

Aesthetica



Interview with Brittany Nelson, Exhibiting with Morgan Lehman Gallery at VOLTA NY

Richmond-based artist Brittany Nelson's medium of choice is the tintype, a unique direct-positive exposure used for portrait photography. Tintype in the 1850's was the foremost technological advancement in photography, and Nelson adds a further dimension to this process, combining it with 21st century practices and bringing it into the purely material realm. Nelson is a 2015 Creative Capital Artist Grant recipient and is presented at VOLTA NY by Morgan Lehman Gallery, New York. We speak to the artist about this unique process and how photographic chemistry techniques inspire and influence her work ahead of VOLTA NY 2016.

A: What is your inspiration behind your recent works? What effect were you hoping to create?

BN: The inspiration for the current works is a mix of science fiction, films about space travel, resource images from the NASA website, and of course photo history itself. Processes like tintype has seen a big resurgence lately. Instead of using tintype in the

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present to speak about the past, I want to use its aesthetics to speak about the future. I think of these as future artifacts. Like the idea of the golden record created by Carl Sagan and Ann Druyen that went out on Voyager 1.

This notion of a hopeful transmission, and trying to use the logic we are familiar with on this planet and attempt to project that with a hypothetical other intelligence in mind that would have to decipher it. I would be remiss, if we are talking about inspiration here, to not mention that I've listened to only the first two Drake albums on repeat for months making these. I can't stop. I like when he talks about his millions.

A: How has using photographic chemistry techniques helped to inspire and influence your work?

BN: All of the work begins first with a historical photographic process. I think of each process as a logic problem. In the contemporary climate of photography, these processes have fallen into a point of crisis where they are now "effects." I call them analog Photoshop filters. Photography's conceptual advancements have always been tied to technological advancement.

Tintype in the 1850's was the foremost technological advancement in photography. The work always starts with developing a logic on how to circumvent these problems. How do you exploit the process for what it can do that no other material is capable of, and justify its use in a contemporary setting while contributing something new to the conversation rather than rehashing it. By changing the underlying base assumptions about what something should be used for, you can completely reinvent it. I have a deep understanding of the history and where the process came from, and then I ignore it.

A: Can you explain the process of using tintype and the desired effect? What are the best qualities of working in this medium?

BN: The most unique quality of the tintype is that the tonal range is metallic silver. How cool is that? If you don't protect them with coating they will tarnish just like expensive silverware. It is also interesting because it is not actual a positive image. It is a negative image but placed on a black background to create a fake positive. The black metal of the background has become the vacuum my monoliths float around in. The process of using tintype is kind of a bitch, frankly.

There are a lot of opportunities for things to go wrong. There are a lot of variables to control. I am also not using a camera at all. All of the forms are made in the 3D tool in Photoshop. They are hyperrectangles with virtual digital lighting. I then translate them to an inkjet printed negative, and project through the negative onto the sensitized plate. All of them are created in a completely digital environment.

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A: You have mentioned in another interview that you enjoy discovering the errors and mistakes made on the work during this process. Do you feel that anomalies are an important part of the creation process?

BN: Yes, particularly things that are traditionally considered mistakes. The base assumption about creating a “successful” tintype is that you are capturing something representational. Most often, a portrait. So there is a myriad of unwanted artifacts that people go to great lengths to avoid to create a successful portrait. And this is essentially the idea of what being a master tintypist is. I, in turn, go to great lengths to create these failures. It has to be the right amount, and in the right way so it feels like it is participating in the piece instead of interrupting it. But a lot of these “failures” are really exquisite variables the tintype chemistry is capable of producing.

For more information on VOLTA NY, visit www.ny.voltashow.com

Credits

1. Video featuring Brittany Nelson, courtesy of the artist and VOLTA NY.

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