

Portland Press Herald

9/24/2023

Art review: In a pair of Portland shows, photographers ‘push around’ the medium

The works on display at the University of New England and Maine Jewish Museum demonstrate how effectively photography can transcend form and find provocative new meaning.

BY JORGE S. ARANGO



Rose Marasco, "Projection Number 10," 2008

“Photography is just like any other medium,” the renowned photographer and teacher Rose Marasco once told me. “It can be pushed around.”

IF YOU GO

WHAT: “Rose Marasco: Camera Lucida”

WHERE: University of New England Art Gallery, 716 Stevens Ave., Portland

WHEN: Through Oct. 8

HOURS: Noon to 5 p.m. Thursday through Sunday

ADMISSION: Free

INFO: 207-602-3000, library.une.edu/art-galleries

WHAT: “Kahn+Kennedy: Sun. Water. Weeds.”

WHERE: Maine Jewish Museum, 267 Congress St., Portland

WHEN: Through Oct. 27; artist talk 7 p.m. Oct. 3

HOURS: Noon to 4 p.m. Sunday through Friday

ADMISSION: Free

INFO: 207-773-2339, mainejewishmuseum.org

She was speaking about her solo show at the University of New England Art Galleries, “Rose Marasco: Camera Lucida” (through Oct. 8). Her statement modestly downplays the accomplishments of this consistently surprising show, but also succinctly describes what Marasco is doing – as well as Nanci Kahn and Meredith Kennedy at the Maine Jewish Museum in their show “Sun. Water. Weeds.” (through Oct. 27). All these women are pushing the photographic medium around, and to fascinating effect.

The incessant drive toward experimentation and innovation, all within the context of Marasco’s innate narrative impulse, is what comes through most strongly in “Camera Lucida.” This combination of technical exploration and story is perhaps best exemplified on the first level of the three-story gallery with photos of a 1921 diary.

The entries illustrate the mundanity of this diarist’s life. Two entries: “Work. Read book. It’s [indecipherable] and went to bed. O Gee I wish something would happen” and “Made \$30.60 last week. Nothing new diary.” Marasco places the diary on a surface and arranges around it leaves, a bud of a tree and, poignantly, a wishbone. This is part of her “Domestic Objects” series, which she executed using 4-by-5-inch transparency film and Cibachrome prints. They are – she writes in her newly released book, “At Home (Osmos)” – “chronicles of the actual and symbolic significance of everyday household objects.”

With the purchase of the West End home, originally constructed in 1837 and added onto during the 25-year period between 1885 and 1910, the narrative thrust of Marasco's work took another turn. As she began renovating, she uncovered some 87 items left by previous owners. At first, she began documenting them with simply composed shots of the objects on a white ground – a washboard, two bottles, a leather bag.

But Marasco is fascinated by the mysterious histories, actual or implied, by objects. So, these photographs begin to take on new meanings. One shows the contents of a bundle she found in the ceiling timbers of the basement. For Marasco, the resulting still life, composed of an empty pack of Winston cigarettes, tins of shoe polish and a buffing cloth, are evidence of a memory and a ritual – “an after-dinner smoke and a shoe polish” – that serve to connect her to the former occupants.

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So, too, a single woman's leather shoe she found on the third floor. Subsequent research led her to a Northampton, England, shoe museum's directory of “concealed shoes,” where she discovered an old superstition that explains the shoe's absence of its partner: “a single woman's or child's shoe was frequently placed in the walls of a newly built house, often on the third floor, to protect the home from evil spirits,” she writes.

Everywhere in this show, the inner life of objects is preeminent. There are 2020 images created at an artist residency in Virginia of common household implements – a peeler, a pastry blender, a grater – digitally projected onto a curtained window. These objects suggest, perhaps, that they are characters in a life performance that will unfold before us when the proscenium curtain parts.

Elsewhere is a series of photograms, where she placed objects on photo-sensitive paper and exposed them to light, then scanned them into a computer and used Photoshop's invert tool to color the backgrounds (originally all black) in bright shades of red, orange,

yellow, purple and green. In this context, they become like ghosts of these objects living through variously colored realities – object constancy amid peripheral change.



Rose Marasco, "Library at Virginia Center for the Creative Arts," 2018

There are New York City shots Marasco took with a wooden pinhole camera she constructed. And there are many of her "Projections," in which she photographs rooms with images projected onto the walls. Some were simply shot when the sun was shining through a window on which she placed a lacy curtain, so that the pattern of these curtains projects in large scale onto walls, furniture, shelving, etc.

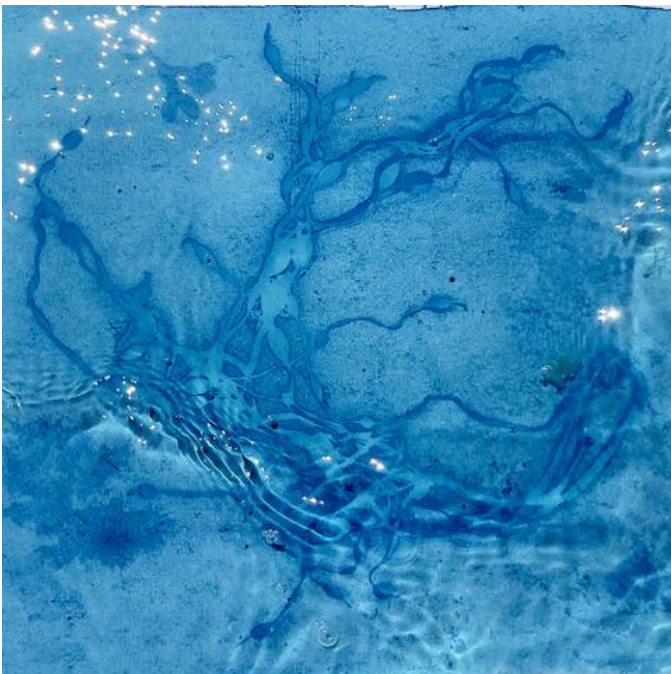
These are from her residencies in Virginia and Finland in 2017 and 2018. But she had done this earlier in her own home by projecting collages of women she admired onto walls of various rooms. These are my favorite works in the show. They feel surreal and

strange, but also imbue the rooms with new psychological dimensions that create a whole new space within the space.

The projections of this period called to mind contemporary philosopher Alain de Botton, who wrote beautifully about home as a “refuge to shore up our states of mind, because so much of the world is opposed to our allegiances. We need our rooms to align us to desirable version of ourselves and keep alive the important, evanescent sides of us.”

BLUE MOOD

Nanci Kahn and Meredith Kennedy also “push around” the photographic medium. To begin with, they use the 19th-century camera-less process of cyanotype, in which iron salts are applied to a surface (for most of these, that initially means silk or fabric of some kind). Atop this Kahn+Kennedy – their art moniker – then lay various kinds of sea flora – water lily pads and buds, feather algae, rockweed, et alia – onto the surface and expose it to light. After pulling off the marine flora, white negative space remains where these plants lay, surrounded by the deep blues that are the chemical reaction of the iron salts to light exposure.



Kahn+Kennedy, “Ascophyllum nodosum – Rockweed and Glint”

The majority of these are then brought to the seashore and submerged in water, the surface of which catches glints of light. Kahn+Kennedy take another image of this and then reproduce it on various kinds of rice paper. The light, the ripples on the surface of the water, the sand below the image and its reflection on the water surface, as well as other natural phenomena, transform the pattern quality of the images into something more ethereal.

Both Kahn and Kennedy are departing from their usual practices with this form of photography. Kahn has been a photographer for years, exploring other historical methods of the medium, but specializing in more traditional black-and-white and color photography, usually of people and street scenes. (She is also the curator of photography at the Maine Jewish Museum). Kennedy is a graphic designer by training who became seriously interested in photography 11 years ago, doing street photography and portraiture. Given her graphic design training, it's easy to see how the cyanotype process, which is essentially flat and graphic in its two-tone spectrum and sense of clearly outlined and/or delineated forms, would appeal to that sensibility.



Kahn+Kennedy, "Chondrus crispus - Irish Moss with Rockweed"

But their combined efforts and backgrounds have resulted in a show that feels about more than just photography. It is the ethereality imparted by the cyanotype's interaction with water that gives the images their emotional and physical reverberation. The effects of these phenomena transmute what are essentially fixed images, bringing them out of a static state into one of fluidity and movement. This quality imbues them with a sense of time and memory – the fleeting nature of both embodied by shots clearly snapped the second before the water and light create another effect – as well as of return to origin. The seaweed they harvested returns, in another form, to the place where it originated. The latter necessarily also prompts contemplations of an environment in constant flux and, increasingly, peril.

Kahn+Kennedy have also used this process to create fabric wall hangings and works that can be worn like scarves, proving the adaptability of the photographic medium for a variety of uses.