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ART REVIEW

Ambiguity is essence of 'Beyond Image'

The interplay of perceptions takes many forms in a Pasadena photo exhibit of 10 primarily young artists.



A teardrop slides down the cheek of a black-and-white still picture of a woman's face in a work by Emilie Halpern, part of "Beyond Image: Photography in Contemporary Art." (Emilie Halpern)

In a short DVD in the show "Beyond Image: Photography in Contemporary Art," the camera fixes on a black-and-white still picture of a woman's face in profile. Her eyes are cast down, possibly shut, and her lips are slightly parted. Slowly, a drop of water rolls down the print in the manner of a tear, from eye to mouth. After a short interval, another drop follows, and another, each leaving a damp track across the photographed cheek.

The absorbing work, by Emilie Halpern, brings to mind Man Ray's famous close-up of a face dotted with glass teardrops. It packs a visual pun and conceptual conundrum into a small, spare package, with no sound, no color, no frills. The transient tear draws a vanishing trail upon an unchanging

face; stillness and motion wed with the same aplomb as the real and the represented. And yet the tear isn't real either, but a drop of water representing a tear.

The strongest entries in "Beyond Image," at the Armory Center for the Arts in Pasadena, strike at just these rich, vulnerable intersections, where differing modes of perception collide, converge, collaborate and contradict. Curator Elise Barclay has gathered 10 artists, most of them recent master of fine arts graduates from schools in the area. Each engages photography as an adjunct of ordinary vision, an extension or manipulation of ordinary sight.

For as long as photographs have been made, they've been doctored, enhanced, manipulated and altered. These recent variants don't take us "beyond" the medium or the image, but in the best cases, more deeply into the wonderfully ambiguous nature of representation.

— Leah Ollman