

REVIEWS

Distant Images, Local Positions

EFA PROJECT SPACE
NEW YORK CITY
JANUARY 24–MARCH 8, 2014

It is perhaps unsurprising that an artist whose own work continually engages issues of migration, place, surveillance, and geopolitics should curate an exhibition featuring nine artists whose own work reflects similar concerns. In *Distant Images, Local Positions*, Wafaa Bilal creates a space for an aesthetic dialogue between artists whose work in varied media is shaped by a common concern with the role of geography and landscape as mediating factors in our understanding of a contemporary culture of surveillance, mass media, and the significance of place.

On entering the gallery at EFA Project Space, the visitor is immediately confronted with a large, sculptural installation by Haseeb Ahmed and Daniel Baird. *Has the World Already Been Made? x5: Bridge* (2014) is the fifth iteration of a work that was first created in 2011 and has since been presented in galleries in Europe and the United States using different elements and structures at each venue. The installations share a common use of architectural and other fragments that the artists capture from sites around the world by making casts or molds of these elements. Unlike some earlier versions of the work, *Has the World Already Been Made? x5: Bridge* piles these forms on top of one another on a makeshift bridge that comes together in the center of the gallery. The viewer must investigate closely to identify the original structures from which the work was cast, and this need for scrutiny heightens a sense of dislocation that is appropriate for a work that seeks to investigate the intersection of places through what might be described as found traces of their material existence.

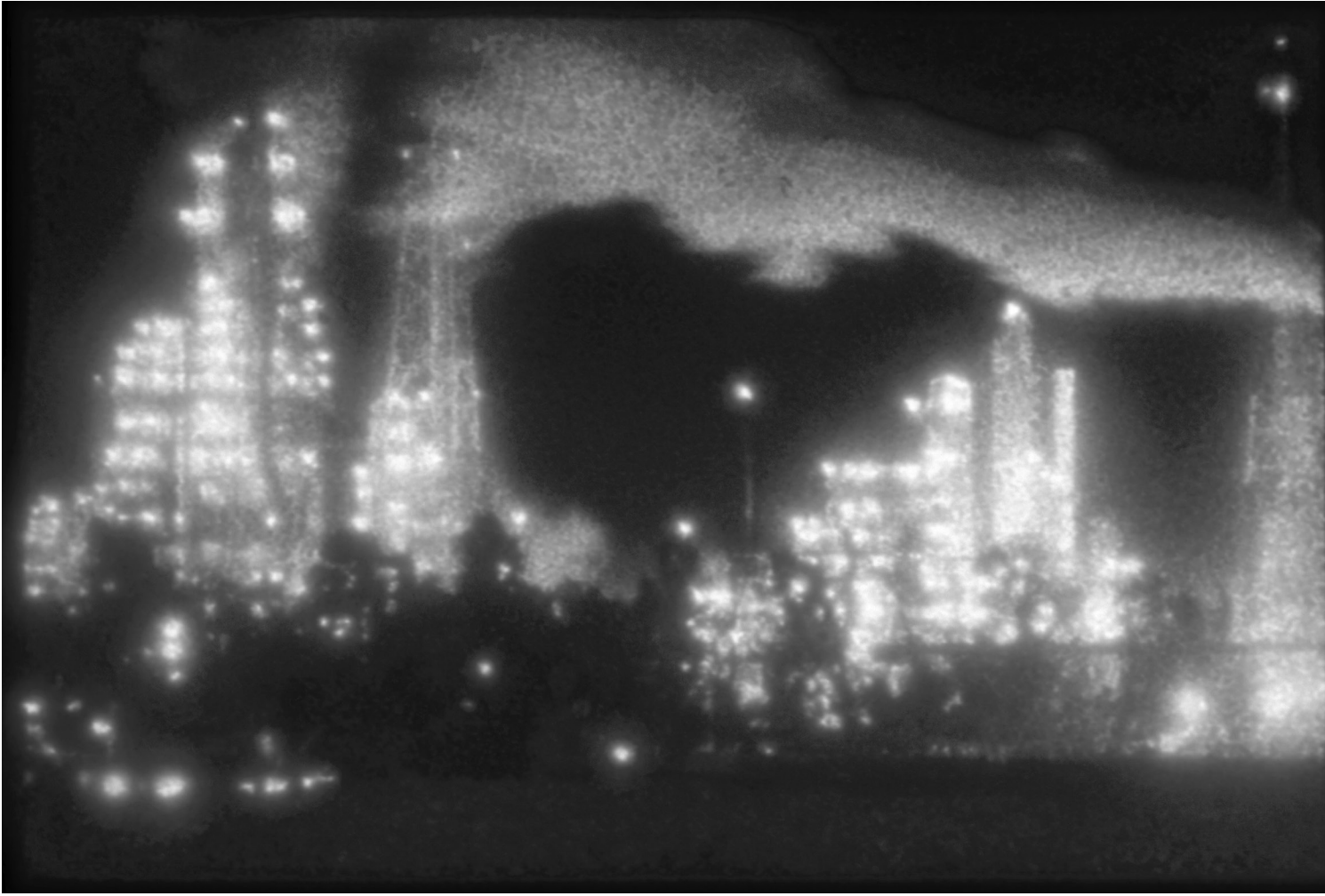
The other exclusively sculptural piece in the show, Travis LeRoy Southworth's *The Deep Empty* (2014), uses ripped and mashed-up pages from *National Geographic* magazine in an arrangement that recalls stalactites dripping onto a cave floor and creating amorphous natural forms. As with *Has the World*



Megaemprendimiento (2010) by Mary Mattingly; courtesy Elizabeth Foundation for the Arts

Already Been Made?, the material of the work is not immediately identifiable; once the viewer becomes aware of its origins, however, the piece takes on a metonymic quality as the content of its component parts merges with the overall representation of a specific geologic or geographic feature.

Trevor Paglen and Scott Patrick Wiener both address issues of surveillance in their work (in photography and video, respectively) that, while sharing a subject, present very different viewing experiences. In his large-scale photograph *Untitled (Reaper Drone)* (2010), Paglen captures a miniscule shot of the drone, no more than a pinpoint against a golden sky. The tool of surveillance itself barely visible, the photograph offers a commentary on the ways in which we are constantly and unknowingly watched by powers beyond our sight. In *Landscape Acquisition* (2012–present), Wiener uses both two-channel video and grainy black-and-white photographs to show not a drone itself, but the views accessible from the aircraft. The video *3 Surveys* (2012), which shows the view from cameras



29°59'23.45"N, 90°25'19.35"W (Norco) (2013) by AnnieLaurie Erickson; courtesy Elizabeth Foundation for the Arts

mounted on both top and bottom of an RQ-1 Reaper Drone, presents a disorienting yet compelling combination of sky and forest footage that both draws the viewer in and destabilizes the viewing position in ways that are at once aesthetically pleasing and conceptually troubling.

Another artist whose work intensely probes notions of surveillance is Hasan Elahi. *Concordance* (2014) is a multichannel video installation mounted on one wall of the gallery. The relatively small screens each show what appear to be related fragments of an urban landscape—the closed metal shutters of a storefront, stretches of pavement—yet it is difficult to piece together a coherent whole. Moreover, the images barely register movement, as only the occasional fleeting glimpse of, for example, a plant catching the breeze marks the distinction between still photograph and moving image. After accidentally appearing on an FBI terrorist watch list in 2002, Elahi created *Tracking Transience*, an online project that tracks and continually publishes his movements and whereabouts. Although

Concordance does not specifically represent Elahi's location, it is connected to the larger project through its exploration of the state of continual surveillance in our cities, an effort that is ongoing even when there is nothing to see.

Regina Mamou's installation *Proposed Vortex* (2013) provides two of the more inscrutable images in the exhibition. Large-scale photos of nondescript wooded landscapes, photographed in fall or winter when the grass is withered and the trees bare, are lit by floodlights using ultraviolet bulbs. The effect is eerie, a feeling that is reinforced upon learning that the landscapes belong to the grounds of a Spiritualist community. The black light reflecting on the surface of the photos reminds the viewer of the ghostly superimposed images that populated nineteenth-century spirit photographs, themselves a medium much favored by early Spiritualist devotees. The hauntingly blank landscapes of Mamou's photographs are thus potentially populated by spirits beyond our comprehension but in keeping with the history of the places she records.

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Two additional artists working in the photographic tradition, though not using traditional photography, round out the exhibit with compelling images that, like Mamou's, rely for their impact on a type of illusion. In the series *Slow Light* (2012–present), AnnieLaurie Erickson uses handmade artificial retinas to create photographs that replicate the experience of an afterimage—the latent imagery that remains on our retinas after we look at the sun or a bright object in the dark. While this process itself would be visually striking no matter what the subject of the pictures, the fact that Erickson is photographing sites of oil refineries considered off limits to photographers by government authorities adds a layer of complexity to these visually dense images. As Erickson says of the series, "For me, these images evoke both a presence and an absence. They are points along a continuum between strict representation and subjective abstraction, or between our immediate visual reality and the decaying, remembered imagery that subconsciously shapes our perception."¹

Unlike Erickson, Mary Mattingly uses digital technology to edit her finished photographs in order to create scenes of what Lucy Lippard has described as "disaster tourism." In three works from her series *After Candide* (2008–11), Mattingly layers scenes of gawking tourists, themselves equipped with cameras, over photographs of flooded landscapes—the kind of images of natural disaster with which we have all too often been confronted in recent

years. What makes Mattingly's photographs particularly effective is the way in which they draw the viewer into what seems to be a simple image of tourists, only to then shock us with the realization that what these travelers are watching and recording is the absolute devastation of homes, lives, and landscape. To the extent that such images may force an uncomfortable recall of the viewer's own forays into disaster tourism—for example, by visiting the remains of Ground Zero in the days and months after 9/11—the photographs provide a jarring reminder of how contemporary responses to disaster and trauma are shaped by our culture (or cult) of images, and especially the constant consumption of those images through social media and the internet.

Although the works included in *Distant Images, Local Positions* take very different approaches to the theme of understanding geography and the control that images can exert over it, they share an interest in the ways in which artists can manipulate material, viewpoint, and process to produce work that encourages viewers to consider how landscape and place function in our increasingly watched and recorded world.

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NOTE 1. AnnieLaurie Erickson, Artist Statement; see http://annielaurie.com/html/slow_light_intro.html.



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