

KATE WERBLE GALLERY

83 VANDAM STREET NEW YORK, NY 10013

The Boston Globe

THROUGH THE WINDOW OF ABSTRACT PHOTOGRAPHY

MARK FEENEY

JUNE 5, 2012

LINCOLN — The acceptance of abstraction in painting was a hard-won battle, so much so that once it was won, representation became for a time peripheral in contemporary art. One of the forces driving the emergence of abstraction was the emergence of photography. Painting is not intrinsically representational — any more than prose, say, is intrinsically factual. But until the arrival of photography, with its unrivaled capacity to render the external world visually, painting did that rendering more convincingly than did any other visual medium.

Abstraction has never been anything like orthodoxy in photography. It's always been peripheral to the medium. How could it be otherwise? Unrivaled capacities are not something to be squandered. Just because LeBron James is tall, strong, and quick doesn't mean that he *has* to play basketball — but devoting those talents to quoits would seem like kind of a waste.

That said, peripheries have their virtues. They lend themselves to experimentation, innovation, and confusion (which, artistically, can be a lot more fertile than certitude). Also, art photography long had another orthodoxy: black and white. Then technical developments — and changed assumptions — made color reproduction less expensive and of higher quality. Black and white has not exactly become peripheral, but its status is very different from what it was three decades ago.

Black and white does not dominate “second nature: abstract photography then and now.” The show, which runs through April 21 at the deCordova Sculpture Park and Museum, testifies to just how varied non-representational photography can be. The deCordova's Lexi Lee Sullivan organized the exhibition.

Sprawling vigorously over three floors and one roof, “second nature” consists of more than 130 works, by nearly three dozen artists. Those works extend beyond still photography to include film, video, and a slide show. They range in date from 1938 to this year. Some of the artists are well known: Aaron Siskind, Gyorgy Kepes, Harold Edgerton, Stan Brakhage. Many more are younger and lesser known. They include Luke Stettner, Yamini Nayar, Aspen Mays, Bryan Graf, and Corin Hewitt. Hewitt's “Recomposed Monochrome (216, 115, 177)” is as beautiful an image as there is in the show.

What constitutes an abstract photograph? It can be the image of a fictive interior, as in the work of Nayar. It can show some detail of a “real” object — the bits of urban detritus or wall markings that Siskind specialized in — which then appear abstract when seen enlarged and out of context. (The finest canvases Franz Kline never painted are Siskind photographs.) Or an abstract photograph can be something representational presented in such an unusual or unexpected fashion as to appear abstract. The images in Mays's series “The Sun 1957,” for example, look like sets of celestial dominoes.

That younger photographers would turn to abstraction makes considerable sense. The overwhelming photographic fact of our time is that of the image glut. It chokes the multiplicity of screens that defines contemporary life. How can even the most talented photographer break through the deluge of images out there? Well, one way is to show something that cannot be seen anywhere else — because it doesn't *exist* anywhere else.

TEL 212-352-9700 FAX 212-352-9704

www.katewerblegallery.com EMAIL info@katewerblegallery.com

KATE WERBLE GALLERY

83 VANDAM STREET NEW YORK, NY 10013

In such uniqueness, though, does something crucial get lost? Like any other piece of art, a photograph exists in space. That's true whether the image is representational or abstract. Unlike any other piece of art, a photograph not only exists in time but does so twice over — or, rather, it does if it is representational. There is the photograph's here-and-now existence as you look at it in a museum or gallery — but also there's another present, a here-and-then, recorded when the shutter clicked in front of the lens. At the very least, this act of recording provides, as Walker Evans once wrote, “a quaint evocation of the past.” At its best, though, a viewer gets something else, what Evans called “an open window looking straight down a stack of decades.”

What may be most problematic about abstract photography is how it closes that window. The Brakhage work in “second nature” is a four-minute color film, “Mothlight.” It presents shots of moth wings, leaves, and other thin, translucent objects in an onrushing stream. The overall effect is of kaleidoscope shards on parade. The work is beautiful and delicate and mildly hypnotic. Yet after a minute or two it's less interesting, frankly, than the homely reality of the 16mm projector playing it. The whirring sound the projector makes, the motion of its turning reels, the solid functionality of its shape and workings: There's nothing abstract about them, nothing whatsoever.

TEL 212-352-9700 FAX 212-352-9704

www.katewerblegallery.com EMAIL info@katewerblegallery.com