



No Horizon: Helen Mirra and Sean Thackrey

By Lawrence Rinder

This exhibition brings together two artists whose approaches to art emphasize simplicity and bare experience related to their longstanding engagements with Zen Buddhism. Helen Mirra's recent art practice is represented by woven wall pieces that capture the nuances of her somatic experience (breathing, standing, sensing) and the conditions of the geography she encounters and moves through (air, ground, sky). Each small-scale weaving presents a rich and restrained irregular grid of drifting color, shape, and texture. Sean Thackrey's photographs, which are mounted on specially dyed wood panels, are meditations in and on Venice. His close-up compositions reveal the infinitely varied and remarkably expressive details of weathered slabs of Venetian stone. In Thackrey's photographs we encounter the simultaneous expression of the particular and the universal. The title of this dual-artist exhibition intimates the name of a series of prints, *Without Horizon*, by the artist and composer John Cage—whose own engagement with Zen was evident in his practice of relaxed concentration and devotion to chance operations.

For the past two decades, Helen Mirra has developed a practice that draws equally on the forms and methods of Conceptual art and on direct experiences outdoors. She often works in series, and her projects reveal an iterative exploration that asks how geographical place, gravity, and the body relate. In its methodical, minimalist, and quasidocumentary approach, Mirra's work recalls that of artists such as Douglas Huebler, Stanley Brouwn, and Michelle Stuart, while her focus on the idiosyncrasies of personal experience resonates with work by artists of a somewhat more romantic disposition, including André Cadere and Bas Jan Ader. In Mirra's case, her consistent engagement with almost-nothing grows from the root Buddhist teaching of walking a path of harmlessness. (The irony of Zen expression is articulated in the instruction to do nothing; as even the instruction, let alone a response, is a doing of something.)

In 2016, Mirra moved to Muir Beach, California, just north of San Francisco, where she lives outside the gate of Green Gulch Farm Zen Center. In the years since, Mirra has been making a series of woven pieces, each of which takes about a month to complete (they are usually named for the month in which they were made). They are not large; not more than two or three feet in height and width, and—with one exception—they are vertical in orientation. The pieces appear quite different when seen from various angles. With a slight shift in viewpoint, distinct colors appear from underneath others, and a magical patterning appears and disappears. Critically, this optical effect is incidental, caused by the parameters of Mirra's process rather than by intention. The nuances of the material—mostly linen, with some additions of wool, cotton, and silk—combine with a distinctively restrained palette to convey subtle sensations of place, atmosphere, and season. One doesn't know quite how



to categorize these pieces. Although they have a generally rectangular format and hang on the wall like a painting, their dimensional and object-like nature associates them more with sculpture. But they are neither paintings nor sculptures. Although they are woven, they do not particularly engage with any tradition of weaving, so to call them weavings would be to miss the mark. They are, in a way, abstracted artifacts of Mirra’s regular, day-long walks in the foothills of Mount Tamalpais.

This exhibition includes three woven pieces from 2017 and every piece Mirra made in 2018, as well as two made in 2019. Most of the works may appear very minimal at first glance, though as Mirra observes, “Rather than being a reduction of more, they are an amplification of less.”¹ The subtle differences of tone across the gridded and striated compositions, as well as the ephemeral sensation of color created by the two-color warp and single-color weft, are cues to focus our attention. Mirra quotes the French composer Éliane Radigue to suggest the direction of her thought: “Everything is interval, we are always in-between. And in this interval, between two states, there is a continual articulation of invisible variations, imperceptible transitions. All in-betweens are fundamental.”² Anyone who has closely watched the formation and deformation of clouds or fog will understand the essence of this body of work. Among the exhibited works, there is one outlier, referring to an ancient image of a labyrinth incised on a clay tablet that was found in Pylos, Greece. Dated to 1200 BCE, this is the earliest securely dated image of a labyrinth. Mirra’s piece replicates both the image and the form of the tablet, while the spectral colors of the labyrinth’s path are strands of mushroom-dyed yarn.

Sean Thackrey has written that his works are “objects, marks on paper, produced by photography; what they are meant to be is objects of contemplation.”³ Thackrey has been interested in Zen, as well as other forms of philosophy, since an epiphany in early adulthood opened to him the universe of perception and insight that is available in the simplest of experiences. The origins of his photography practice date to the same period, and in his work we can see a profound attention to detail and nuance, which comes with a revelation of the beauty that is present in even the most everyday materials and forms. Although Thackrey has made photographs for decades, his primary vocation has been as an art dealer specializing in nineteenth- and twentieth-century prints, drawings, and photographs; and later as a winemaker, a craft he still practices. In 1970, with Susan Thackrey and Cynthia Pritzker, he opened the San Francisco gallery that would become Thackrey & Robertson, through which he helped build some of the finest private and institutional photography collections. After moving back to Bolinas from Berkeley in 1977, he began to experiment with winemaking. His approach was and remains unconventional, inspired both by his intuition and by information and insights gleaned from his growing collection of ancient winemaking books and manuscripts.

The photographs presented in this exhibition are drawn from an extended series that began in 2012 when Thackrey was in Venice, Italy, and made a photograph that captured

the uncanny beauty of an ordinary wall. Since then, he has returned almost yearly, always in winter, to photograph the walls of the city. Most, but not all, of Thackrey’s photographs capture visual impressions of Istrian stone, the predominant building material of Venice. This stone, which is often mistaken for marble, is a kind of limestone that possesses a bright white tone. Venice’s proximity to the sea has caused the stones of the city to decay at an accelerated rate, and this state of transformation forms the exquisite variations evident in Thackrey’s photographs. The visual lushness created by the combination of polished stone, fissures, and dust is accentuated by Thackrey’s use of extremely high-resolution photography and a keen attention to the perfection of his prints. In addition to attending to the finished quality of his prints, as well as the special qualities of the papers they are printed on, Thackrey brings an artistic eye to the mounting of his photographs. For this series, he has devised an approach involving pieces of wood, each specially stained to resonate with a specific photograph. The wood panels serve to set the photographs off from their immediate environment, while also alluding to the images’ architectural theme.

While Thackrey’s photographs are a kind of memento mori, evoking the inevitable decay of matter, they do not convey sensations of chaos or uncontrol. On the contrary, his images inspire a sense of quiet repose. The feeling of calm he evokes is supported in part by his frequent use of compositional symmetry: two parts of the flat surface are often bisected by a vertical line. This gesture is fundamentally Classical, even Archaic, in its sensibility and helps to connect his work to a long history of Mediterranean art and architecture. This symmetrical composition echoes—in an abstracted manner—the form of the human body and recalls, in particular, the bilateral structure of the brain. Contemplating one of Thackrey’s photographs, it is easy to feel compelled to contemplate cognition itself, as one feels the mind working to reconcile order and disorder, deterioration and stability.

Although they are of different generations and work in different media, Helen Mirra and Sean Thackrey have arrived at a similar point in their artistic practices. Each in their own unique manner has found a resonant way to capture the ephemeral beauty of being and time: their art underscores the balance of presence and absence, form and formlessness, mind and no mind. In the words of the fourteenth-century Chan (Zen) poet Stonehouse:

I spend my time in the stillness of meditation
 Bizarre rocks and gnarled pines remain unknown
 To those who look for the mind with the mind⁴

Notes

- Helen Mirra, email to the author, March 29, 2019.
- Éliane Radigue, *Time is of no importance (Le temps n'a pas d'importance)*, trans. and quoted by Helen Mirra, email to the author, March 28, 2019.
- Sean Thackrey, essay for Commonweal Gallery exhibition, July 9–August 5, 2016.
- The Mountain Poems of Stonehouse*, trans. Red Pine (Port Townsend: Copper Canyon Press, 1986), 49.



FRONT
 Helen Mirra: *July*, 2018 (detail)
 Sean Thackrey: *Caterina I*, 2014 (detail)

INSIDE
 Helen Mirra: *September*, 2018

BACK
 Sean Thackrey: *San Michele I*, 2016

ABOVE LEFT TO RIGHT
 Helen Mirra: *1–21 May, Overlook—Green Gulch—Redwood Creek—Heather Cutoff—Overlook*, 2017
 Sean Thackrey: *Cannaregio V.III*, 2014

NO HORIZON: HELEN MIRRA AND SEAN THACKREY July 3–August 25, 2019

Checklist

(works shown in order of display)

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| <hr/> | <i>July</i> 2018 Linen; 25 ⁵ / ₈ × 20 ¹ / ₂ in. Courtesy of Peter Freeman, Inc., New York | <i>Dorsoduro I</i> 2014 Archival pigment on rag paper; 21 ³ / ₈ × 23 in. |
| <i>February</i> 2017 Linen; 13 ¹³ / ₁₆ × 9 ¹ / ₂ in. Courtesy of Galerie Nordenhake, Stockholm | <i>August</i> 2018 Linen, silk; 32 ¹ / ₄ × 19 in. Courtesy of Galerie Nordenhake, Stockholm | <i>Cannaregio V.III</i> 2014 Archival pigment on rag paper; 54 × 23 in. |
| <i>March</i> 2017 Linen, wool; 13 ⁷ / ₁₆ × 9 ¹ / ₄ in. Courtesy of Peter Freeman, Inc., New York | <i>September</i> 2018 Linen, wool; 32 ⁵ / ₈ × 17 ³ / ₁₆ in. Collection of Claes Nordenhake, Berlin | <i>Cannaregio V.IV</i> 2016 Archival pigment on rag paper; 54 ³ / ₄ × 23 in. |
| <i>1–30 April, Tamalpais circles</i> 2019 Linen, silk, wool; 22 ¹ / ₄ × 10 in. Courtesy of Taka Ishii Gallery, Tokyo | <i>October</i> 2018 Linen; 34 ¹ / ₄ × 18 in. Miller Meigs Collection, Portland, Oregon | <i>San Girolamo I</i> 2017 Archival pigment on rag paper; 24 ³ / ₄ × 23 in. |
| <i>1–21 May, Overlook—Green Gulch—Redwood Creek—Heather Cutoff—Overlook</i> 2017 Linen, silk, wool; 22 ¹ / ₄ × 10 in. Courtesy of Galleria Raffaella Cortese, Milan | <i>December (Pylos)</i> 2018 Linen, mushroom-dyed wool; 17 ³ / ₄ × 12 ³ / ₁₆ in. Private collection, Hamburg | <i>Caterina I</i> 2014 Archival pigment on rag paper; 27 ³ / ₈ × 23 in. |
| <i>January</i> 2018 Linen, wool; 14 ⁵ / ₈ × 10 ⁵ / ₈ in. Collection of Lluïsa Sàrries i Zgonc and Peter Freeman, New York | <i>January–February</i> 2019 Linen, cotton; 22 × 31 ¹ / ₂ in. Courtesy of Large Glass, London | <i>San Stae I</i> 2014 Archival pigment on rag paper; 41 ¹ / ₄ × 23 in. |
| <i>February</i> 2018 Linen; 18 × 11 ¹³ / ₁₆ in. Courtesy of Peter Freeman, Inc., New York | Sean Thackrey (United States, 1942) All works courtesy of the artist | <i>Accademia II</i> 2016 Archival pigment on rag paper; 41 ³ / ₄ × 23 in. |
| <i>March–April</i> 2018 Linen; 16 × 10 ¹ / ₄ in. Collection of Claes Nordenhake, Berlin | <i>Accademia III</i> 2017 Archival pigment on rag paper; 21 ¹ / ₄ × 23 in. | <i>Cannaregio IV</i> 2014 Archival pigment on rag paper; 32 ¹ / ₄ × 23 in. |
| <i>April–May</i> 2018 Linen; 18 × 11 ¹³ / ₁₆ in. Collection of Claes Nordenhake, Berlin | <i>San Michele I</i> 2016 Archival pigment on rag paper; 41 ⁵ / ₈ × 23 in. | |
| <i>June</i> 2018 Linen; 29 × 10 ¹ / ₂ in. Collection of Callum Innes, Edinburgh | <i>Misericordia I</i> 2016 Archival pigment on rag paper; 28 ¹ / ₄ × 23 in. | |

