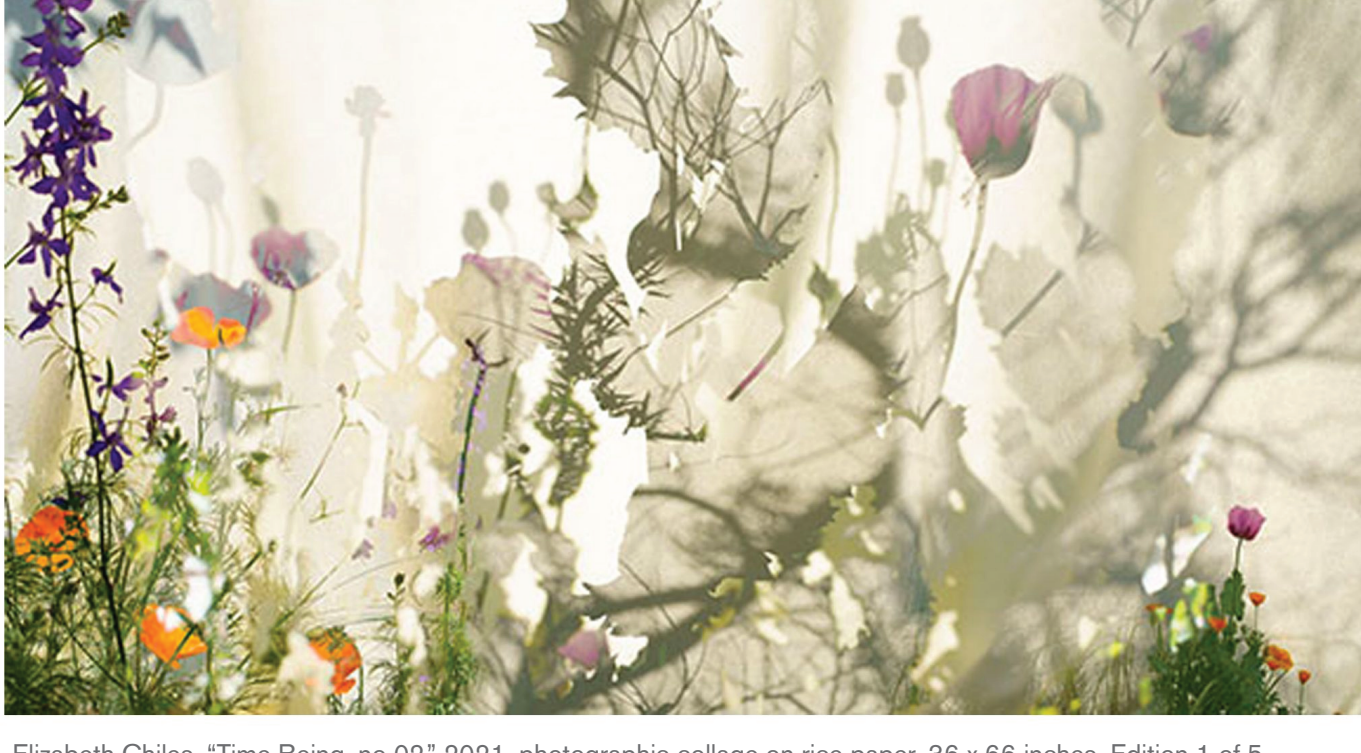


Eternal spring: Elizabeth Chiles at grayDUCK Gallery

Exploring impermanence through a gentle flux of light and dark



Elizabeth Chiles, "Time Being, no 02," 2021, photographic collage on rice paper, 36 x 66 inches. Edition 1 of 5. Courtesy the artist and grayDUCK Gallery

By Barbara Purcell - September 1, 2021

Elizabeth Chiles is an aspiring master gardener, and it shows in her art. In "Time Being," on view at grayDUCK Gallery, Chiles has ventured into her own yard and a friend's garden (as well as the arroyo that connects them) for a body of photographs and photographic collages that capture the beauty of nature and the mystery of life. Sunlight and soft linen envelop these images in luminous and liminal ways, offering, what Chiles calls, a dream within a dream.

Inspired by Austin's near-perfect spring early in the pandemic, these works recall a quieter time when many of us were staying close to home. Back then, Chiles spent her days exploring the surrounding environs with her young daughter, witnessing life in an up-close and almost magical manner.



Elizabeth Chiles, "Time Being, no. 15," 2021, diptych, photographic collage on rice paper, 36 x 50 inches. Edition 1 of 9. Courtesy the artist and grayDUCK Gallery

"I love being outside, but this was a whole different scale," she recalls. "It was a unique time in bonding with my daughter and the plants all around us, but it couldn't last forever."

It couldn't last forever, but it did plant a seed. Chiles was already experimenting with a found piece of fabric yardage for her photography, its tactility and transparency adding a new layer to her ethereal images. But the work took on new meaning once her neighborhood became the whole of her world. Family, friends, and nature formed a fascia not unlike the fabric folded into these photos; connecting to things both seen and unseen.

For the next year, Elizabeth continued playing with the cloth while contemplating the pandemic. Her photographic collages – which appear concomitantly hand-painted and computer generated – emit a surreal, serene feeling. Her individual photographs catch sight of inner lives that might otherwise go unnoticed. The result is an evocative garden on the gallery walls, carrying the viewer through the arroyo of open imagination.

"This space between the material world and the immaterial world is the central focus of my work," says Chiles. "It's what led me to work with the fabric in the first place, for that physicality and ephemerality."

The linen maintains a poetic presence throughout, altering perception and enhancing our connection to the invisible fascia at play. The weave of the canvas merges with the weave of the paper to create a trompe l'oeil of time and space. Flowers, mainly poppies, emerge as psychic portals into the unknown.

"Time Being, no 7" (2021) is a single red poppy waving off to the side while the background billows as a blank canvas. (The wind cooperated that day, I am told.) Chiles tells me this particular photograph connects her back to that pandemic spring like no other work; she can't imagine the show without it.



Elizabeth Chiles, "Time Being, no. 07," 2021, archival pigment print on rice paper, 11 3/4 x 7 3/4 inches. Courtesy the artist and grayDUCK Gallery

"The more I worked with the poppy the more I realized nothing else compared," she expresses. "There's something on the other side of it, as opposed to a rose which is sort of singular and present. The poppy is a fantasy in the future."

"Poppy Seeing Poppies I – XV" (2021) is a series of 15 smaller works with a graphic repetition not unlike Warhol's Marilyns. (Less pop, more poppy.) These 12-by-8 inch portraits, five across on three shelves, lean against the wall with style and grace. Shadowy cut-outs and vibrant color distract from the subtle folds of linen immortalized by soft white light. Each poppy has its own persona, its own agenda, but when stepping back, you can easily observe them in conversation with one another.

"For most artists, when you do something and you believe in it, you want to do it again and again. This is the thing; and if I do it five times, you're like, she is doing that thing," Chiles explains. "It's about how the works interact with each other. Doing it this way really gets people to slow down and look at it – and it gives a lot back to the viewer."



Elizabeth Chiles, "Time Being (Poppy Seeing Poppies I – XV)," 2021, photographic collage on rice paper, 12 x 8 inches, each. Courtesy the artist and grayDUCK Gallery

The other repetitious set in the show is a 34-panel series of lumen prints, one of Chiles' earliest works involving cloth. "Echo the Sun" (2020) are long exposures (between one and three hours) of sunflowers placed on photosensitive paper left outside. These camera-less prints create an old-fashioned impression of nature's fleeting beauty. A bright splotch on each sheet could pass for a fading flower, or a dying sun. A missing panel at the bottom right-hand corner serves an ellipsis for the cosmically unquantifiable.

"Time Being" is an apt title for what was supposed to be a quantifiably post-pandemic world. The phrase connotes enlightenment as much as impatience.

"We are time beings as well," Chiles points out. "We're always thinking, to some degree, of our mortality."

Each of these works explore impermanence through a gentle flux of light and dark. Shadows of poppies crane their necks from behind an otherworldly curtain while sunlight casts endless beauty on a season that will soon come to an end. The scrim is getting heavier, more sculptural. The most recent works move beyond the moment in which these seeds were first planted.

"The fold and the physicality really take over, but also the weave," says Chiles. "The weaving together of fabric and the weaving together of photos is a metaphor for community. All of the relationships, all of the gardens, it's done with care and intention – that's why it's in all of these pictures."

"Time Being" runs through October 3 at grayDUCK Gallery, grayduckgallery.com