

PLANET JACKSON HOLE

CREATIVE PEAKS: Contemporary Catalyst

Teton Artlab visiting artist tweaks photography materials to create futuristic visions.

JACKSON HOLE, WY – Brittany Nelson once likened herself to a tiny Bart Simpson with a chemistry set.

The Montana native arrives July 1 for her two-week residency at Teton Artlab. A nontraditional photographer, her works investigate photographic materials themselves. She uses 19th century chemical processes like mordantage and tintype to create luscious, eerie images that seem to spill from the surface.

“My research deals with a lot of concepts from science fiction, so I’m very interested in researching and visiting places that involve geologic phenomena,” Nelson told *The Planet*.

Yellowstone is a hotpot of inspiration for Nelson and a key reason she is excited about the Artlab residency. “I’m specifically coming to the Teton Artlab to revisit Yellowstone,” she said. Nelson teaches at Virginia Commonwealth University in Richmond, Virginia.

She says she is drawn to locations that feel uncanny or other worldly and do not match our day-to-day experience or expectations. “In the mordantage work, I contextualize these abstractions as a type of landscape,” she said.

Mordantage is a negative-reversal process in which a piece of gelatin-silver paper is submerged in a bath of copper chloride, glacial acetic acid, and hydrogen peroxide. The chemicals dissolve the emulsion on the paper and loosen the silver so the surface becomes soft and pliable. From there, Nelson manipulates the material.

“I approach this work as a scientist, it is a process of cataloguing variables and recording results,” she said. “It is important that I have a tight set of restrictions when devising the experiments. Everything is self-reflexive; all the chemistry and materials used are based in the history of photography.”

Photography can be so much about a moment in time, but often that moment is tied to a subject, explained Travis Walker, Teton Artlab’s executive director. “Instead of a traditional subject, Brittany

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captures the instant a chemical reaction takes place, which opens up an exciting dialogue about the role of science and alchemy in the arts.”

Nelson earned her MFA at Cranbrook Academy of Art in Detroit, where she also lived for several years. Her accolades include the Fish/Pearce Award for Excellence in Process Based Work from the Print Center in Philadelphia, PA, a Theo Westenberger Foundation Grant, and in 2015 a Creative Capital Grant.

“Brittany’s work stood out to us because it was so mysterious and primordial, like watching a galaxy form or a star implode,” Walker said.

Nelson says residencies are always “game changers” in her work. “Just by traveling to a different location and using a different space, the variables change dramatically with what I have access to, or how I can work on someone else’s equipment. And because there is a ticking clock with how much time you have to make something, this causes you to problem solve and make decisions in new ways that yield unexpected results,” she said.

One constant that travels with her is music. Of late, Nelson has been a Drake fiend, and during her time in Jackson she is bringing her love of Mr. Yolo himself.

“I highly recommend the fine people of Jackson avoid the darkroom at this time unless they want to join my all day Drake dance party,” Nelson said.

She will be using the darkroom facilities at the Art Association. She says the idea of clean darkroom printing is a radical idea to her at this point in her career.

“I want to do some large archival, master prints,” she said. “Which is frankly impossible in my own lab because one: it is set up for very large tintype work, and two: it is so contaminated. The only thing I *can’t* do in my own space is a clean print at this moment.”

More creative visitors at the Artlab

Claudio Orso visits the Artlab July 16 to 30. A multi-genre artist, Orso is currently the coordinator for Apollo Outreach Initiative of the Cinema Studies Program at Oberlin College. The Apollo Outreach Initiative is a year-round media literacy outreach program directed at public schools in the Oberlin area.

Orso’s areas of interest include large-scale puppets, paper masks, and woodblock prints.

“I found in the carving of woodblocks the greatest treasure of challenge and satisfaction because of the oftentimes antagonistic nature of the wood’s grain and density,” Orso explained in his artist’s statement. “The hand printing of the woodblock is also an occasion of wonder and discovery, like when an ink sounds right on the brayer, its color biting into the paper, the circular burnishing motions of the wooden spoon, the joy of peeling off the print.”

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Chad Stayrook takes up residence at the Artlab August 2 through 31. An interdisciplinary artist based in Brooklyn, NY, Stayrook's approach is one part Ernest Shackleton and one part performance artist. His website included several videos of installations, experiments, and performances. One video entitled "Cloudmaker" takes the viewer on a journey through "the daily work routine of the man who makes the clouds in our skies."

Stayrook explains: "I play the role of artist, research scientist, and adventurer to document the process of discovery."

Like Nelson, Stayrook is interested in history. In his case, he says he wants to revive the method of historical explorers.

"[Their] exploits trended towards romantic, even magical, experiences," he noted. "I bring them into a contemporary world that is dominated by empirical procedures, where the romance of scientific pursuit has been discouraged." PJH

Caption: Brittany Nelson comes armed with mordantage during her two-week residency at Teton Artlab. Drake darkroom dance parties may or may not be included.