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Leslie Shows @ SFAI

NOVEMBER 26, 2015



Tutela, 2015, acrylic, ink,
sand, canvas, aluminum 56
x 120"

There is a magnificent loneliness to the work of Leslie Shows. It gives off an eerie, alien, inhuman beauty, signaling the vast space that exists beyond our everyday, self-centered experience. Her work reads as painting, but it's really painting *and* sculpture. Layers of aluminum, wood, synthetic rubber, Plexiglas, acrylic, ink and sand coalesce into splintered, contingent spectacles of geology, biology and time. Encountering her strongest work one feels alone in the cosmos, a solitary traveler witnessing colliding narratives of transformation and evolution.

Even before she was honored with a SECA award in 2006, Shows received attention for her innovative use of materials and landscape motifs influenced by Surrealism, science

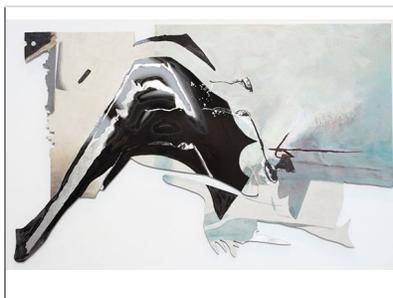
and technology. Now, at 38, with solo shows behind her at the Scottsdale Museum of Contemporary Art, Bemis Center for Contemporary Arts and representation by [Haines Gallery](#) in San Francisco, Shows is steadily steaming into a productive mid-career,

on a parallel track with environmentally oriented artists such as photographer [David Maisel](#) and painters [Kristin Baker](#) and [Mary Anne Kluth](#). She speaks of wanting to “make work that is so secret from myself that I would be seduced into making it.” The nine works on view here continue her critique of landscape and the visceral histrionics of altered space and frozen time — mesmerizing, toxic, known and unknowable. Working with scanned images of minerals, doodle drawings, and paint pours, Shows transforms the integration of these materials into what she calls “structures of narrative.” *Tutela* is an epic expanse of poured acrylic, ink, sand and canvas layered over laser-cut aluminum. The largest piece in the show, it possesses both beauty and lonesome eternal dread — a bifurcated vision of yawning, primordial space. Cold sooty inks and watery ochres are left to impose their own order, creating empty canyons, signifying either the future or the primordial past. As with much of the work in this exhibition *Tutela's* power rests with its ability to compel viewers to let go of linear negotiations and traverse wormholes of shifting spatial and temporal mysteries.

Like many artists today who explore the demise of nature, Shows, who grew up in Alaska, acutely aware of the devastation wrought by mining, has long navigated the terrain between nature and techno-culture. Once bucolic and carrying an unassailable purity, landscape is now threatened or threatening. The chalky deposits and tarry slags of Shows' work speak to the fact of human intervention and a permanently altered earth. She illuminates both our geologic and industrial history, revealing subterranean chaos and multiple realities.



K Drop/ In each beak,
2015, acrylic, ink, graphite,
sand, canvas, polymer
clay, aluminum 59 x 82"



Serrated A/ the tail of
another, 2015, acrylic, ink,
sand, canvas, polymer
clay, aluminum 60 x 95"

Works such as *Serrated A/The tail of another* and *K Drop/In each beak* deftly manipulate notions of representation, idea and experience. Paying close attention to the intrinsic qualities of materials, Shows bypasses culturally inculcated meanings and lets "nature take its course." The granular sediment and metallic glaze function as skins over Shows' deeper ideas: of landscape as a construct, perched atop uncontrollable, unknowable forces that grow, erode and regenerate.

Smaller works, such as *the left condition*, *the right condition* and *Isomere* don't fare as well. They're compelling at a distance, but up-close their integration of drawing and facture feels over-studied, in sharp contrast to the larger works, where awe and confusion about our environment and the challenge it poses to our own relative importance loom large. As Robert Smithson so elegantly put it: "One's mind and the earth are in a constant state of erosion ... brain waves undermine cliffs of thought, ideas decompose into stones of unknowing."

–JULIA COUZENS

Leslie Shows @ San Francisco Art Institute, [Walter and McBean Galleries](#), through December 12, 2016. Shows lectures on her work December 1 at 7 p.m.

Read [Squarecylinder's](#) review of Shows' previous exhibition @ [Haines Gallery](#).

About the Author:

[Julia Couzens](#) is a Sacramento-based artist and writer whose work has been widely shown, most recently at the di Rosa Preserve. Her drawings and hybrid objects are in museum and public collections throughout the U.S. These include the Achenbach Foundation for Graphic Arts; Berkeley Art Museum; Oakland Museum; Weatherspoon Art Gallery, University of North Carolina; and Yale University. She lives and works on Merritt Island in the Sacramento River delta.

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