

Christine Neill – Integers of Form and Light, by Christopher Stackhouse

In the hollow precincts of contemporary art, dexterity, technical skill, and virtuosity are underrated. Dedication to fundamentals such as drawing and material handling is considered suspect. Attention to such educative detail is often thought to challenge or thwart the progressivism of conceptual art. Christine Neill's practice is the antithesis of that cynical read. Neill dives head first into the confluence of the subjective and the universal. The content of her drawing, painting, printmaking and photography is the natural world. Plant life, rocks, minerals, and biological phenomena establish a pantheon of characters; each have been given close attention, anthropomorphized, and rendered as portraits. Her formal interests lie in the effort to transform the immateriality of light and darkness into compositional structure that elaborates on the symmetries of living organisms and the environment they inhabit. Watercolor is an effective medium to achieve this outcome, and it is a technique that Neill has mastered yet one with which she continues to experiment. Over the course of a four-decade plus career, abstraction is still marginal to her practice. She is resolutely invested in representational art. Still her aesthetic is flexible. It can go from being clinical to poetic, shifting modes from the crisp draftsmanship of her stone drawings to intricate photographic layering processes that veil botanical with zoological imagery.

Five Stages of a Palm (2012-14) is exemplary of Neill's artistic and scientific engagement with interpreting this wilderness. She has blended watercolor and archival ink jet printing on paper, with etching into the protective acrylic glass cover of the frame housing the paper. This stratification of visual elements creates kinetic illusion in static form. The content of the image is bees pollinating date palm trees. As well, palms being evergreens, illustrated are the pinnate leaves and flowers of the tree growing, reproducing, dying and falling off. This cyclical process may be read as an allegory of human maturity, mortality, and timelessness of the spirit. More plainly, it is a meditation on death, decay and rejuvenation. Though Neill seeks to capture the essential characteristics of such subjects and specimens in their natal contexts, she imbues them with a lyricism that attends a tradition in floral paintings. Her *Papaver Die Back* (2004) owes as much to Édouard Manet's *Vase de pivoines sur piédouche* (1864), as it does to bluestocking artist Mary Delany's mosaic *Papaver somniferum, the Opium Poppy* (1776). At the same time, Neill's work can be evaluated among several contemporary practices. For example, conceptual artist Sharon Core's photographic reproductions of famous floral still lifes are as much botanical studies as they are formal exercises in art historical appropriation. Core, like Neill at one point, maintained a garden to grow rare flowers that served as source material for imagery. Each in their own way has pursued richly illusionistic pictorial properties that express the figural complexion of the floral forms reproduced. Moreover, Neill is invested in producing images from firsthand account without remove.

Heuristic in method, there is a morphological aspect to Neill's output. Many of the organisms and their parts depicted throughout her body of work are rendered in isolation as models of their kind. Beyond documenting the act of observation and pointing to existence, there is a symbolist effort especially noticeable where the figures are either compositionally centered or singularly represented in the picture. An attractive series of digital prints made in 2011, also employs a method of photographic montage that tools her subjects with shadow and light. Again with these, she printed on the protective acrylic glass face of the frame. That image then casts a shadow on the print on paper beneath, which is treated as both image content and substrate upon which variation of shadow, depending on the direction of light, is received. The underlying print also becomes a reflective surface that provides a subtle backlighting for the image printed on the acrylic glass. This process gives works from the series, such as *Cape Kelp* and *Lunaria Rings*, an emblematic aura. Seaweed is metamorphosed into a star: seedpods into dancing anatomy. Neill's exploration of the material conditions in art making here, notably, incorporates the frame into the image content by binding two-dimensional with three-dimensional elements. However practical in application it is to use the frame for conservation purposes, to treat the frame as integral to the subject-content of the art evokes gestural possibilities that Neill has yet to explore but still may.

Outside limits of representing an absent subject or specimen removed from its natural environment, Neill reproduces select viewing experiences where intellectual sensations meet artistic intuition. Taking and editing photographs redoubles initial encounters with both objects and environments that inspire reflection. Printmaking in her practice is mostly subsidiary but instrumental. It is one of the tasks that constitute the design of her practice. Keeping record of shapes, patterns, and symmetries that appear, in both built and naturally occurring environments, provides her with a store of form reference to (re)interpret the physical world. Giving attention to the beauty of discrete parts that otherwise aggregate, and goes unnoticed, opens up visibility itself to more flexible meaning. It re-invigorates the alchemical power of metaphor. The effort to transform likenesses into purer optical energy is a staple exercise in late modernist art. Earlier on there are Piet Mondrian's paintings of trees that he gradually abstracted to simple linear and planar relationships in a pictorial field. More romantically, Joan Mitchell's brushy *Cerulean Blue Tree* (1964) comes to mind, where connection between form and color is the focus. Mitchell's paintings and drawings of lime trees (*Tilleul* as many of them are titled) use color to tease out relationships between light and shadow among branch structure and leaf pattern. Yet, Neill has avoided being 'painterly' while at the same time indexing painting, as she uses photo-based media processes. Artists Vija Celmins and Philip Taaffe can be productively constellated with Neill on these bases. With Celmins, it is the use of natural elements like spider webs, ocean surfaces, moon surface, star fields, clouds, and other naturally occurring phenomena as singular subjects in drawing or painting. Celmins draws and paints in duotone fashion, marrying photography with draftsmanship, the mechanical with the manual,

covering the support base (most effectively on paper) from edge to edge. She places viewers in nameless places (fields of vision) with little to no locational context. Among decorative elements from architecture, textiles, cultural and religious motifs that Taaffe borrows and repurposes as formal content in his paintings, he has often turned to animal forms for graphic power and compositional experimentation. His paintings *Cobra Nocturne* (1997) and *Calligraphic Study 1* (1996) contain silkscreened reproductions of the same Monocled Cobra in striking position rhythmically patterned on canvas supports. Taaffe's project, however different, presents substantial crossover with Neill's. His *Pteris Viscosa*, also from 1996, could be viewed as a meditation on the structural properties of a type of fern.

In 1968 Neill made a series of nocturnal outdoor drawings of trees. Moonlight was the only available light source illuminating the tall grove that she chose to draw. In a sequence of just a few drawings the passage of time is palpable. The play of light, depending on the moon's position in the sky, indicates the different hours captured each evening. There was a fearless interest in what the formal knowledge of the repeated exercise would yield. The artist was sitting in the almost dark, ostensibly in or near the woods. Variations in tonal value shift in the pictorial field of vertical linearity, accented by hatch marks, exceed the edge boundaries of the sheets of paper upon which they have been placed. It is a unified, however cropped, vision of tree trunks and the spaces between them. Light is used to describe darkness, and between these an atmosphere brimming with mystery is perceived. Albeit in a different manner, night still intrigues Neill. Her most recent use of photography gives more calm attention to the aphotic atmosphere that follows nightfall. *Night Bog* (2014) is a direct return to the compositional character and ambience of her tree drawings from 1968. Replacing penciled chiaroscuro with cinematic chromaticism, her camera picks up a hue cycle of cool nighttime color: blues, green, deep brown, black, violet, and gray fog. Plant life abounds. The plethora of steep tree trunks in the foreground pierce the top and bottom edges of the cropped scene. In it, Neill catches a relative abundance of light. Accenting the uniformed darkness of the photo is a thin, fading band of moonlight seeping across the top half of the image. The sky and treetops reflected in the water pooling on the forest floor give the sensation of infinite space. Haunting, peaceful, the setting is reminiscent of an establishing shot in a suspense film. *Terraza* (2015) shows an elegant balance of Neill's environmental and aesthetic preoccupations. Taken from what appears to be an interior view looking out upon a terrace and night sky, architectural delineation harmonizes with silhouettes of nature and the horizon line fading in the background. Sans the presence of human or animal figure, save the gaze of the photographer, a poetics of silence and/or absence is being forged. Where the manmade and wilderness meet, particularly in the sublunar milieu of Neill's latest photographs, her generative analysis of the expressive quality integral to all form encourages a refined awareness of the dialogue between human life and the environment that sustains its support.