



ART PRACTICAL
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Stay Home

Will Rogan
Sep 10 - Nov 06
Altman Siegel Gallery
by Patricia Maloney



Can, 2010; gelatin silver print; 16 x 20 in. Courtesy of the Artist and Altman Siegel Gallery, San Francisco.

Stay Home, Will Rogan's current exhibition at Altman Siegel Gallery, tantalizingly suggests the balance that sometimes must be struck between visual information and conceptual intent. The gelatin silver prints and small sculptures on view examine loss and obsolescence and the futile attempt to stem off either over time. They create a careful correspondence between photography's presumed capacity to preserve and a magician's feigned control over the material world—his ability to make an object disappear at will. The exhibition itself is an exercise in illusion—a reverse sleight of hand in which we are presented with absence and must conjure what is missing.

Rogan has not given one much to look at; the wry and poignant humor that accumulates from looking at the exhibition as a whole is hard to tease out from individual photographs. Most of the colors fall within the middle range of gray tones; the images are plain and diffused, with little contrast or depth of field. Taking in the exhibition at a glance, the eye goes to those works that possess strong blacks: an image of a garden hose asymmetrically looped around two hooks; small stacked blocks resting on pedestals in the middle of the room.

The artist deliberately withholds, even eradicates, imagery. Instead, Rogan proffers subtle talismans to convey his intentions: a soda can; a building façade; an outdated volume from a 1966 *Time-Life* series on the universe. There are three photographs of the book in the exhibition; in each, it is open to a double-page spread of text and full-bleed images. In the first, *Viewing the Past As It Happens* (all works, 2010), the opening line of text identifies both the title's source and a

key to the show: "The astronomer has a unique privilege among scientists: he can actually see the past happening." Culturally, it's been long assumed that we, too, can see the past unfold through the vast photographic record of events and people, that an image captures the intention and meaning at the point of occurrence. Here, Rogan suggests that photography has a more slipshod grasp on the past than we'd like to believe. Regardless of how long an image may endure, the subject invariably loses its relevance to the present.

This point is particularly driven home by Rogan's sculptural objects, which are comprised of between two and four thin, rectangular wooden slabs painted black on one side, with a photograph of an artist pasted on the other. Rogan took the images from exhibition catalogues de-accessioned by the San Francisco Art Institute library. Discarded from the archives, these artists with once-promising careers are now diminished in significance to the point of obscurity. The blocks can be reconfigured, shuffled like a deck of cards; as arranged in the gallery, their faces and any identifying clues were obstructed. Here again, the sculptures' titles drive home the works' intentions: *Mediums* suggests both a seer—someone capable of divining the influence of the past on the events of the future—and the transference of meaning from person to object.

Such transference is more apparent in *Busts*, a series of altered magazine pages. Rogan erased the covers from six issues of *M-U-M (Magic Unity Might)*, a trade publication for magicians, removing everything but the outline of the featured magician's profile. While the particular role each has played in their profession's history is lost, the tilt of head and posture suggests the gravity and weight universal to portraits of those in power. We don't need to recognize the individual's accomplishments as long as we can see the form by which those achievements are conveyed.

However, in an almost reverse gesture, the gelatin silver print *Can* elevates the insignificant to totemic. A discarded soda can resting at the corner of a weed-choked curb catches the light and becomes a glowing, ethereal object, intended to be overlooked by all except those who might understand its potency—in other words, a magic object. Similarly, in *The Floor*, a plastic googly eye stares up from the matted carpet on which it lays, as the unnoticed observer that sees all. *Can* and *The Floor* are intersecting points in the show's constellation of images, transferring their power to a viewer. Because the viewer is the only person fully visible in the room, she becomes the omnipotent presence that designates what is significant. These images also interject a sense of whimsy, alleviating any melancholic contemplation on the inevitability of loss.



Mediums 4 (II), 2010; paper, wood, beeswax; dimensions variable. Courtesy of the Artist and Altman Siegel Gallery, San Francisco.

ALTMAN SIEGEL
GALLERY S/F

49 GEARY ST, STE. 416 [4th floor] SAN FRANCISCO, CA 94108
tel: 415.576.9300 fax: 415.373.4471 // // // // // ALTMAN SIEGEL.COM

But Rogan's sleight of hand eventually returns our illusions—our magicians' powers—to us. Across from *Can* hangs *Shredder*, which depicts the façade of a document-shredding business. The sign hanging next to the entrance informs one of its services: "Document Destruction—*While You Wait*." Through the presence of a machine that necessarily creates absence, Rogan makes it clear that we don't have to wait for the march of time to determine what remains relevant. If the future portends only obscurity, why not take control of the process? With so much effort given to making things visible in the world, *Stay Home* suggests it's also comforting to know that we can make them vanish on our own terms.

***Stay Home* is on view at [Altman Siegel Gallery](#), in San Francisco, through November 6, 2010.**