

“Elizabeth Chiles and John Swanger: Lumens & Currents” at grayDUCK Gallery

This exhibition has a softness that's seductive, but it also speaks to our timeless wonder at the workings of wildness

Reviewed by Sam Anderson-Ramos, Fri., Jan. 6, 2017



#55 & 57 by John Swanger

The softness of "Lumens & Currents" is its seduction, a gathering of gauzy forms and shapes that are distinct from one another but still cohesive. The work is by two artists, Elizabeth Chiles and John Swanger, but you might not know it by looking. Chiles' Time Capsule: A bouquet of roses and a blueberry is a two-parter, a grid of 10 and a single framed piece off to one side. The pigment in the grids comes from actual ground-up flowers, which results in various shades of purple and pink that will apparently change during the course of the exhibition as they are exposed to the sun over time. I don't know how the piece might change after my viewing, but the incarnation I saw had a lovely kind of haziness to it, satisfyingly collected in a diagram that gives the piece presence in a whisper, an experience similar to Swanger's #55 & 57, a set of two large varnished pieces, "paper on linen," painted with baby blue and slightly rosy shades that echo those in Time Capsule. The varnished surfaces of the paper give the two images a topographical look, like you could run your hand over them and feel the Earth or some more ethereal place, possibly the sky itself or the air. The pieces also shine, giving the baby blue piece a shimmer like the ocean seen from above.

At this very moment, I'm seated near a garden of succulents and other green things flourishing in our tepid winter. The tending to and manipulation of natural elements, delicate and ancient at once, is like the execution and layout of "Lumens & Currents," a collecting of the gentilities and processes of the natural world, like landscape painting, though there are no traditional landscapes here, only suggestions of landscapes, notions of them. The closest thing to a typical landscape are Swanger's Blue Cliff (unsigned, n.d.) and Mountain (unsigned, n.d.), found paintings that he covered with aluminum leaf, so the images work more like jeweled charms or vistas in braille than historical landscape paintings. Otherwise, we only receive hints at the wisdom of the natural – flowers, clouds, and so forth (though no animals, curiously) – the way we might wandering through a massive botanical garden or a peaceful meadow hidden by trees. "Garden," "tended," and "peaceful" are essential vocab because the show doesn't impress danger upon me or the awesome. It's more gentle than that, like an old lady's backyard – sipping iced tea among the roses, placing a bouquet on the dining room table. That's just fine, because every attempt we make to know nature is a tending, and the moments we manage to honor and cherish them, as in a garden, are peaceful, meditative ones – they are transcendent and mysterious. Chiles' lumen prints capture the temporariness of a plant with the lightness of photography; her Window shows us glowing curtains to the outside world; Swanger's paintings, like #65 and #55 & 57, mentioned above, are the rippling curtains we can touch; his found paintings covered with aluminum leaf are titters at the joke we play on ourselves, that we can duplicate the dignity of our spontaneous world. But his objects, like the entire show, are also nods of agreement – that yes, our timeless wonder at the workings of wildness, which includes ourselves, is a worthy calling, and that our collusion with the wildness is real.

“Elizabeth Chiles and John Swanger: Lumens & Currents”
grayDUCK Gallery, 2213 E. Cesar Chavez
www.grayduckgallery.com
Through Jan. 15