

Wandering Visions Settles In For A While At Boltax

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"The Birds" by Melina Berkenwald

Shelter Island - In what is clearly one of the season's most unusual shows, Boltax Gallery is exhibiting the innovative work of multimedia artist and craftswoman Melina Berkenwald, who hails from Argentina where creative ambiguity in visual as well as literary art seems to be in the blood. The exhibit comprises two bodies of work. They seem distinct, at first, though they both take their origin from photographs, but what Berkenwald does with her images - on canvas and on glass - is cause for wonder and admiration.

The artist, who is having her first showing in New York, was discovered by Karen Boltax earlier this year at arteBa, the annual contemporary art fair in Buenos Aires. Boltax was looking for someone to fill out the 2008 season, which she has exclusively dedicated to celebrating women artists from all over the world, and she was impressed by what Berkenwald was doing with photography and etching. Talk about art on the edge. The edges here - of glass squares and embroidered heavy canvas - frame two kinds of pictures that are executed with some remarkable techniques. On the glass, the subject is birds. On the canvases, mostly landscapes of Rotterdam Harbor. Though individual pieces in both media can stand on their own, they generate added significance when seen as part of a series, two-dimensional constructs that, close together, take on multiple layers of meaning.

The photographic embroidered images, called "interventions" - shots printed on thick, shiny white vinyl canvas - are "intervened" with by way of select areas highlighted with colored threads sewn right onto the canvas. As for the "etched-glass," these fragile installations are designed to hang together at various lengths, some shadowing others and creating additional shadows on the wall. In both bodies of work, the glass and the embroidery, an illusion of depth and motion is made to complicate an earlier sense of stasis. Subject matter seems transformed. The birds soar, the red boat in the harbor gleams. The surprise of the exhibit is that these two very different mixed-media photographic modes actually complement one another.

Berkenwald, who arrived a few weeks ago from Buenos Aires to assist in the installation, stayed at the Shelter Island home/studio of Rafael Bueno and his wife, the poet Lila Zemborain (they run the annual summer poetry readings Poetry in the Garden), where the walls are white. As regular Boltax visitors know, however, Karen Boltax is to the orange born, but the pleasure at the gallery is in seeing how effectively "Visions" works on the walls and as seen through Boltax's large, well-lighted window.



"Pick-Up" by Melina Berkenwald

The glass used for the installations is ordinary, the effects are not. Beginning with images taken from Alfred Hitchcock's iconic movie, "The Birds," Berkenwald recreates the images on glass, first by drawing an outline and then by incising the shape with a diamond point drill. In some cases the drawing, done in black ink, is filled in with etching marks; in other cases, the ink is erased and the etching outline appears shiny white. The process, many leveled and intricate (and requiring a strong and steady hand), reflects Berkenwald's artistic interest in narrative (she takes inspiration from books as well as from film). Her birds in flight, stilled on the glass and framed in arrested motion, take wing when the glass

squares are hung in such a way that some panes are seen through others and as reflections on the wall. Truly, the medium is the message.

The "interventions" may at first strike some viewers as precious, but as Berkenwald herself is happy to point out, and as a brief accompanying catalog essay, by Mario H. Gradowczyk, explains, the idea of manually altering prints or negatives with various materials dates to the 19th century and particularly to a practice called Pictorialism, though unlike many artists who so alter images by adding to them, Berkenwald does not edit in new components. Rather, as she puts it, she "remaps" scenes with different sizing and by emphasizing certain details - a red boat in the harbor, a bright cloud - with shiny colored threads. The backs of the canvases, showing the thread designs, are a delicate composition unto themselves. The scenes, variations on subject matter illustrating arrivals and departures, a favorite theme for Berkenwald, change as compositions, due to shifts in scale (some photos are blow-ups, others long shots) and the amount and location of the embroidery. It's not all Rotterdam Harbor, though. In "Pick-Up," another series, a partially threaded truck makes its way along a highway under a bank of puffy, white, partially threaded clouds. The result is that from image to image, and within each image, the impression is of time shifting, space changing, movement being altered, and thus mood. "Wandering" Visions, indeed.

- "Wandering Visions" will remain on exhibit through Aug. 25. Boltax is located at 21 North Ferry Road (114) on Shelter Island.