

Elise Nicol's Composited Photographic Landscapes

By Arthur Whitman | Posted: Wednesday, May 22, 2013 12:00 am

Transmuted into ghostly presences, images of branches and foliage anchor Elise Nicol's abstract, photo-based prints tenuously in recognizable reality. Dark silhouettes, patches of diffuse, amorphous light and color, tangles of stiff lines—they suggest nature seen as if in a transformed state of consciousness.

Her process of making these is complex and rigorous. It involves a sequence of photographing, compositing, re-photographing, and a pigment transfer technique that fixes the final image. Layers of acrylic paint and varnish finish the work. A close look at her work reveals a rich and sometimes unnerving mixture of photographic, digital, drawn and painted (or painterly) aspects.

Nicol, a former Ithaca resident, is currently showing seven framed prints at the Corners Gallery. All of them are identical in size (22" x 30" or in the case of one upright piece, 30" x 22"). Living up to their oblique titles, the pieces that comprise "Strange How Hard It Rains Now" demonstrate the range and consistency of her vision and the complexity and precision of her craft.

Each print is divided into four equal-sized segments, with thin white borders faintly apparent. This reflects the separate sheets of film used to transfer the final image. Although the images are otherwise continuous, this act of measured geometry adds yet another layer of depth. Together with the irregular outer borders of the printed areas, a collage-like feeling is imparted.

The "necks" in *Landscape with Broken Necks* appear to be those of flowers: branches and blossoms silhouetted in an indeterminate shade of dark against a pale soup of similarly hard to place hue. They appear upside-down, as if one was gazing down at reflections in water—an impression abetted by a transparent wave-like stroke painted across the middle.

The dark branches form a dense, impenetrable thicket in *Morning Spills from the Wreckage*, perhaps the show's most haunting piece. Against them—and against a splotchy beige-brown ground—pulsate globes of orange and white light suggesting ethereal flowers.

Slow Drip of Days Long Gone is another standout. Punctuated by scorch-like patches of dense black, though them the picture seems to radiate an incandescent glow. Spotlight-like areas of luminous white maintain their crispness of outline while seeming to diffuse their light throughout the more amorphous areas of fiery yellow-orange and lime green that dominate. In *As With Morning Spills* one can almost sense the heat and the thickness of the air.

Recognizable imagery seems to recede further in both *No Hell Like This Hell on Earth* and *There's Always Someone Throwing Matches Around*. If only for the color, the former suggests immersion underwater, thick with cloudy white diffusion and crisp white sparks. Earthy grainy red suffuses the later piece, dotted with rows of black ovals—perhaps suggestive of burn marks.

Night Kisses Day is the sole upright piece. A curtain-like filigree of tiny leaves covers the surface, appearing both in a fiery tone and melting into the shadowy background purple-blue-gray. It is as delicate and sweet as the title suggests.

Both photography and painting in their traditional forms involve some combination of optics (if only the human eye) and chemistry. Perception melds with matter. It can be said that in this age of ubiquitous digital photography—shown on screens or printed by means of obscure technology—we have lost sight of this potential kinship, and of the artistic potential of the photograph as something robustly physical, familiar to anyone who has worked in a darkroom.

Of course digital processing was part of the creation of these images. This is particularly noticeable and problematic in *Just This Side of Memory*, which dominated by a dense tangle of stiff, grass-like lines. (At least some of them appear to be drawn.) Some of these lines appear heavily pixilated, an effect with a certain harshness that is hard to reconcile with Nicol's dream-like pastoral aesthetic.

In other cases, particularly in *Slow Drip*, the effect of (what appears to be) digital texture revealed on careful inspection is something like a minor shock. One was expecting to find something else.

For the most part, however, Nicol's is able to traverse this difficult, slippery terrain with finesse and intelligence. Each piece here is a world unto itself, with its own logic and its own poetry. Nevertheless, a strong overall vision is clearly at work.