

Continuum: Aspen Mays & Dionne Lee

Silver Eye

Education Guide
Sep 5—Oct 26, 2019

About the Artists

Aspen Mays (b. 1980) received her MFA in photography from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago in 2009. Solo exhibitions of her work have been mounted by the Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago; Hyde Park Art Center, Chicago; Light Work, Syracuse; and the Center for Ongoing Projects and Research, Columbus. Mays was the recipient of a 2006 Rotary Fellowship and was a 2009 Fulbright Fellow. She lives and works in the San Francisco Bay Area, California, where she is Associate Professor at California College of the Arts.

Dionne Lee (b. 1988) received her MFA from California College of the Arts in 2017. Her practice is based in photography, collage, and video, and engages ideas of power and racial histories in relation to the American landscape. Lee's work has been exhibited at Aperture Foundation and the school of the International Center of Photography in New York City; Aggregate Space and LAND AND SEA in Oakland, San Francisco Arts Commission, and Root Division in San Francisco. In 2016 Dionne was awarded the Barclay Simpson Award and was a Graduate Fellow at Anderson Ranch Arts Center. She currently lives and works in Oakland, CA.

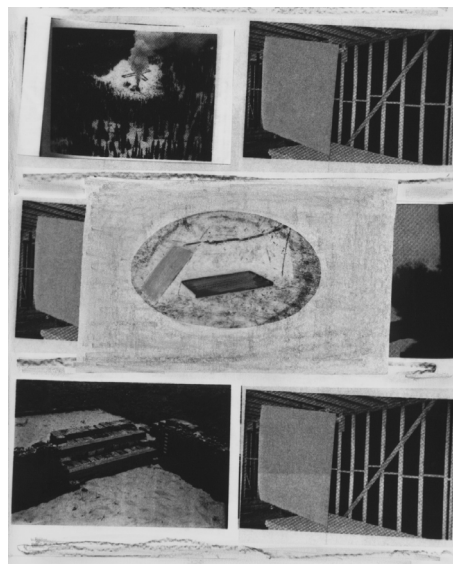
I. Introduction

This exhibition explores ideas of creative influence, mentorship, partnership, and collaboration in contemporary photography. The focus of this exhibition is a duo that first met as student and teacher, Aspen Mays and Dionne Lee. Mays is an internationally renowned photographer and Associate Professor of Photography at California College of the Arts. Lee was Mays' graduate student at CCA and now lives and works in Oakland, CA.

The notion of creative influence is one of the most often discussed ideas in contemporary art, but also one of the most difficult to define. Continuum attempts, somewhat absurdly, to map out creative influences like one would with a family tree. Here, instead of genetics, the hereditary traits are ideas, aesthetics, and values, passed down from generation to generation; accepted, altered, rejected, and transformed over time. Unlike a traditional family tree, creative influence is not simply a journey from past to present; it stretches out across any number of different timelines, descending and ascending, circling, growing the tree in all directions.

Questions for Looking

- Artistic influence and mentorship are important to this exhibition. What kinds of themes or subject matter do you see the artists sharing?
- What does it mean to you for artists to influence each other? Is influence different than sharing? Is sharing different than copying?

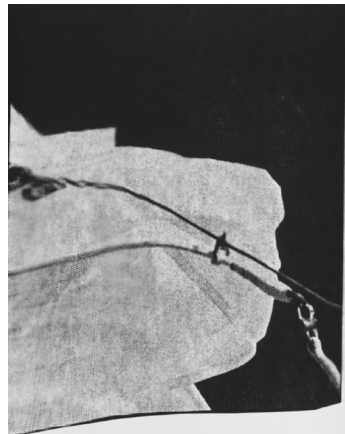
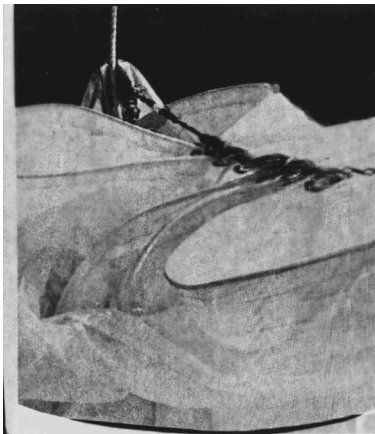


II. Color and Found Imagery

Both artists in this exhibition use found imagery, also referred to as appropriated imagery. These are images that the artist did not create themselves, but takes from another source, like books, magazines, or the internet to create a new photograph. Aspen Mays sources her found images from weather cameras and screen shots from online searches of storms, while Dionne Lee sources imagery from books about disaster and disaster preparedness, survival guides and nature magazines. Aspen Mays has also included words from the 107th Psalm, a sacred hymn from the bible. Color plays an important role in Aspen Mays work, and she uses a variety of processes like marbling and dyeing the paper to create different effects, while Dionne Lee has chosen to work in black and white for her photographs and videos.

Questions for Looking:

- What does it mean to you that these artists are showing us views of nature through found materials and sources, rather than photographs they've taken themselves?
- What could Aspen Mays be suggesting with the color choices in her images? What moods do you associate with these colors? What moods or feelings do you associate with black and white images?
- Is Dionne Lee using found imagery in a different way than Aspen Mays is?



III. Landscape and Movement

Dionne Lee's work looks at the ways complicated cultural histories and legacies can shape how we relate to, and gain access to, land and power. Movement plays a part in this through the way Lee explores the movement of people across land, and moves her own body through the landscape in her video work. Aspen May also focuses on movement, with many of her images showing the physical force storms have upon the landscape.

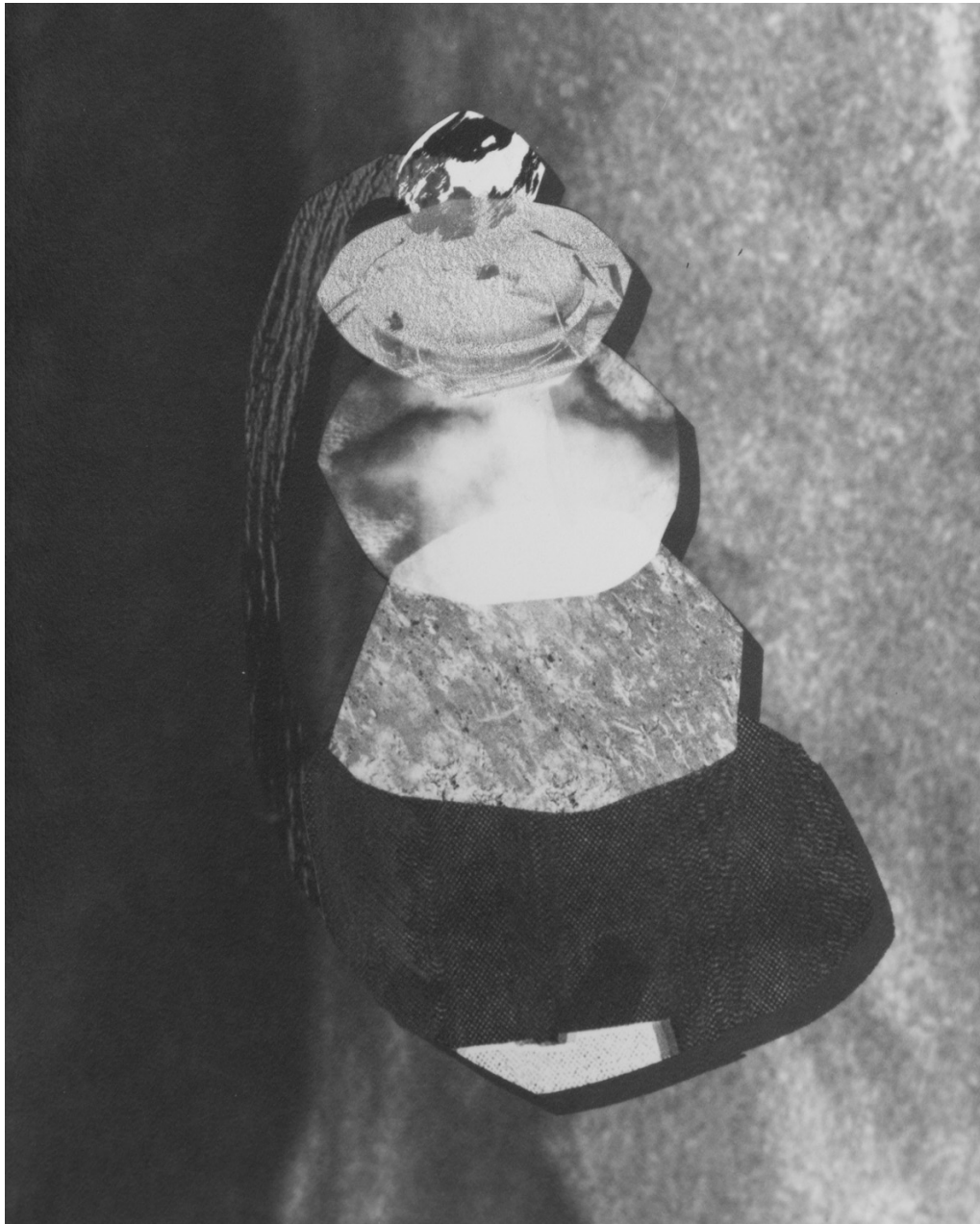
Questions for Looking

→ In *Fleet* Dionne Lee shows us a series of images of a sail being rigged. While the sails can suggest the idea of exploration and the excitement of traveling to new places, it also recalls the ships and sails that have been used to forcefully remove people from their land during the transatlantic slave trade. Considering this, is progress or exploration always completely beneficial? Looking at the images, does the way the sail is being portrayed suggest whose perspective this narrative being told from?

→ Aspen Mays uses palm trees in many of her images. While the palm tree might make us think of somewhere tropical and relaxing, does this image feel relaxed or at ease?

→ In her video work, Dionne Lee shows her own body moving throughout the landscape. What does seeing the artist in their work mean to you? Does it change how you feel about the work?

Images from top to bottom: Dionne Lee, *Fleet*, six silver gelatin prints, 2019; Aspen Mays, *Palm Psalm*, silver gelatin print with dye, 2019; Dionne Lee, *Challenger Deep*, Single channel video, 19:47, 2019;



IV. Climate Change and Identity

Both Aspen Mays and Dionne Lee are interested in the forces of climate change in our world today. Aspen Mays' images of trees moving violently in the winds of a storm are accompanied by images that reflect the markings seen on boarded up windows—a method many people use to protect their homes against the power of tropical storms. Dionne Lee looks to survival methods, found in camping books and guides, and inscribes these messages onto her prints. Her images of cairns, the stacks of rocks used to make hiking paths, speak to a desire to forge a path forward, even in the face of our planet's uncertainty. For Lee, the idea of survival has dual notions and she also considers the histories of African American people in the United States, and the different methods of survival they have formed while enduring slavery, segregation and inequality on this land.

Questions for Looking

- Some of the words and phrases that Dionne Lee has taken from survival guides and nature magazines and incorporated into her work are not easy to read. How does the difficulty of reading these messages make you feel about the work?
- In her video work, Dionne Lee performs the acts of collecting dew from grasses, and dowsing, a centuries old technique of searching for underground water. Aspen Mays shows the spiritual words some people have written on buildings or the boards they place across windows, in hopes of gaining protection from storms. Do these actions feel based in logic or based in faith? Does one force feel stronger to you?

Glossary

Psalm	A sacred song or hymn, in particular any of those contained in the biblical Book of Psalms and used in Christian and Jewish worship.
Dowsing Rod	A Y-shaped twig or rod, or two L-shaped ones—individually called a dowsing rod, divining rod used to locate ground water, buried metals or ores, gemstones, oil, gravesites, and many other objects and materials without the use of scientific apparatus.
Found Imagery	(or appropriated imagery) Images sourced from external areas such as books, magazines, personal or family photos, or internet searches, which are then incorporated and made a part of new works of art.
Cairn	A man-made pile (or stack) of stones which have been used from prehistoric times to the present for uses such as marking trails, ceremonial purposes, or to locate buried items, such as caches of food or objects.
Archive	A repository or collection of information, often a place in which public records or historical materials (such as documents) are preserved. Archives can be institutional, like a museum or library, or they can be person, like a family scrapbook collection.
Marbling	Paper marbling produces patterns similar to smooth marble or other kinds of stone. The patterns are the result of color floated on either plain water or a viscous solution known as size, and then carefully transferred to an absorbent surface, such as paper or fabric.

Reading List

- Dungy, Camille T. 2009. *Black Nature: Four Centuries of African American Nature Poetry*. Athens: The University of Georgia Press.
- Kimmer, Robin Wall. 2003. *Gathering Moss: A Natural and Cultural History of Mosses*. Corvallis: Oregon State University Press.
- Oransky, Howard. 2015. *Covered in Time and History: The Films of Ana Mendieta*. Oakland, California: University of California Press.
- Reiss, Julie H. 2019. *Art, Theory and Practice in the Anthropocene*. Wilmington: Delaware Vernon Press.
- Hewitt, Leslie. Doninic-Molon, Johanna Burton, Esperanza Rosales, Lisa Melandri and Samantha Topol. 2013. *Leslie Hewitt: Sudden Glare of the Sun*. St. Louis: Contemporary Art Museum St. Louis.

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This guide serves as an education supplement to the exhibition, *Continuum: Aspen Mays + Dionne Lee*, and contains information about the works on view, questions for looking and discussion as well as room for student responses. To schedule a tour of this exhibition for students, go to: silvereye.org/about/plan-your-visit

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