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 iterative explorations that ask 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 dispositions 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
Photography began in 2012 when Thackrey was in Venice, Italy, and made a photograph that captured something. As Mirra observes, “Rather than being a reduction of more, they are an amplification of less.” This Rubio difference, according to Thackrey, involves the kind of minimal composition, 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 support the direction of her thought: “Everything is in between. We are asleep in between. In this interval, between two states, there is a continual articulation of indeterminate variations, which makes time and space lose all fundamental.”

Anyone who has closely watched the degradation and deformation of clouds or the way we happen to understand the essence of the 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 Flynos, 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.

Thackrey has written that his works are “objects, marks on paper, produced by photography, what they reveal is the objects of contemplation.” Thackrey has been interested in Zen, as well as other forms of philosophy, since an epiphany in early adulthood. He describes his work as “a kind of contemplative practice, a kind of mindfulness, a kind of meditation.” It is a form of meditation that is not limited to the traditional posture of sitting or lying down. Thackrey’s work is exhibited in various galleries and museums, including the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art and the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston.

Helen Mirra and Sean Thackrey have arrived at a similar point in their artistic practices. Each in their own unique way has brought together elements from different disciplines and traditions. Thackrey’s photographs are a kind of memento mori, evoking the inevitable decay of matter. Although they have a generally rectangular format and hang in a way that is often mistaken for marble, they are neither paintings nor sculptures. Although they are of different generations and work in different media, Helen Mirra and Sean Thackrey have worked together on various projects, including an exhibition held in San Francisco in 2016.

This exhibition includes three woven pieces from 2017 and every piece Mirra made in 2018. In 2019, she created two more pieces that were included in the exhibition. The Mountain Poems of Stonehouse exhibition included three woven pieces from 2017 and every piece Mirra made in 2018. 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.” This Rubio difference, according to Thackrey, involves the kind of minimal composition, 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 support the direction of her thought: “Everything is in between. We are asleep in between. In this interval, between two states, there is a continual articulation of indeterminate variations, which makes time and space lose all fundamental.”

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