

ONE GOOD EYE *-)

Cut & paste: Collage Club looks forward; Stacey Steers back

Surrealism rears its dreamy head at Alto Gallery and Robischon Gallery.
By Rupert Jenkins - April 13, 2017



Stacey Steers: "Edge of Alchemy," film installation view. Photo by Rupert Jenkins.

Surrealism is a portal to the offbeat and the uncanny. As an art form, it can be described as the juxtaposition of unrelated ideas and imagery; as a colloquialism, it can be applied as much to White House press briefings as to Salvador Dali paintings. As collage, its psychologically-charged dreamscapes enter two Denver galleries this April, with the Alto Gallery hosting a group exhibition by the Denver Collage Club, and Robischon Gallery presenting the apocryphal animations and assemblages of Stacey Steers.

The Denver Collage Club meets regularly to explore ideas and interpretations of “collage today,” to quote from its manifesto. Mark Sink and Mario Zoots founded the group and it’s a broad gathering, both in terms of the number of artists involved (33), and in the ways they approach their medium.

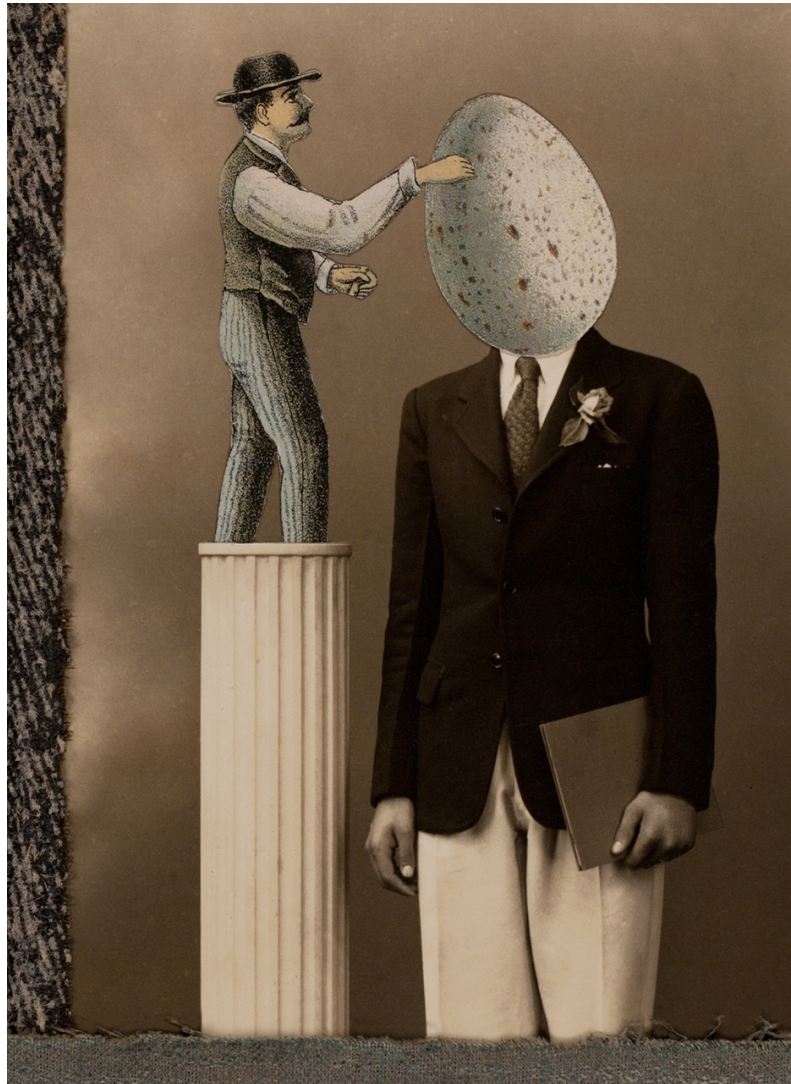
I have to be upfront here and admit that “digital” and “collage” are strangers within my personal lexicon, and my appreciation of collage depends on clear evidence of blade and glue. Unfortunately that disqualifies a lot of the work at Alto, but what remains verifies just how innovative and flexible handcrafted collage can be, in content as well as practice.

Susan Goldstein in particular has a classical approach that stylistically draws associations with Joseph Cornell, whose 20th century assemblages are at turns magical, poetic and intuitive. Goldstein’s two, tarot card sized pieces, drawn from

her “Bending Time” series, delicately juxtapose figurative and symbolic illustrations of lopsided scales and eras to suggest a topsy-turvy society of indeterminate century and equilibrium.

Former RedLine artist Suchitra Mattai usually works on a far larger scale, but at Alto she is represented by two small embroidered drawings. Taking what appear to be Victorian-era East Indian parlor illustrations, Mattai has connected elements within them by sewing colored thread into the surface of their antique paper substrate. The pieces are simple in comparison to Goldstein’s, yet they evoke a similarly disorienting cultural microcosm.

Like many others in the show – one might say like most others working in their medium – Goldstein and Mattai reanimate bygone eras, and without implicating either of them individually, there is an undeniably stale aura of post-WWII Bakelite



Susan Goldstein, from “Bending Time,” 3.5 x 4.75 in.
Antique photo collage.

telephones, military swagger, and pineapple-cheese hors d'oeuvres pervading the gallery.

Some artists, happily, do break with that by sourcing contemporary imagery and concepts. In “Token of Absence,” for instance, Mario Zoots binds a paperback copy of “On Photography” onto a blue board. Zoots’ intervention has covered the eyes of the laborer — or traveler whose portrait fronts the book and this, juxtaposed with an adjacent blank luggage tag, creates an effective and troubling sense of dislocation and erasure.

Adam Milner’s “Bedroom Fossils” preserves residue gathered, one assumes, from his bed sheets in the morning. What could be a rancid Tracey Emin-like self-disclosure turns out to be a sweetly romantic series akin to Victorian pressed flowers, in which Milner has embedded (pardon the pun) eyelashes, petals, insects, and other obscurities into rag paper. Is this collage? By my taxonomic definitions I’d say no, but it would be harsh to deny Milner’s whimsy a place in the show, which is uneven but always engaging.

Like many group exhibitions, it takes a while for visual relationships and consistencies to fall into place, but one has to tip one’s hat in Sink and Zoots’s direction for nurturing such a diverse community of artists and channeling them into an even vaguely cohesive gallery show.

As Lisa Kennedy has written elsewhere on *One Good Eye*, Stacey Steers’s films are composed of thousands of individual collages that appropriate images from silent film, 18th and 19th century illustrations, and photographic sources such as Eadweard Muybridge’s ca. 1870s “Human and Animal Locomotion.” Her tour de force now screening at Robischon Gallery is “Edge of Alchemy,” a 19-minute handmade film that is a master class in assembling and recontextualizing appropriated imagery.

Viewing “Alchemy” was by far my most enjoyable film-in-a-gallery experience since seeing six hours of Christian Marclay’s “The Clock” at SFMOMA a few years ago. Steers’s film is a frenetic surrealist drama driven by the expressiveness of its two main characters and by an ominous, Penderecki-inflected score by the Polish composer Lech Jankowski, who has also composed for the Brothers Quay.

What makes “Alchemy” all the more wonderful are the silent film icons Mary Pickford and Janet Gaynor, who have been plucked from their original films and inserted as trembling, hand colored heroines into a retro-futurist landscape that is in equal parts Victor Frankenstein laboratory and Georges Méliès moonscape. Emotions as raw as theirs are rarely seen on contemporary screens; they may invoke a few giggles, but they also retain an uncanny power to connect with audiences on a hyper-emotional level, even within the surreal dreamscapes Steers has invented for them.

For Robischon, Steers has reconfigured her three most recent films — “Phantom Canyon” (2006), “Night Hunter” (2011), and “Edge of Alchemy” (2017) — as multi-

media sculptures, with “Alchemy” also having its own private screening room at the gallery’s terminal point. Her sculptural constructions – a stack of antique beds for “Phantom Canyon”, two Victorian houses for “Night Hunter” and an oculus for “Edge of Alchemy” – symbolically mirror each film’s design aspects, and they all contain miniature screens or projections showing fragments of their source films. As cinematic experiences they are frustrating, but as conceptually independent objects they introduce a tangible sense of Gothic allegory to the exhibition as a whole.

As a third iteration of the films, enlarged stills and a smattering of original collages line the gallery walls. Given my “blade and glue” litmus test and comments about digital collage at Alto, I should admit upfront to finding the large (40 x 52 in) digital pigment prints to be visually stunning and secure in their own artistic veracity. The original collages used for the films are exquisitely handcrafted and a generous addition that nicely rounds out the show. That Steers transformed 6,000 of those small individual frames to create the magically profound “Edge of Alchemy” is quite remarkable.

The Denver Collage Club exhibition closes at Alto Gallery April 22 (altogallery.com). “Trinity,” featuring “Edge of Alchemy” and other works by Stacey Steers, plays at Robischon Gallery, 1740 Wazee Street, Denver, through May 6th (robischongallery.com). “Alchemy” will be screened theatrically at the Denver Film Festival in November, but see it now while you can enjoy it surrounded by Steer’s other creations. Both shows are programmed in conjunction with Denver’s Month of Photography (mopdenver.com).

Rupert Jenkins is a writer and curator based in Denver. He is the former director of the Colorado Photographic Arts Center. His company, Durrington Edits, specializes in arts-related editorial projects, exhibition planning, and consulting, with an emphasis on photography and the photo-related arts. rupertjenkins.com.