

Ollman, Leah, "Ambiguity is the essence of 'Beyond Image'", *Los Angeles Times*, April 14, 2007

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.

By Leah Ollman, Special to The Times



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.

Susan Silton and Kim Schoen take the most straightforward approaches, and their works happen to be among the least rewarding. Silton presents nearly abstract blurs, stills from video footage made by standing in one spot and spinning around. The images are luxuriously hued but otherwise dull. Schoen stages fireworks displays and has others photograph them. Her pictures of single bursts of light have the silvery tones of pencil drawings, but the images and concept both feel slight.

Others with more complex agendas deliver more provocative work. Soo Kim cuts select forms out of her photographs of trees and neighborhoods to turn them into tracery – fragile and whimsical plays of presence and absence. Renee Lotenero constructs a tile sculpture that rises and spills like a makeshift wave, and riffs on it in a sequence of curious, fresh and unfettered collage drawings.

Christine Nguyen mounts a 12-by-20-foot grid of individual prints to make a lush mural. The tonality resembles that of a cyanotype, and the translucent imagery (first drawn on Mylar and several steps later printed on photographic paper) veers from diagram to sketch, microscopy to astronomy. Like the even larger installation Nguyen made for the Hammer Museum last year,

“The Great Bear Writes a Song for the Cryosphere” evokes a busy, fluid realm, part mythic and part scientific, at once underwater, earthly and celestial. It’s a beautiful space to immerse oneself in.

Kristi Lippire tries too hard to start a conversation with photohistory in her sculptural renditions of images by William Eggleston and Wolfgang Tillmans. The results are clumsy and gratuitous. Gregory Michael Hernandez attempts to reconcile the camera’s framing of a single view with the human capacity to look in all directions from a single position. His challenge is akin to translating the information on a spherical globe to a flat map, and he tackles it in a mildly satisfactory way through paper engineering, making “truncated cuboctahedrons,” with each facet a separate image contiguous with the rest. The geometric shapes look like snowflakes when laid flat and like faceted spheres when folded up.

Both Augusta Wood and Brian Bress make straight photographs of tampered, staged environments. Wood writes phrases extracted from literary texts into the scenes she shoots. In one image, words are carefully inscribed in water on a hardwood floor; in another, “the chaos of warm things” appears in shadowy letters interrupting the warm light streaming into a breakfast nook. The pictures have quiet, poetic resonance. Bress playfully courts ambiguity, photographing scenic backdrops and props that have varying degrees of verisimilitude.

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.