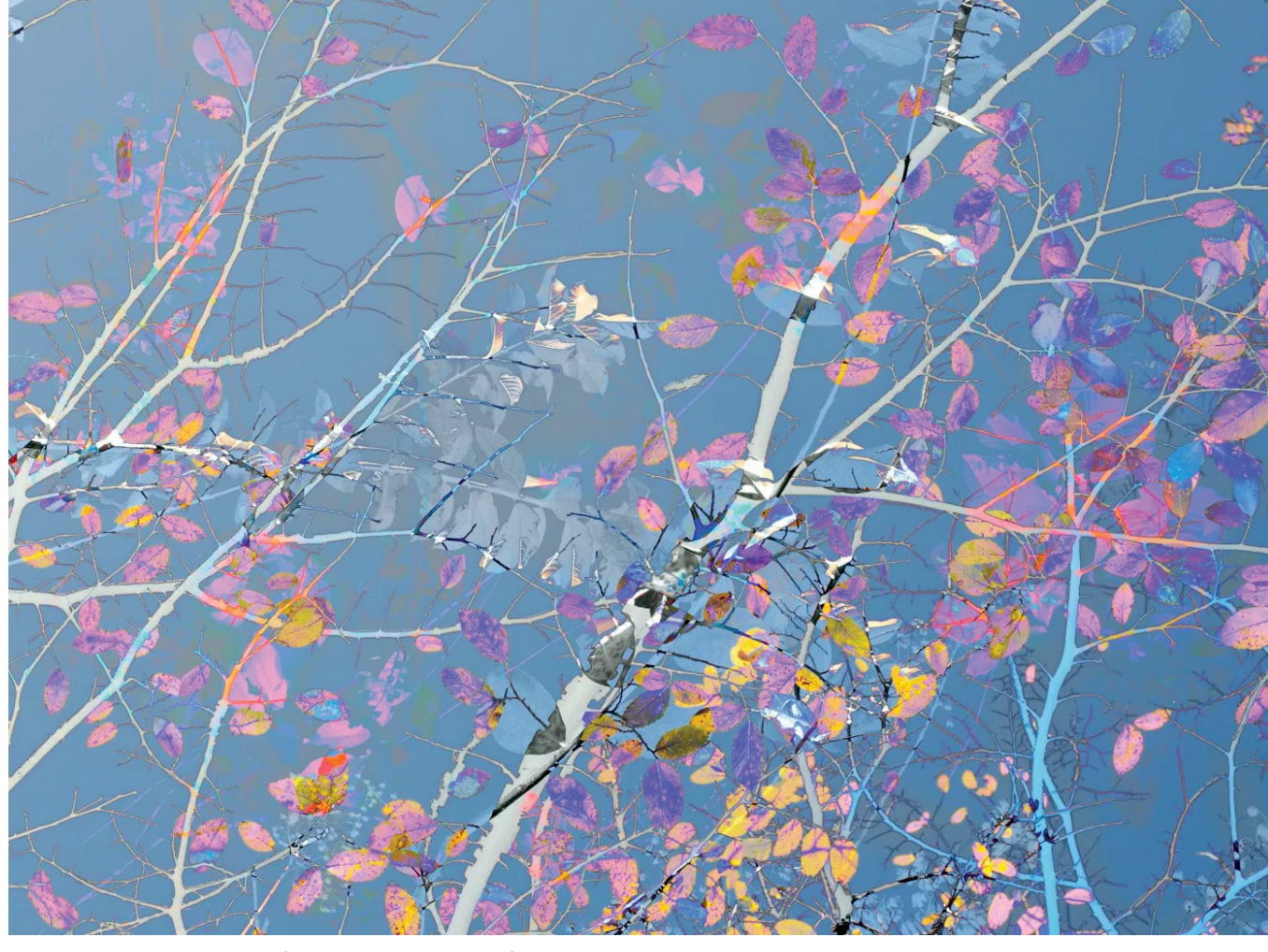


Weaving light: In her newest photographic work, Elizabeth Chiles embraces serenity

By Erin Keever - March 29, 2018



Elizabeth Chiles, "Weave (September 20, 2017)," photo collage. All images courtesy the artist.

No one can accuse Elizabeth Chiles of being superficial. The Austin-based artist invests a great deal of time contemplating the meaning of life and attempting to make sense of her own.

She says: "The work I have to do, is to turn a sense of goodness and well-being into something that matches my life. Not just through the making of a photo, but through dialogue with people, through conversing and interacting."

I sat down with Chiles recently to find out just how this personal mission was working out for her. I meet up with her as she's taking a break from the confines of her studio in the Canopy complex, sitting feet up, on a bench in the sun. It seems appropriate. Chiles is an artist aware of her natural surroundings, especially as they relate to conditions of light.

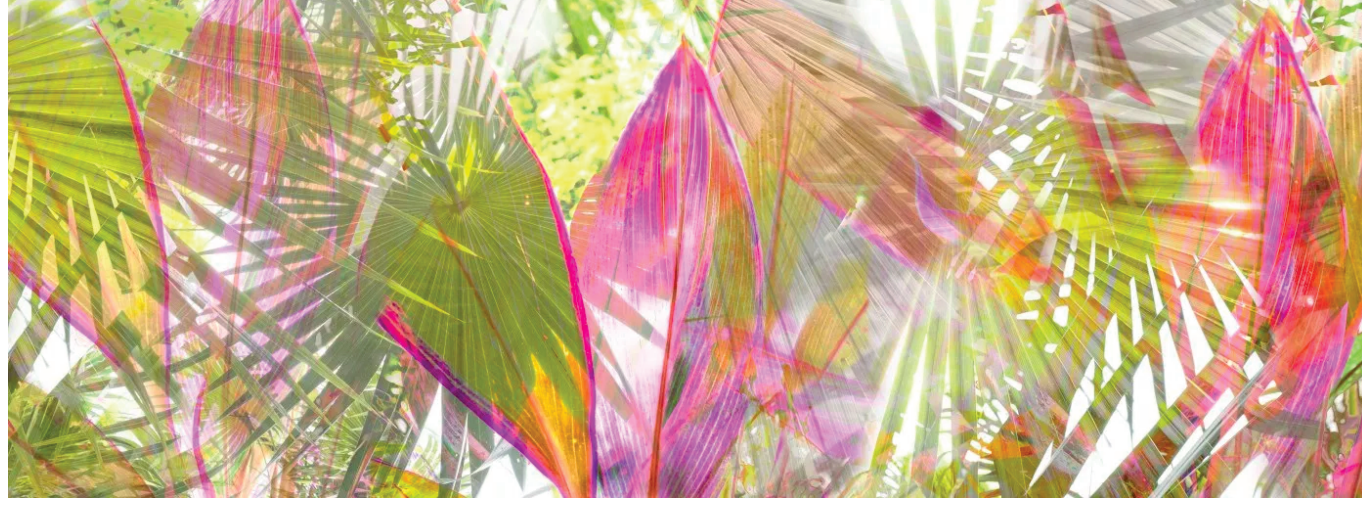
When we get to her second-floor studio space, she asks if I would like the lights on or off, relaying that inside she works with the lights off most of the time. "Normally sitting here, near the window, it is so relaxing. I love it."

Surrounded by proofs of her photography pinned to the walls, she unravels the course of her art career.

Born in Austin and raised in Houston, Chiles did not start out in studio art, photography or design. Rather she came at it through a major in art history. As an undergraduate at Columbia University she took a class in 19th century Modernism. Her professor, Jonathan Cray, spoke about the beginnings of photography, viewing devices, panoramas and J.M.W. Turner's painting.

And Chiles had a revelation.

"Everything I ever wanted to know is in this class. Prior to this I never would have identified these as my interests. It was only when he began talking about them that I thought this is exactly what I want to be talking about, everything from my childhood, my family history, my perception of the natural world, poetics, analysis and intellection all came together in this moment."



Elizabeth Chiles, "Weave (June 27, 2017)."

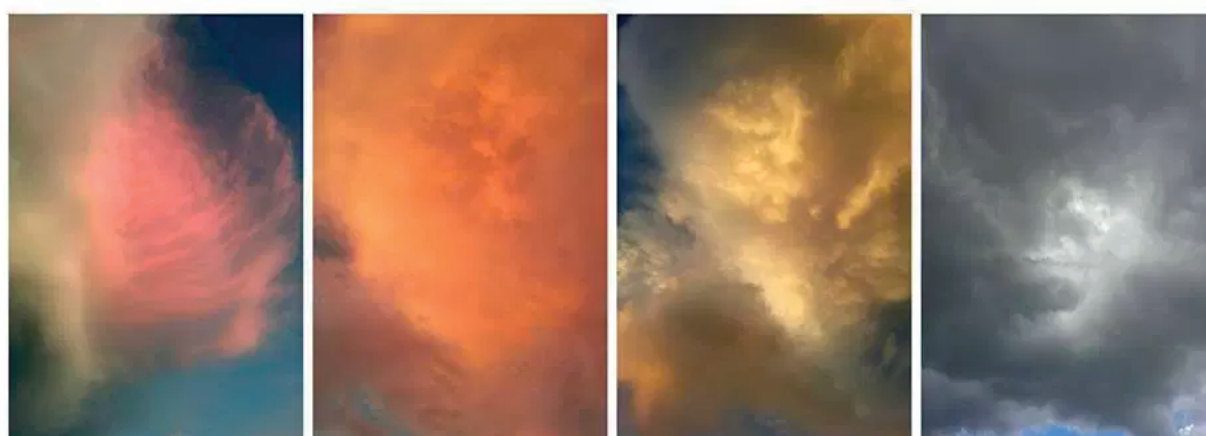
While it would be several years before she got any real studio or foundational photography classes under her belt, in undergraduate school Chiles had a moment of conviction. "I got a rare gift of knowing... I remember where I was standing in my dorm room and my awareness that I was a photographer."

Following Columbia, Chiles worked in Boston at the Barbara Krakow, now Krakow Witkin Gallery, learning about the promotional and commercial sides of contemporary art, communicating with clients and dealing in sales. Here too she got an education in the practical aspects of exhibition and installation, working with framers, inspecting frames and learning to appreciate different qualities of woods. She built a dark room under a loft where she slept in her apartment. Looking back, she regrets being foolish enough to sleep over toxic chemicals but remembers at that point being still essentially self-taught, young and hungry.

Once she had spent a few years assembling a portfolio and getting feedback from colleagues, Chiles moved west to attend the San Francisco Art Institute for an MFA in photography. "It seems late to me," she says, of her graduate studies. "But I was coming at it more from a thinking perspective, not a making perspective."

After graduate school and a stint at respected photo institution, Fraenkel Gallery, Chiles moved back to Austin in 2007. Acknowledging that she is a "leap before you look" kind of person, she soon realized that local art jobs were scarce. Chiles worked at Lora Reynolds Gallery for a couple of years and taught at the college level in and around Austin for six years.

When asked why she left teaching, she pauses and answers, "well my daughter was born... I wasn't totally conscious of the decision to stop...I had a show coming up and I needed to spend time with my family and found that the more time I spend in my studio, the more successful my work becomes."



Elizabeth Chiles, "With Time," photographs on aluminum, 2016.

Some may know Chiles for her abstract pictures of subjects from nature. She did a series of vast tree canopies seen from below, and other series of close-ups of grasses and meditations on clouds. She talks about her images as being built over time, referring to them as composite collages.

"What if I flatten it? What if I duplicate it and flip it back on top of itself? Then I can get a weaving pattern."

Whether abstractions of clouds or grasses, or her newly designated "weavings," Chiles' images are layered and manipulated carefully until they feel right to her.

A long unfurled vertical print on the floor commands attention in her studio. The format is reminiscent of Chinese scrolls, while silhouetted foliage, leaves and delicate branches resemble Japanese Ukiyo-e style. Chiles tells me that the work is a proof printed that morning. She wants to comb over every detail, scrutinize each inch and clean up any transition points on the digital file.



Elizabeth Chiles, "Weave (August 8, 2017)," photo collage.

spaciousness and serenity, Chiles' new images embrace open spaces, similar to those seen in Japanese stylistic tradition.

At times images possess fluctuating properties as luminous fragmentary forms rest upon and shift amidst glowing, split -fountain-like backdrops. Chiles says she wants to offer an "atmosphere that becomes the plane" and a "sensual takeaway from a place," revealing the energy of that place including the colors, sounds and feelings.

In planning her upcoming exhibition, "Elizabeth Chiles: Weave" at Grayduck Gallery, deciding how to install the prints has been a significant part of the process. Some photos suggest human scale and relate to the body like a full-length mirror. They will hang from custom designed dowels, gracefully draping down onto wooden platforms.



Elizabeth Chiles in her studio. Photo by Susan Scafati.

Also on the horizon for Chiles is a new book of poetry. (She has self-published books of her photos and poems before.) Chiles notes that the origin of the word "text" relates to the word "weave" and she is attentive to how text is woven and regards the combination of text and image as similar to the act of weaving.

"I think I write when I have a sense of openness, clarity and spaciousness, poems are somehow sparing. They are reflections on consciousness and play back and forth between and exterior world and an interior world."

She will have a poetry performance at The Contemporary Austin's Laguna Gloria site during the run of the Grayduck show.

As we finish up, Chiles reflects on the many hands that contributed to her exhibition, the interaction and the dialogue between editors, designers, wood-workers and framers. She mentions her friend and colleague Julie Nathalielsz, who will lead a workshop and a performance at Grayduck, entitled SEED/BED, as part of Fusebox Festival. Nathalielsz is a dancer who shares Chiles' interests in the body and perception, materiality and immateriality.

Chiles says, "It feels kind of a like an important moment for me, I am giving my life's work and my ideas form."