

Art in America

JUNE/JULY 2014

EXHIBITION REVIEWS



Luke Stettner:
Untitled #2, 2014,
pigmented inkjet
print, 20% by 16%
inches; at Kate
Werble.

LUKE STETTNER

Kate Werble

Argentinian author Jorge Luis Borges imagined language as an endless metaphor. At the heart of language, he surmised, was an attempt to collapse two incommensurable orders, the experiential and the symbolic, the alignments of which could only be arbitrary. In acceding to representation, experience gave way to an interminable relay among words and images, a *mise en abyme* of metaphors whose logic betrayed a frustrating opacity. Luke Stettner's compact show, "time, women, stars, death, sleep, flowers, life, eyes, a river, dreams" (all works 2014) trafficked in such Borgesian problematics: the abstraction on which representation hinges; the lapses and deformations of meaning that result. The exhibition's title lists 10 components of what Borges identified as the "twelve essential affinities": archetypal metaphors to which writers consistently return, despite the seemingly infinite inventory of things with which to draw comparisons.

The eponymous work finds Borges's terms silkscreened on a long piece of paper that has been folded into 10 equal sections. Centered in each panel is a circle of gold leaf for which one of Borges's affinities provides a caption. Affixed with so many disparate concepts, the circles become an omnibus symbol, at once overfull and void. Nearby, a series of yellowed diaries, marked with dates from 1959 to 2006, were aligned side by side—some opened, some closed—atop a painted white plinth. Their author, though singular, was anonymous, and the legible entries, scrawled in shorthand, mix concerns mundane and extraordinary: lunch dates, a lunar eclipse, John F. Kennedy's assassination. Several years (1960, 2003) were missing from the series. At issue seemed to be the fragmentary nature of temporal experience, a proposition Stettner further interrogated in the show's remaining two works.

Like the wind consists of 112 letter-size inkjet prints tacked to the wall in an orderly grid. Each features a photograph from the archive of Stettner's grandfather, himself a photographer (and perhaps the author of the diaries?), which Stettner scanned, printed and strategically cropped. Arranged as a sort of stilled montage, the images shed their temporal bearings, their spatial synchrony undermining the assured progression of chronology. Meaning accrues by way of loose association: a black-and-white checkered hat echoes the right-angled facade of a modernist high-rise and a newspaper's crossword. Hands, watches and shadows recur, as do images of clouds: a nod, perhaps, to Alfred Stieglitz's series of cloud photographs, "Equivalents" (1923-31). Reconstituted in various sizes and locations on the page—minuscule in the upper left, modestly sized in the lower right—the excerpted photographs fail to occupy their ground in full. Blank space assumes importance equal to image, and the whiteness of the paper, flush with the gallery's white wall, produced a certain silence.

On the opposing wall were five inkjet prints, each featuring a grid of shots of sunlight cast on stretches of carpeted floors or the bare corners of white-walled rooms. Reducing photography to its absolute minimum (the registering of light on a surface), Stettner's project here seems *echt-modernist*, particularly in its self-conscious art historical reference. The flattened, angular geometries of *Untitled #2* resemble high-modernist abstraction; the fleecy contours of *Untitled #3* recall 19th-century spiritualist photography. Through Stettner's serial framing, time emerges as something both linear and looped, as near identical geometries of light appear across the individual stills. Faced with time's impalpability, Stettner renders it as something dim, gauzy and gray, an apt visual metaphor.

—Courtney Fiske