

Excavating Environmental Politics from Pristine Paintings and Photos

by Benjamin Sutton on February 13, 2015



'Second Nature' installation view (all photos by the author for Hyperallergic)

Art with an environmentalist message can take very literal forms, from a chunk of Arctic ice kept frozen by solar power to a field of wheat planted in a bustling metropolis, but it can also come in the guise of elegant abstract paintings and digitally manipulated photographs. Those are the primary means employed by Julian Lorber and Mark Dorf, respectively, in their two-person show *Second Nature* at Outlet Fine Art. The intense formal connections between their works, and the subtlety with which they articulate their environmentalist agenda, make it so you could miss the politics of the pieces entirely and just bask in their glowing gradients. If not for two small sculptures included in the gallery's back room, I would have done just that.

Dorf's photos are rooted in landscape photography, but he destabilizes their tranquil and verdant imagery through digital alterations. In "Emergent #18," for instance, green and turquoise shapes float above a seemingly placid lake whose water, on closer inspection, has turned a gruesome hue of rusty red due to a rare concentration of iron thrust to the earth's surface by tectonic action below. The specks of color, sourced from single pixels of the landscape photo, match the blue-green gradient that frames the piece. In "Emergent #19" (2014), meanwhile, an image of a fallen tree in a forest glows with an unnatural pink-purple light, while an abstract gradient border in matching hues frames the image. The seemingly artificial colors, actually extracted from two pixels at the center of the digital photo of the tree, highlight the technological filter through which most of us experience nature. They also reminded me of the pollution-augmented sunsets described in rhapsodic terms by the main character of Don DeLillo's *White Noise* and the outrageous landscapes concocted by the Hudson River School painters. Like a field researcher taking samples of the landscape for analysis, Dorf carries out close studies of digital images of nature, isolating and highlighting toxic-looking colors. Through such manipulations, he turns these fragile landscapes into unreal, over-the-top versions of themselves.



Mark Dorf, "Translated Mesh #3" (2014)

If Lorber's approach to nature were likened to a method of scientific research, it would be the extraction of core samples from sediment, stone, and ice. His vibrant gradient paintings, whose textured surfaces resemble a canvas thick with layers of tape, evoke cross-sections of geological strata. In "Line Aphasia_Torrential Amber at Dawn" (2014), for example, a rich orange at the bottom of the composition shifts to gold, pale yellow, dirty white, and eventually black, like nutrient rich earth buried deep below polluted dirt. The pieces in his 18-panel installation "LA FLASH_Tropic of Cancer" (2014) echo the gradients in Dorf's photos, dramatic sunsets, the cool blues of tropical seas, the buildup of grime on every surface in the urban environment, and, especially at this time of year, the successive layers of dirty snow and ice lining the streets. The front room of the exhibition is a visual delight, but two pieces in the back room clue visitors in to the environmental issues at play.



Lorber's sculpture "Pelican" (2015), a standard electric fan painted to look like it was rescued from an oil spill, casts the rest of his works in a new light. Suddenly, paintings that seemed pristine in their gentle color gradients and sharply molded surfaces take on a toxic, apocalyptic sheen. Lorber's other piece in the room shifts the tone even further: titled "Your services are no longer required" (2015), it consists of a small, plush toy of a bearded man, smeared with what resembles oil or coal, reclining on a cardboard box with one hand down his pants. What at first reads as an off-color joke about outsourcing, unemployment, and homelessness — or an apocryphal representation of Santa Claus — takes on new meaning when you learn that the toy is a novelty Charles Darwin doll. This touch of black humor adds to the sense of alarm seething beneath the surfaces of Dorf and Lorber's seductive works. Like toxic materials spilled into an thriving ecosystem, these two sculptures infect everything around them, crystallizing the exhibition's environmental politics.