

Eileen Neff

Traveling into View

March 4, 2015 - April 18, 2015

BRIDGETTE **MAYER** GALLERY

709 Walnut Street Philadelphia PA 19106

One to One

Nathaniel M. Stein

*[T]he steps to this particular abstraction... are, like the ascent to any of the abstractions that interest us importantly, an ascent through illusion which gathers round us more closely and thickly, as we might expect it to do, the more we penetrate it.*¹ - Wallace Stevens

Metaphor moves in a flare of intuition that is both the recognition of an abstract likeness and the event of a poetic transformation. Arrested, I see: this *is* that, although it is not. A metaphor is an impossible being, an alchemy of logic and magic, a dun-white horse who – pausing, turning, breathing – returns one's regard from the verge of a deep dark wood. As in metaphor, similitude is estranged and remade in the tropical grove we enter with Eileen Neff – sometimes in a pitch-dark night, sometimes in the lambent green light of day.

In January 2014, Neff held a three-week artist's residency at Monte Azul, a unique amalgamation of contemporary art center, eco-resort, and nature preserve set in the rainforest of southern Costa Rica. While not documentary in any usual sense of the word, the works that comprise *Traveling Into View* are drawn from her experiences of the residency – experiences of transit and arrival, of the forest's fecundity and her own limitations in face of such fecundity, of close looking amid profuse stimulus, and of repeated passages (as by foot between her casita and Monte Azul's café, or by car over the mountain road linking the compound to parts beyond). The photographs Neff made in Costa Rica became the raw material for the digitally-crafted pictures that take on physical forms and spatial relationships in the gallery – all of which has as much to do with painting, sculpture, and literature as it does with the insular traditions of photography. Neff's constellations of image-objects displace linear coherence with the sensibilities of collage, a mode of expression that draws close to experience while declining to represent causes and effects in a prosaic manner.

As Neff's work often has, the current project posits a kind of dream-like photographic narrative and then fractures that narrative over the razor edges of temporality and perception. In its introductory passage the installation suggests the unfolding arrival of a beholder who is both rapt by technologically augmented vision and savvy to it. The god's-eye vista of *Window Seat* receives a reflexive jab in *Pre-Viewing*, in which the shadow of a superimposed postcard rack reveals a picturesque view of Costa Rican landscape as a constructed surface. A knowing gesture, the postcard rack is also a reference to Neff's oeuvre, as well as a synecdoche for the larger ecosystem of photographic imagery that preconditions the traveler's perception and representation of the world.² Fast on the heels of this canny dialogue comes *Mountain Road*, a (roughly) three-and-a-half by five-foot gulp of

experience in which earthbound sensory overload seems to overflow cerebral maneuver. As the beholder is sped through unfamiliar, sublime terrain, roadside foliage blurs against landscape, and the relation between figure and ground scintillates.

If there is a suggestion in these works that some type of distance may be necessary for sense-making, there are complex ripostes throughout the project. Two pendants to *Mountain Road* embody immediate examples. Evoking, respectively, the parted curtain of enlightenment painting and the beady gaze of the taxonomist, *The Golden Leaf* and *Moon-Tropic* broach historical modes of looking and picturing that have served to bring the phenomenal into a visual order. These two pictures seem to promise both a grand spectacle and still, close, concentrated seeing. Scrutiny, however, works both ways. In *Moon-Tropic*, what appears to be the fronds of a tropical plant in the compass of a botanist's magnifying glass is in fact a reflection, caught in a mirrored disc Neff brought with her as potential working material, along with the roll of Mylar film she used to create *Reflected* and *Reflected 2* (two chromogenic prints that appear later in the installation). At some point in the artist's process, the photographed mirror-double of botanical fact was twined with the celestial bodies of the Costa Rican night.

Circuits of resemblance are also much at issue in *The Golden Leaf*, a photograph (and a title) that describes the form of a curtain tie-back, the appearance of a pictured curtain, and the effect of gold pigment on the surface of a print (as in, gold leaf) – not to mention a parallel realm of reference to tropical flora and the grasping fantasies of explorers-cum-treasure hunters. Here the curtain is drawn back on glinting indices of disappeared phenomena, artifacts of the lens made inscrutable in a conjured night. In Neff's characteristically precise visual language, these first pictures seem simultaneously to reinforce the allure of vision and qualify its capacity to discern.

In a related vein, consider the lightbox transparency, *Green Honeycreeper*, installed alone in an alcove between the front and rear spaces of the gallery. The work stems from a recurrent experience during Neff's residency: she passed this tangle of trees and the eponymous bird on the walk between the café and her living quarters – “a regular, brilliant moment had several times each day.”³ There is a sensual universe even within minute proximal encounter, a telescoping intensity for which the gesture of isolation here provides a kind of felt analog. A thatch of vines and branches knits the world together, while sprays of color and the very luminescence of the object seem to pull towards a wilder revelation. The experience of keen looking is both irreducible and rich. So rich, in fact, that its expression tends to undercut and overflow representation's urge towards structure and distance.



Rosita, Archival Pigment on Dibond, 5 x 5 inches, 2015



Waves, Archival Pigment on Latex Impregnated
Paper, Cut-out, 32 x 12 inches, 2015



detail, *Back Up*, Archival Inkjet
Print, 27 x 17 ½ inches, 2015