

Emilie Halpern

Anna Helwing Gallery, Culver City, CA

April 15- May 20, 2006



Emilie Halpern, *No End*, 2006, 7 C-Prints, 13 x 19 inches each.

In her second solo show at Anna Helwing, "White Nights," Emilie Halpern engages the convergence between the sciences, communication, and perceptual vulnerability on both cosmic and microcosmic scale. The subtle power of Halpern's work comes from its ability to tweak our perception of the commonplace, highlighting the charged emotionality at play between imperceptible forces- gravity, memory, desire- and concrete observation.

In her short DVD *Magicienne* (all work 2006), Halpern is seen momentarily levitating over a narrow-wooded path in an urban park. But instead of using focused meditation to combat the forces literally pulling her down, the artist faked the phenomenon by placing a large mirror between her legs. Conflating the conjured with the real, the viewer is left with conflicting emotions of awe, calculation, and eventual disillusionment. Suggesting that optical fakery may be as worthy of consideration as the material transcendence of natural laws, our admiration for this work is directly proportional to the time taken for the shady realization of artifice to sink in.

Especially disarming, in *No End*, is the play between critical distance (or at least the appearance of it) and meteorological legerdemain. This work purports to illustrate the phenomenon known as "white nights", that period of the year when the arctic sun never sets below the horizon, blurring one day into the next. Presented as a series of photographs lined up along the gallery wall, we witness the progression of the sun down toward the horizon and then back up again. But like most of Halpern's work, this too is counterfeit, depicting the ocean off Los Angeles rather than the frozen north (or south) where the phenomenon occurs. What could easily be a textbook illustration quickly morphs into fantastic fakery when we notice that the ocean waves are identical in all seven photographs.

Most of "White Nights" is so self-effacing that you really have to get close up and personal to delve behind the surface. A good example of this is *Heartbeat*, which is simply a spot-lit blank wall with a speaker behind it emitting the sounds of a human heart: for those who linger, the beat gradually rises and races to hummingbird speed. With *Lightning*, the large-scale white tendrils streaking down from the gallery rafters at once offer straightforward evocations of natural similitude and fold out the implication of our own passivity regarding the event or claim of sublimity.

Ultimately, one is left with the feeling that Halpern is gently toying with us. Inconstancy is everywhere in her show, from static lightning bolts to images of dead stars illuminating an unmade bed. The artist offers glimpses of fantastic possibilities while simultaneously alerting us to the harsh limitations of our shared perception.

- Brendan Threadgill