manuscripts thinking about how his work translates his experiences into this beautiful, succinct — but also abstract and layered — language. I think often about how photography can emulate a poetic practice, which, to me, is about acute observation and looking at the world, but leaving it open enough so that the viewer can come at it from different angles. I'm interested in that moment when something comes to coalesce for an instant, then just as quickly dissipates back into the atmosphere. With this work there are elements of that, but there are also more hard edges and cuts involved in their layering that were made in reference to the sometimes collage-like quality of pieced quilts.

What about the color of the works? In the past you've overlaid blue and pink pieces of Plexiglas on your photographs, which invoked cyanotypes and other forms of early prints, as well as the hues of the film itself. But with these works, it doesn't seem like those same references are necessarily at play. Why is it important for you to work within the same blue-to-pink color spectrum?

It's something I think about a lot because I'm continually drawn to those colors. For me, they represent the transitional moments at the

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beginning and the end of the day. All those colors meet at those times— you have hot pinks and yellows coming in at the beginning of the day, and then you have that pink-blue crepuscular mix at the end of the day. These are both moments of transition. I primarily photograph more towards the end of the day because I like the colors of the light then and the way in which shadows turn blue at dusk. A lot of the examples of quilts and textiles I saw in my research were also within that color spectrum — perhaps I sought them out. For example “Camino Real,” in this show — the color pallet and composition for that work was inspired by an Anni Albers weaving which is made of pinks and reds, and was originally commissioned by Luis Barragan for a hotel in Mexico City. I adopted Albers’s title to provide a direct connection to that piece.



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The piece in the center of the show, “Labyrinth” is made of two parts and is inspired by a passage in “American Patchwork Quilts” by Lenice Ingram Bacon that describes what was considered the height of quilt-making in the 1800s, which were white-on-white quilts. It intrigued me because many of my sculptural forms explore this same layering of white on white. The passage talks about how the quilts became very much like labyrinthine reliefs because of the subtle relief between the

stitched white layers. Sometimes though, at the outer border, some practitioners would insert a different color. I was interested in that slight disruption of the pattern, but wanted it to be subtle, so I used the pink that was occurring within the shadows of the larger pattern.

Learning of the white quilts was intriguing to me because you think so much of quilts being about strong color, but over time many have faded and often turn more muted and subtle in their mix of colors — that’s where the softer pallets and tones come from here. I hope that the colors also emphasize the sometimes temporal or fleeting nature of these works. For this show, I also thought about the movement of light throughout the day as the works are arranged in the gallery. Within the show, the works move gradually from colors referencing the beginnings of the day, to bright midday light, to a dusky color spectrum, and then end with the deep blue of night.

I am quite excited that there’s some yellow coming into these works.

Radical. [Laughs.]

For me, it is! [Laughs.] I’m excited to explore it more.

With your photographic-based work, you often exaggerate the objecthood of the print. Even more so with some of these new works, which are collaged — the photographs are actually three-dimensional or sculptural, in a sense. Do you think your sculptures or textiles are photographic in any way?

I come at all my work through photography in a way, so I’m very interested in that moment when objects and space begin to take on photographic qualities. Shifting planes can collapse and create different perspectives. I think a lot about the arrangement of the

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objects in an exhibition space and that comes from my practice of arranging these objects when I'm photographing them. With the sculptures, particularly with the cast concrete works and their pigments and textures, they have within them physical references to some of the original ceramic and cast forms I was also looking at during my research. Their materiality is different to that of the photographs, which is important. In some ways they recall original moments of inspiration when I am photographing or researching at a site, but they are also about translation and abstraction, which the photographs are about too.

With this exhibition, I'm showing more sculptures than I've ever shown before. It's a kind of collection and accumulation of forms that I've been exploring for several years now. Some of them have been made recently and are in direct connection to the particular patterns found in quilts. It was exciting for me to bring together all of these different elements and see them in the one space together and think about the relationship between the objects and the images that I create and how they inform and impact each other. In some ways the sculptures become echoes — or casts, in a way — of the photographs, and in other ways they are the starting point and the initial source that creates the images. But it is important to clarify that none of the objects that are being shown are the things that I've used to make the photographs. They are definitely related in shape and form but are created at a different scale because they are intended to be experienced in person.

Why is that important for you, not to show the works you've photographed alongside the photos they appear in?

I'm interested in how photography changes your sense of scale of time and space, but I'm

not so interested in creating a didactic system of references between object and image. I like the more open and loose set of connections in a memory of a particular object. I enjoy the curiosity and mystery that an image of an object can create, as well as that sense of transformation. And a sense of the illusory — I liked your use of that word — and the illusive that comes along with photographic processes.

For me, your work often dramatizes the illusory qualities that are embedded in photography, which we tend to take for granted.

I recently did research at the Ransom Center in Austin, Texas which has an extensive William Henry Fox Talbot collection. A lot of Fox Talbot's salt prints have this beautiful, purplish-blue mix that I call upon a lot in my own work. These early images ratified my sense that, at the foundations of this medium, there is a complex mix of illusion, abstraction, and observation. Talbot's prints are detailed rendering of things from the world — he was making contact prints of objects in some cases — but what was being printed and depicted was often melding with the larger atmosphere of his images. I think that's really quiet a fascinating and strong aspect of photography, that it is so elastic, and expansive. It is an inclusive medium, involving many different practices and practitioners; it can be a concrete, decisive movement, a depiction of something, but it can also be incredibly abstract or illusive, and it can be all these things at once. For me, it's the images that are a combination of both — the actual and the imagined — that are the most compelling.

I think photography is the medium of our time. We are in a moment that's not very fixed, that is continually changing. Photography's presence now via cellphone cameras and our

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continuous use of this technology that is increasingly being woven into every aspect of our lives is fascinating. I don't think the omnipresence of pictures diminishes the power of photography or photographic images; I think it strengthens it. The ubiquity of images now, and our frequent and intensive use of images to communicate, is incredibly exciting. It empowers the medium.