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'Printstallations' @ San Jose Institute of Contemporary Art

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L to R: Meghann Riepenhoff, "Littoral Drift Nearshore #511 (Bainbridge Island, WA 04.29.17 Three Simulated Waves, dawn to Dusk)," 2017, unique dynamic cyanotype, 95 x 144 inches; Stephen Whisler, "From a Great Height," 2018, woodcuts on paper

by David M. Roth

Printmaking rarely aspires to monumentality. Its history, with a few notable exceptions, is largely one of intimate works made either by dedicated printmakers or by painters seeking to expand their purview with help from master printers. *Printstallations*, a show featuring the work of eight such masters, upends that tradition by filling half the San Jose ICA with large-scale prints. They dominate entire walls, hang from the ceiling and activate floor space using a wide range of media and techniques, including photography, lithography, textiles, woodblock prints, computer-aided design, LED lights and much else.

The exhibition is but the latest example of the ICA sidestepping staid white-cube displays in favor of more active modes of audience engagement. While size is a critical component, the strength of the show rests more with innovative processes than with expositions of sheer scale.

Meghann Riepenhoff, for example, creates what she calls "dynamic cyanotypes," montages made from pieces of light-sensitive paper that she develops by covering them in sand and dousing them with seawater. The exposure, we are told, is only partial since the chemicals are never completely washed off, and as a consequence, the images develop over time, crystalizing and shedding salt. Such a loose and indeterminate process would seem an unlikely vehicle for



Beth Howe and Clive McCarthy, "Triumphal Arch (Class II)," 2012, 8 x 12 ft

generating a coherent image of the marine environment surrounding the artist's home on Bainbridge Island, Wash. But it does. Frothy waveforms – rendered in eye-tingling shades of turquoise with barnacle-like surface textures — do everything but give off the briny smell of salt air. That bit of mimesis encapsulates the feeling of the ocean in a way I've not seen before, turning what could be a tired cliché – the seascape – into something bordering on a living thing, with all the qualities of fragility and impermanence such an analogy implies.

Canadian printmaker **Beth Howe** and SF-based semiconductor-engineer-turned-artist **Clive McCarthy** do something similar with *Triumphal Arch (Class II)*. They transform a staid image of a freeway overpass into something bordering on animate. They do it by translating a digital photo into machine instructions that drive a router. The resulting woodblock, inked and printed, yields an extremely low-resolution black-and-white reproduction of the source image, which the artists divide it into nine segments. At a distance the jaggy composite is perfectly readable until



Sarah Amos, "Blue Isabelle," collagraph on felt with hand stitching, 2017, 66 X 84 inches

you focus on the places where the segments connect. Then, the image begins to roil. Up close it dissolves into liminal fuzz, inducing a sensation akin to vertigo. Like the work of Jim Campbell, another engineer/artist, *Triumphal Arch* challenges perception by asking how much visual information can be removed from a picture before it degrades into noise.

Sarah Amos, an Australia-born printmaker, dazzles by sewing figural forms made of yarn, buttons and bric-a-brac, onto multi-layered collagraphs. Their appendages, built of patterns gleaned from African, Asian and Oceanic tribal motifs, call to mind space aliens dressed for Mardi Gras. **Sarah Sanford**, a Santa Cruz artist, superimposes photographs of light shot in her studio atop pages of a 100-year-old French leger book. The faded paper evokes the passage of time, but the more noteworthy characteristic of the piece, titled *Agenda 1917*, is the myriad shapes into which Sanford's juxtapositions appear to bend light. Their skeletal patterns and spectral qualities recall a watershed moment in photographic history: the discovery of the x-ray in 1895 by the German physicist William Roentgen.

Pantea Karimi, a native of Iran, imprints floral patterns culled from a 12th century herbal medicine text onto translucent silk banners that hang from the ceiling. Her efforts, titled *Folding Gardens*, bring to mind those of

another 19th century German photographer, Karl Blossfeldt. His precise shots of plants, achieved with a camera capable of magnifying subjects by up to 30 times their original size, revealed structural patterns never before seen. **Fanny Retsek**, the ICA's former master printmaker, submits *Flee*, an extraordinarily detailed wall-sized etching



Kyoto Fischer, "Imagined Nostalgia: Tatami," 2017,
lithography print, encaustic and LED lights, 60 x 60 inches

that depicts endangered species, visible as negative silhouettes framed by undulating surface incisions. Retsek's penchant for obsessive marking carries over to the floor-mounted, light-activated print by **Kyoko Fischer** titled *Imagined Nostalgia: Tatami*. In this, the Tokyo-born artist attempts to re-create the look and feel of a tatami mat by using small hash marks to mimic the texture of woven straw, replete with tea stains. These she affixes to a 60 x 60-inch grid of transparent plastic cubes set on LED bulbs, creating what looks like a highly fragmented stained glass window. This, too, has a relevant antecedent in Atsuko Tanaka's *Electric Dress* (1956), a Gutai masterpiece that featured, rather sensationally, a live model (and later mannequins) draped in pendulous multi-colored light bulbs.

The exhibition concludes with eight ceiling-hung banners – woodcut prints by **Stephen Whisler** that comically depict falling bombs I initially took for snow angels. Laugh or cower? I couldn't decide. By that point I'd taken in more material and process innovations than I could fully absorb. This is an exhibition to put on your must-see list.

“Printstallations” @ [San Jose Institute of Contemporary Art](#) through June 10, 2018.

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