

Staring into the Fire:
Kate Petley

August 17 – December 18 2021

Kate Petley's image-making process has always been guided by an adherence to change and the power of ambiguity. She began photographing sculptures assembled from cardboard, tape, and other castaway materials in 2015, casting them as characters in photographs and works on canvas. Under her command, these makeshift sculptures are transformed into arresting abstractions that seem to occupy horizonless atmospheres. Translucent and opaque forms materialize as portals or monoliths that float in front of or fold into fields of gradated color.

With humanity ever on the cusp of societal upheaval, digital images and technologies shape contemporary human experience, structuring our perceptions of time, space and information. And digital natives are deeply habituated to recording their surroundings and presenting their experiences as viral worlds for online dissemination and consumption- a transformation Petley has experienced with intense interest.

Petley's digitally based work circulates within this ecosystem of rapid production, sharing and obsolescence. She synthesizes ancient languages of painting and sculpture with the lure of the networked image- inviting viewers to perceive the space between analog and virtual. She does not dismiss the value of the networked world; rather, she questions its rapidity and scale as dictated by screen ratios. By offering an alternative way of engaging virtual spaces, she re-orient viewer experience of vision, scale, presence.

"Thanks to the photographer, humanity has acquired the power of perceiving its surroundings and its very existence with new eyes." Laszlo Moholy-Nagy

Photography and other imaging technologies can depict macro and micro phenomena and color worlds that are undetectable to human vision. Petley deploys photography's association with observation and its capacity to broaden what can be seen to construct an alternative way of inhabiting the world. Her color-and-light filled spaces may be truer to the perceiving subject's interior reality than what is more readily visible to human perception. Brushed, corrugated and pitted surfaces undergo a startling shift when enlarged and presented as photographs or prints on canvas. Sculptures from pedestrian origins assume a mythical aura once scaled and photographed. Her works are puzzles, provoking the impulse to solve. Once printed on canvas, Petley's selective hand-brushed overlays of acrylic paint and glazes induce a cognitive dissonance as the mind strives to differentiate between digital and material realms. She cultivates tension between the two-dimensional flatness of printed images and their representations of three-dimensional sculptures and expressive brushwork. In *Equal Measure*, Petley intensifies the optical experience through indeterminate light sources and shadows. Two yellow shapes dominate and interact through a push-pull, magnetic attraction and repulsion. They float in a space of ambiguous depth from which the central form folds outward, foreshortened into the space of the viewer.

Her active titles suggest emotion and movement, existing in a state of suspended animation. There is no before or after in Petley's work, only elements hovering and glowing in a perpetual present. *Counterclockwise* represents a moment of contact between two planes – a cosmic collision. Yet, time in stasis foregrounds an unexpected tenderness between the two forms.

Though long interest in manipulating and transforming paper, Petley recently returned to paper works unmediated by the camera's lens. Her *Difficult Character* series opens a dialogue with other works in the exhibition. Roughly constructed, these black-and-white works emphasize the physicality of the cardboard. Her textured constructions are soaked in water and sun dried to separate them into layers. Crumpled, ripped, and painted over in sections, the paper works contrast the smooth surfaces, bright hues, and implied texture and dimensionality of her photographic images. The *Difficult Character* works are situated firmly in the physical world, inviting absorption in silvery moonlit sheens, shadows, and roughhewn textures. Yet, after viewing her digital images, a question mark persists on people's place in the world vis-à-vis pervasive digital culture.

Petley harnesses physiological responses to color and light to activate feelings of joy, quietude, and wonder. These works belong to a long lineage of painters and photographers interested in light and abstraction. Yet, Petley re/presents the luminous surface as space for mental reflection and divine absorption, a space increasingly usurped by the ever-present backlit screen. The suggestive title of the exhibition and her individual works lay bare her motivation: to mesmerize.

Sandra Q. Firmin
Director, CU Art Museum
August 17 – December 18 2021