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91st Annual International Competition

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The Print Center

by Anne Cross

Given the method by which artists are selected each year for The Print Center's Annual International Competition, it appeared to be mere coincidence, and not a result of curatorial initiative, that this year's winners all produced exhibitions that interrogated the passage of time and the affect of the impermanent. The art of TR Ericsson, Yoonmi Nam, and Serena Perrone demonstrated not only the Competition's aim of highlighting artists who utilize photography and printmaking in conceptually and materially intriguing ways, but also displayed thematic similarities so strong that they prompt new considerations of the print medium. Though varied in form and process, the work of Ericsson, Nam, and Perrone all demonstrated a clear interest in how matrix-based image processes such as photography and printmaking could be used to explore themes of temporality, deterioration, bodily and environmental decay, and the instability of memory. By extension, the works also prompted questions about agency and the formation of knowledge, both in artistic practice and personal experience.



Yoonmi Nam: Still, 2017, installation view. Photo: Jaime Alvarez

Entering through the ground floor galleries of The Print Center's home on Latimer Street, we first encountered a small and subtly poetic installation by Yoonmi Nam. Framed on the walls were a series of prints that depicted delicate flower arrangements emerging from disposable containers. Using the traditional processes of Japanese woodblock printing and lithography, Nam created works that played with an uncertain tension between ephemerality and timelessness, between the natural quality of the flowers and the commercial origins of the containers. *Prairie Ikebana* featured a handful of wildflowers blooming from a Styrofoam clamshell, and *Pop Corn!* showed a single flowering branch reaching forth from a popcorn container, the kind you might receive at a county fair. Like a plant growing from a crack in the sidewalk, the flowers seemed to defy the disposability and impermanence of their vessel.



Yoonmi Nam, POP CORN!, 2016

Accompanying the prints were several sculptural objects variously depicting ever-more disposable and quotidian objects, including plastic bags and food containers. There was something humbling about the attention and care that Nam has bestowed upon takeout

bags with that ever-present yellow smiley face, or crushed Styrofoam containers, broken as if they'd been stepped on; the deceptively realistic bags were, in fact, printed on fine Japanese paper, and what looked like Styrofoam was really porcelain. Displayed on pedestals throughout the gallery, Nam both elevated their value and invited viewers to take a closer look, to inspect their delicate and fragile material. As containers of our quotidian habits, these containers are also relics of our lives, our values and our vulnerabilities. Their remaking into works of fine art presented a contrasting yet concurrent sense of time, both eternal and fleeting, forcing us to question the temporality of such objects in our own worlds. Indeed, though these objects that we encounter everyday are trash, created to be used and discarded even more swiftly than cut flowers, their presence in landfills and on our streets belies their intended disposability. In particular, the Styrofoam containers evoke their persistent presence through our knowledge that unlike the flowers, they will not biodegrade. Nam's work thus seemed to offer an eternal solution to the inevitable decay of such impermanent things, as if, by rendering such images in porcelain and fine paper, she has suspended them in time, like a fly in amber.

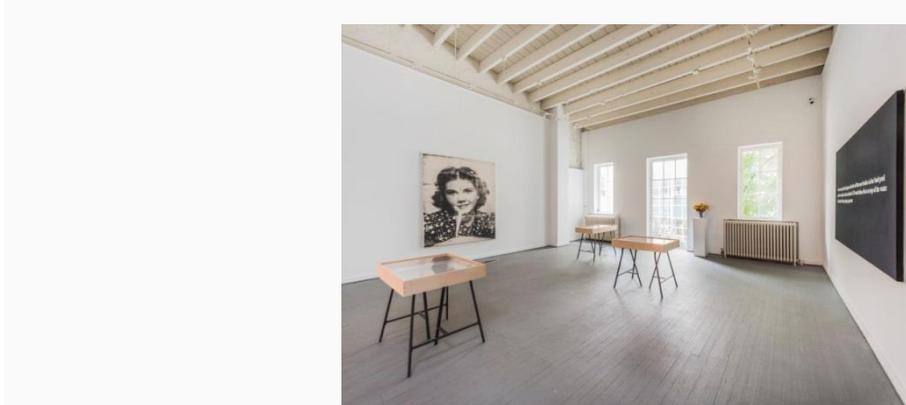


Yoonmi Nam, Take Out (Csirke-Fogo), 2015.
Photo: Jaime Alvarez



Yoonmi Nam, Take Out (Thank You For Your Patronage), 2016.
Photo: Jaime Alvarez

Upstairs in the second floor galleries we found two shows by the artists TR Ericsson and Serena Perrone that dealt with similar themes of memory and affect as it relates to temporality and decay. In his respective exhibition, Ericsson built an archive of memory, evoking familial artifacts – such as letters, photographs, and his grandmother’s handbag – as a way to chronicle his own painful past and explore the powers of commemoration. Though the information contained within the archive was not necessarily fully knowable to an outsider, the way that the artist played with the phantom qualities of his referents provoked a sense of mourning and loss to the viewer.

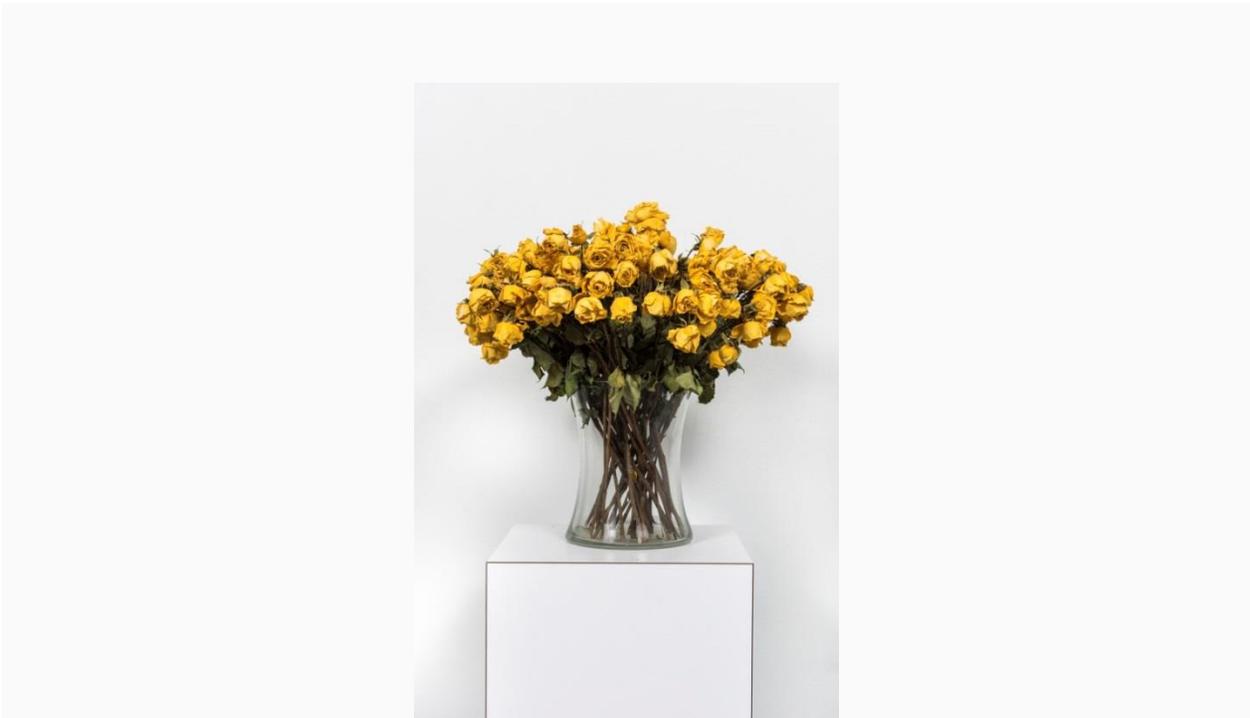


TR Ericsson: *Jeanne*, 2017, installation view.
Photo: Jaime Alvarez

In one of the most striking objects, a painterly work entitled *Jeanne*, Ericsson used the funerary ashes of his grandmother as the raw material for a screen print. Depicted at a young age, the woman’s portrait blurs and fades into the muslin ground. No doubt a result of the unstable medium, a large fissure runs from her face and across the front of her body, calling to mind the fracturing of one’s identity that occurs as one’s family members attempt to reconcile what they knew of someone after their death. A related work entitled *Trellis* consisted of a faded photographic landscape produced from the residue of nicotine, like the ghost of a heavy smoker who has left a room after a long time of habitation. Like the portrait of *Jeanne*, the image hovered between presence and absence, visible and yet resistant to total visual acquisition. Accompanying the installation was a vase of yellow roses – the symbol of friendship – that gallery attendants were instructed to slowly let wither and die over the course of the exhibition, a work that Ericsson entitled *Memento Mori*.



TR Ericsson, *Jeanne*,
2016. Photo: Jaime Alvarez



TR Ericsson, Memento Mori, 2017.
Photo: Jaime Alvarez

As objects produced from matrix-based processes, we understand that some sort of unseen material artifact existed to produce these images, whether a film negative, a woodblock, a lithographic stone, or a silkscreen. By using such processes to engage with the dichotomies of presence and absence, between the seeming stability of corporeal life and the instability of memory, Ericsson's work prompts us to wonder whether all print-based artworks are then simply relics, *memento mori* of some phantom process to which we do not bear witness.

Moving across the second floor galleries, Serena Perrone's work expanded outward from Ericsson's more intimate familial history to a larger view of time and from an interior, emotional landscape to a landscape of subjectivity informed by both internal and external conditions. Perrone's exhibition was also the most varied of the three competition winners, employing a wide variety of processes including etching, aquatint, gum bichromate, cyanotypes, and sculpture to create works that combined elements of her own history, the history of Italy, and the history of the printed image. The title of Perrone's exhibition, *Fata Morgana*, refers to a mirage that is often seen in the Strait of Messina off the coast of Sicily, from where Perrone's family originates and where much of this work was made. Like the mirage itself, Perrone's work plays on our individual subjectivities, engaging our position as viewers to emphasize the instability of observation and perception. For Perrone perception is decidedly a liminal space in which the interior territory of our identity is constantly shaped and reformed as it abuts with the exterior territories of landscape and intrapersonal relationships, transitions that can be both productive and destructive.



Serena Perrone, *Fata Morgana*, 2017, installation view.
Photo: Jaime Alvarez

One suite of images, a series of etchings entitled *Fragments: Revisited*, was the result of intergenerational practice and fragmented collaboration between Perrone and her grandmother. Beginning with a 1962 book of poetry that her grandmother published under a pen name, Perrone used titles from the table of contents as seeds to cultivate new poems through which she examined her own experiences, as if filtering her own subjectivity through the palimpsest of familial history. The resultant prints combine fragmented imagery of jewel tones – like shards of colored glass – with text made using the light-sensitive method of cyanotype. Together these elements evoke both the artist's fascination with the singularity of Venetian light, as well as a greater sense of permeation, of a permeable membrane existing between the outside and inside, between the past and present, and between memory and experience.



Serena Perrone, *Fragments Revisited*, 2014 – 2017.
Photo: Jaime Alvarez

Perrone also successfully translates her ideas to three-dimension, in works such as *Something is About to Happen*, a series of gum biochromate prints mounted on a low, round wooden base that recalls the shape of sundials, and *Fata Morgana / Mondo Nuovo (Tusa)*, a porcelain peepshow with architectural facades and viewing holes situated on either end. Gazing through either aperture, one's eye is drawn back into a mysterious and ambivalent mythological landscape populated with layers of verdant gardens, classical statues, and mundane, contemporary details like laundry hanging on a line. The setting is at once enchanting and unnerving, as we bear witness to a hidden narrative communicated through the exchange of glances between the paper marble figures. While

immersed in this space of looking, the world of the gallery seems to disappear, leaving us simultaneously transfixed and disturbed.



Serena Perrone, *Something is About to Happen*, 2016.
Photo: Jaime Alvarez



Serena Perrone, *Fata Morgana*, 2017, installation view
[detail view of *Fata Morgana* / *Mondo Nuovo* (Tusa)
in installation]. Photo: Jaime Alvarez



Serena Perrone, *Fata Morgana* / *Mondo Nuovo* (Tusa)
[detail of aperture]. Photo: Jaime Alvarez

Perrone describes her work as situated in the liminal space between the known and the unknown, and from the precarious perspective of one who is neither completely on the

inside nor the outside. By engaging the viewer's sense of his or her own unstable capacities for perception, *Fata Morgana* thus activates our own uncertainties in a way that blurs the lines between a detached, aesthetic experience and a more subjective and emotional form of observation. Perrone's work thus prompts us to question our own agency, as we are simultaneously both seemingly autonomous gallery visitors and subjective bodies constantly in affective transition.

In using matrix-based processes of image making to interrogate the frameworks of memory and history, these artists challenge the structures of knowledge formation and, by extension, individual and historical agency. By activating various layers of temporal displacement and decay, whether in Nam's juxtaposition of floral and commercial detritus, Ericsson's *memento moris*, or Perrone's evocation of the palimpsest that is Italy *writ large*, these works ask how memory is formed against the passage of time, what our relationship is to memory, and how such a spectral relic of temporal change as memory might be represented. Indeed, what are prints themselves if not relics of process and transformation, and records of duration and deferred agency?

In the printmaking process, though the artist makes the matrix, which may be a block or a negative, the artist is not the singular or, even, primary agent of artistic formation. Instead agency is deferred and distributed from the artist to the matrix, the press, the paper itself. By engaging with such conceptual and material disjunctions, Ericsson, Nam, and Perrone work within exciting new parameters of artistic practice, ultimately producing work that is not only affective and moving, but also of an exciting conceptual rigor.

Anne Cross is a Philadelphia-based art historian and curator. She is a third year PhD student in Art History at the University of Delaware, where her research focuses primarily on photography and print culture of the long nineteenth century. Anne received her Master's degree in 2013 from the Institute of Fine Arts at New York University. Prior to attending the University of Delaware, she spent two years as the Luce Fellow in American Prints at the Philadelphia Museum of Art.