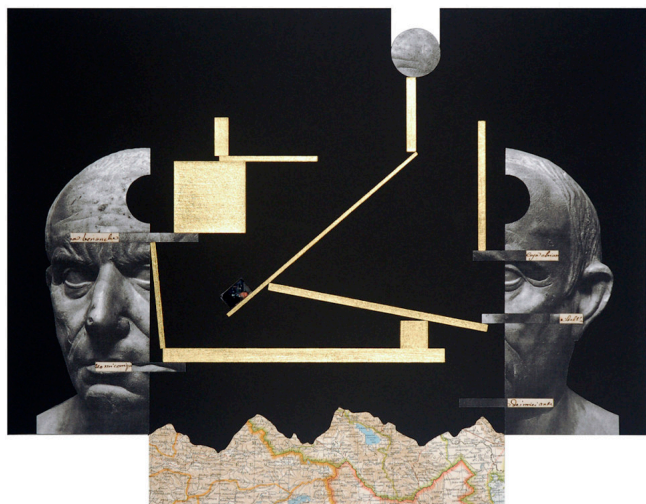


The Presence of Absence: Three Artists at Brian Morris

Thomas Micchelli July 18, 2015



Andrew Ginzel, "Limen" (2009), ink, toner, gold on paper, 25 x 29 inches framed (all images courtesy Brian Morris Gallery, New York)

[Cuts Noon Light](#) is a sleek, smart, strikingly cohesive group show at Brian Morris Gallery featuring the work of three very different artists, Andrew Ginzel, Kara Rooney, and Steel Stillman. At once immediately familiar and decidedly alien, its hybrid objects foreground the unseen, the cryptic, and the elliptical.

It's only fitting, given its deployment of poetic indirection, that the exhibition's title is taken from Pablo Neruda, whose "[Perhaps Not To Be Is To Be Without Your Being](#)" is excerpted in the gallery's press release:

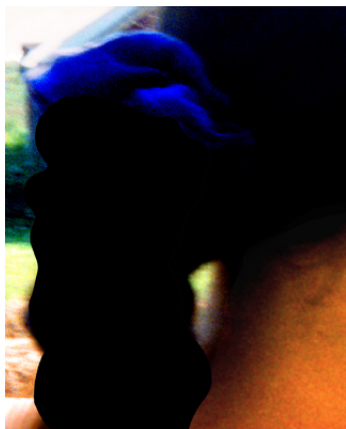
Perhaps not to be is to be without your being,
 without your going, that cuts noon light
 like a blue flower, without your passing
 later through fog and stones,
 without the torch you lift in your hand
 that others may not see as golden

The first line of the poem, which doubles as its title, embodies the emotional core of the show more saliently than "cuts noon light," the last three words of the following line. The construction "not to be is to be without your being" is a double absence invoked by three iterations of the word "be," which indicates presence — a paradox that applies to the sense of meaning coiled within these artworks: tightly packed one moment, then scattering like a flock of starlings the next.

The idea of absence is most plainly manifested in the two archival pigment prints by Steel Stillman, "E. (1973)" and "Buskirk (1988)" (both 2012). These are digital reworkings of old color photographs, described in the gallery statement as "autobiographical," which have been enlarged and cropped so that a detail becomes the subject, and the subject is obscured by large black shapes.

The process sounds simple, even simplistic, but the prints deliver an outsized feeling of disequilibrium, of being lost at night without a map. The black shapes enter the images with a rude bluntness, while the grainy, soft-focus forms surrounding them — our ostensible connection to the real world — seem deliberately askew.

"Buskirk (1988)" shows the back of a woman's head, her hair tied with a royal



Steel Stillman, "Buskirk (1988)" (2012), archival pigment print, 40.375 x 32.75 inches framed, edition 1/3

blue scrunchie, while "E. (1973)" possibly depicts the brown collar of a woman's powder blue coat. Not a whiff of nostalgia here, only the blotting out of memory. The exhibition's press release states that Stillman's photographs "have been altered by the desire to obfuscate and hide [...]" teasing us with secrets kept close to the skin," which is perhaps why they seem so contentious, even belligerent. In the teeth of a full-frontal media culture, Stillman's choice to shield his history feels more of a breach of the social compact than flagrant self-exposure.

Andrew Ginzel also conceals as much as he reveals. He turns collage's classic retro look — in vogue since 1927, when Max Ernst published his graphic novel *Hundred Headless Woman* — on its head by going full-bore on the historical front, incorporating black-and-white photographs of ancient Roman marble portraits, presumably of philosophers, along with bits and pieces of Italian Renaissance manuscripts (facsimiles, of course), which he sets into space-age designs across stiff, black, rectangular paper.

Topographical maps, cut into shapes resembling mountain ranges, line the bottom edge of each of the four works on display. The black paper actually floats at a slight distance above the white mounting board, and precise incisions reveal various elements resting beneath, including the pieces of manuscript and, in a couple of the collages, small round mirrors.

The marble portraits, which are sliced with circular holes or cut into thin, purposefully misaligned slats, are wryly Python-esque presences. Their facial features are bisected, excavated, and/or scrambled, and two are tipped onto the tops of their skulls. The portraits interact with the other components, which include linear passages limned in gold, with a geometric dynamism that recalls the compositions of the Russian Constructivists. The incisions in the black paper, and the mirrors they reveal, contribute to a trans-disciplinary frisson that sparks a delirious confusion between three dimensions and two.

Ginzel's collages may repeatedly cite the past, but their bearing is all here and now. The black-and-white photographs doubling as surgically deconstructed marble portraits, the precision-cut topographical maps and geometric shapes, the reflectivity of the gold and mirrors, and the three-dimensional properties of the black paper contribute to an immediacy that feels of a piece with our favorite hi-tech brushed-aluminum-and-black-glass objects of desire.

But a surface similarity is where the artworks' resemblance to such elegantly designed devices end; they are neither portals nor transmitters, but containers of their own sets of meanings, none of which they are particularly willing to share. You look into them, literally, through the apertures in the support, and they meet your inquiry with disconnected words in a foreign tongue, or throw your own reflection back at you when you happen upon a mirror.

The world may be so overly mapped, like the mountains in the nether regions of the collages, that we no longer live in a landscape but within a set of coordinates; in contrast, Ginzel's obdurate hoarders of signification, christened with such abstruse names as "Hierophant" (2008), "Limen" (2009) and "Scotoma" (2014), set up a perimeter across which quantitative information shall not pass. They echo the order and chaos of the reality outside their frames without agreeing to its terms and conditions; like the other works in this show, they undermine language and logic as keys to

understanding. Meaning and emptiness, within the currency of the artwork, are equivalents.

Kara Rooney's installations — there are two — each consist of three separate components: an abstract color photograph with its bottom edge covered in a band of roughly applied Hydrocal; a floor-to-ceiling chiffon scrim imprinted with a small black-and-white photo; and a low, irregularly shaped, reflective black platform, with two or three obscure-looking items cast in Hydrocal resting on them.



Kara Rooney, "On Moving Farther Away from Speech, or Hindsight is Never Twenty/Twenty, Installation No. 2" (2015), hydrocal, resin, ceramic, digital photograph, wood, steel and chiffon scrim (photo by LDOphoto.net)

Both share the title "On Moving Farther Away from Speech, or Hindsight is Never Twenty/Twenty," with one designated "No. 2" and the other "No. 3" (both 2015). Rooney, who, among other things, is a widely respected writer and editor at *The Brooklyn Rail*, knows the limits of both art and language, and the point at which you must jettison one in order to immerse yourself in the other.

"On Moving Farther Away from Speech..." defies the encroachment of language on visual art (in its making, qualifying and selling) as resolutely as it mixes disciplines. An abstract photograph encrusted with Hydrocal becomes a sculpture; a sculpture, lying on a black platform whose capricious design is as sculptural as anything else in the installation, is implanted with a photograph. The chiffon scrim behaves both sculpturally and architecturally, dividing the space between the wall-mounted abstract/Hydrocal photo and the black platform. The scrim's muted color and soft texture add a graceful painterly note to the nearly-illegible photograph that's screened into its folds.

The disparity among the components — the photo, the scrim and the platform — is such that the grouping could very easily seem arbitrary or thin, but the conspicuous differences in scale and surface are compensated by a deft interplay of color and space. Correlated through the artist's fierce intelligence and inherent grasp of form, the elements stand apart from, but feel dependent upon, one another. The abstract photograph, exiled to the other side of the curtain from the white objects on the black platform, appears particularly isolated, but the installation would seem truncated and off-kilter without it.

Dense with latency, these installations stand forcefully mute, with the low-lying Hydrocal objects the most unyielding. Each one is distinctly shaped, reminiscent of everyday objects but too removed from their original function to spark recognition. One is short, fluted and cylindrical; another looks like an old-fashioned portable radio; others could be casts from distressed wads of packing material. Most are embedded with tiny black-and-white photos that act as formal accents rather than conveyors of information. The objects' placement on the black platform evokes randomness while simultaneously defying it; a few moments of study will reveal how thoroughly intuitive they are in their construction and arrangement: the formal vocabulary is a complete mismatch — shapes that are flattened or boxlike, rounded or crumpled — but the visual syntax guiding their interaction is flawless.

Of all the works in the show, Rooney's installations, with their spatial disjunctions, abrupt shifts in scale, variegated shapes, heterogeneous materials, and abstract, language-resistant imagery, most viscerally invoke the pang of not-being — the void left by the lover who “cuts noon light / like a blue flower” — in all its searing tenderness.

The connection that the exhibition sets up between the artwork and the lines from Neruda returns the nonverbal, despite its heated resistance, to the verbal. This action, however, doesn't assimilate a visual language into a written one; rather, in its parallel expressions, it avows the capaciousness and mutability of the transmigration of ideas.

[Cuts Noon Light](#) continues at the Brian Morris Gallery (163 Chrystie Street, Lower East Side, Manhattan) through July 26.