

SMOKE + MIRRORS
SHADOWS + FOG

SMOKE+MIRRORS / SHADOWS+FOG

Curated by Tracy L. Adler and Mara Hoberman

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HUNTER COLLEGE
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"Anyone who can handle a needle convincingly can make us see a thread which is not there."

— E.H. Gombrich, *Art and Illusion*, 1960

"Smoke+Mirrors/Shadows+Fog" refers both to illusions created deliberately—"smoke and mirrors" is typically used to describe intentional deception—and those that result from natural forces—"shadows and fog" references the 1992 Woody Allen film of the same name, in which the search for a murderer is hindered by human folly and the elements of nature. Whether contrived or naturally occurring, both types of deceit result in confusion or altered perception. The artists in this exhibition utilize and subvert the forces of nature as a catalyst for creating illusions. Drawing structure from elements that are typically elusive, this group of artists constructs installations that harness nature outside of the natural world. They share the impulse to utilize nontraditional mediums—smoke, light, shadow, reflection, gravity, wind, ash, water, and light refraction—to an almost alchemical effect. Rejecting the high-tech practices readily available today, they devise more homespun processes and use unconventional approaches to create impressive, seemingly complex illusions. In their work, they attempt to divert the natural order and charter a new direction, making imagery from the most insubstantial of materials. Ultimately, the shadows cast, the light reflected, and the smoke captured result in a diverse sampling of unique but intrinsically related artworks that explore the limits of materiality as it relates to image-making. Both through minimal and extraordinarily detailed means, these artists offer a personal commentary on how our world can be observed, controlled, and re-presented.

The illusions created in "Smoke+Mirrors/Shadows+Fog" employ a variety of materials, methods, and imagery, ranging from figurative and representational to landscape and the abstract. In the figurative and representational works on view, forms dissolve or are constructed as shadowy presences, no longer subject to the laws of nature. In the video *Narciso* (2001) by Oscar Muñoz, a self-portrait of the artist made with coal dust floating in a sink filled with water becomes increasingly distorted as the water drains over the three-minute duration of the film. Kumi Yamashita makes low-relief wall works that when lit from below project intricate shadows of figures on the wall. In her works *Seated Woman* (2008) and *Origami* (2010), the artist presents two different approaches to working with the representational form through light and cast shadows. Bohyun Yoon's *Structure of Shadow* (2009) comprises disembodied limbs of toy figurines hanging from a metal armature lit by

a solitary bulb. Once a motion sensor is tripped by visitors entering the gallery, the light projects moving shadows of figures, which appear to dance and sway as viewers walk around the room. Fred Eerdeken's word pieces present literal representations through the use of language. Constructed from curved and bent wire elements that look like abstract wisps without the perfect lighting conditions, these works cast shadows that form often ambiguous and thought-provoking phrases. Similarly, Rebecca Hackemann toys with perspective and perception in her ongoing series of anamorphic drawings, which rely on reflection in a mirrored cylinder to bring the images depicted into focus. Often quoting literary and Surrealist sources, Hackemann draws from a rich history of representational imagery.

Conversely, the artists who choose landscape as their subject create environments that are reminiscent of the real world but touched by fantasy or the unexpected. Using fans to create subtle movements in the projected shadows cast by the diorama-like construction of her aptly titled *Breeze* (2010), Claudia Bueno devises a unique shadowbox theater. The installation, which depicts silhouettes of grass, windmills, and laundry lines, honors the poignancy and drama of quotidian imagery. Jim Dingilian captures smoke in empty liquor bottles then uses implements such as Q-tips and toothpicks to create dimensional drawings inside the transparent glass. Manipulating the black residue, Dingilian makes imagined suburban landscapes that are both eerie and alluring. Hanna von Goeler's *The Shadows Cast by Ordinary Objects* (2009) suggests a dinner party that appears to have been abandoned. The table setting is left in darkness save for a small roving light source (a flashlight mounted on an electric toy train) illuminating hand-silvered mirrors etched with images that come in and out of focus as oblique projections on the walls of the gallery. Susanne Kessler and Herbert Cybulska's shimmering installation *Beauty lies exhausted in the streets* (2006/10) offers a sensory experience via numerous hand-cut mirrors and moving overhead lights that are programmed to rotate and change color. The simple elements of mirror and light create an environment that poetically simulates the changing reflections of light on water. In Hiraki Sawa's moody and nostalgic black-and-white video *Trail* (2005), a domestic interior becomes the surprising location for roaming silhouettes of camels, trees, a Ferris wheel, and birds. The typically banal space becomes inhabited by magical figures of the artist's imagination. Mary Temple's subtle white-on-white painted installation, *Stand*, from her "Light Installation" series (2010), creates the illusion of cast shadows of trees onto the gallery walls. The effect is disarming, as the gallery space is impossibly out of reach of natural light.

The artists who use abstraction as a means of creating illusion take a different approach, often expanding or collapsing space through unique pictorial means. In Heather Lewis's *Gravitygrams* (2008-10), particles such as iron brake grindings and ceramic dust are deflected by gravitational forces, leaving behind abstract traces of the utilitarian objects that are used as rudimentary stencils. The resulting monochromatic drawings and floor

installations evoke a sense of deconstruction and suggest a space once occupied. Working with standard stock acetate sheets under controlled lighting conditions, Charles Matson Lume produces complex light refractions that coalesce into large abstract forms on the wall. Borrowing the titles from a line by the poet William Bronk, *We know that knowing is not our way I & II* (2009) visually make reference to the sinuous contours of Brancusi's sculpture. In *621-2256* (2010), Sarah Oppenheimer penetrates the gallery wall with an aperture that affects perception by reducing and manipulating depth of field. By doing so, she questions the nature of spatial awareness. The line between image and reality dissolve in Suzanne Song's illusionistic painting *Flatout* (2010). In this site-specific work, the artist uses abstraction to falsely imply shadows, depth, and spaces beyond.

In all the works included in "Smoke+Mirrors/Shadows+Fog," the medium and construction remain surprising and mysterious. Each artist has a unique approach, but as a group they share a common desire to personalize the process of art-making. The collective result projects a range of attitudes, moods, and approaches. In many cases, the material aspects of these works are structural vessels that set the stage for the immaterial to emerge, like a séance provides the conditions to invoke a ghost. The need for an outside variable—wind, light or motion, for example—to complete or activate the work is essential for the work to become fully realized and positions it in a unique state of constantly becoming. Without this external force, many of these pieces remain unresolved, often literally in darkness. They depend not only on the artist's action but also on the participation or perception of the viewer to complete the work. As a result, the line between process and product becomes malleable and even begins to dissolve. The intimacy established through the physical interaction with the artwork sets up a privileged position for the viewer, who ultimately becomes complicit in the illusion.

Though artists have created illusionism in one form or another for millennia, smoke, mirrors, shadows, and fog function differently in today's age of technology and information, in which the world is well documented and readily available for consumption. But although there are fewer unknowns, there are also new techniques to easily fool the eye, making us question the truth of everything we see. As the work in this show suggests, artists today may be drawn to illusionism precisely because of the trickery behind it. The use of nontraditional materials furthers this sense of mystery. But unlike the kinds of falsehoods that exist in our everyday world, these illusions are used as a means of heightening the sensory experience of the viewer and triggering the imagination.

THE ILLUSIONISM IN ART
THE ART OF ILLUSIONISM

BY MARA HOBERMAN

"Smoke+Mirrors/Shadows+Fog" brings together sixteen contemporary artists who enhance our experience of naturally occurring, yet characteristically elusive, ephemera such as reflections, shadows, mirages, and smoke. By bringing stability and structure to typically fleeting apparitions, these artists offer dazzling and disorienting illusions—alternate realities in which shadows and reflections are not mere byproducts or temporary effects but viable main attractions. Historically, scientific and technological advances have developed in tandem with artistic progression (stylistic and mechanical) toward increasingly effective realistic representation. The advent of linear perspective in the Renaissance, for example, was due in no small part to developments in mathematical principles and instrumentation. Much more recently, innovations such as computer animation, digital photography, robotics, and Photoshop have brought artists remarkable new media and means with which to continue the pursuit of verisimilitude.

Although the illusory work in "Smoke+Mirrors/Shadows+Fog" would seem to lend itself especially well to today's digitized special effects and virtual-reality simulations, these artists tend to prefer age-old techniques such as *trompe l'oeil* painting, shadow play, and mirror (catoptric) anamorphosis. Collectively, they forgo high-tech gadgetry in favor of more humble materials: paint, mirrors, glass, plastic, wood, and metal. Both physically and conceptually, the works brought together in this exhibition suggest a counter trend to the increasing prevalence of computers and digital technology in art making. Rather than embracing the virtual, these artists flaunt materiality and artisanship even while creating uncanny wonderlands.

Dematerialization

The two site-specific wall paintings created for this exhibition by Mary Temple and Suzanne Song simulate depth, light/shadow, and perspective on the walls of the gallery. The *trompe l'oeil* effects recall the murals at the Villa of Mysteries in Pompeii (c. 50 B.C.), which similarly aimed to dematerialize architecture through illusionistic representation of distance, light, and open space. Temple's *Stand* (2010)—a realistic two-tone rendering of a shadow cast by tree trunks and leafy branches—produces a disorienting impression of light penetrating the obviously windowless gallery. In *Flatout* (2010), Song uses geometric forms and shading to imitate three-dimensional space, tempting the viewer into a fictitious area beyond the flat plane of the wall. Sarah Oppenheimer—who created *621-2256* (2010) especially for "Smoke+Mirrors/Shadows+Fog"—is also interested in the dematerialization of interior structure. Instead of creating an illusion of open space like Song and Temple, however, Oppenheimer actually excised a section of the gallery wall. Peering through this opening (which the artist has outfitted with a customized curved wooden aperture) into the adjacent area gives the impression of looking at a projected image. Paradoxically, the hole reduces the depth of field and makes three-dimensional space appear flat.

REBECCA HACKEMANN



Looking Glass House, 2007
Ink on paper and cylindrical mirror
5 x 15 x 15 in.
Courtesy of the artist

Miss Narcissist, 2007
Ink on paper and cylindrical mirror
5 x 15 x 15 in.
Courtesy of the artist

The Secret Knowledge, 2008-09
Ink on paper and cylindrical mirror
5 x 15 x 15 in.
Courtesy of the artist

Ceci n'est pas un Cigar, 2008
Ink on paper and cylindrical mirror
5 x 15 x 15 in.
Courtesy of the artist





This is not a Cigar

2000 is not a Cigar



REBECCA HACKEMANN



Looking Glass House, 2007
Ink on paper and cylindrical mirror
5 x 15 x 15 in.
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Shadow

Shadows, which take on many forms and functions in this exhibition, have a noteworthy art-historical context. The realistic representation of shadow in painting is inextricably tied to the progression of realism, and the use of *actual* shadows to create art goes back to ancient times. The contemporary shadow-based works included in "Smoke+Mirrors/Shadows+Fog" reference Chinese shadow puppetry (an art form dating back to the second century B.C.) as well the phantasmagorias of 18th-century France. Using various light sources including a roving flashlight, precisely calibrated overhead spots, and backlighting, Claudia Bueno, Fred Eerdekens, Hanna von Goeler, Hiraki Sawa, Kumi Yamashita, and Bohyun Yoon bring shadows to the forefront of their work. To marvelous effect, these artists manage to harness a typically elusive and immaterial byproduct into a workable primary medium.

The simple technique of using a backlit screen to show off ghosted figures and evoke fantastic settings in ancient Chinese shadow puppetry is echoed thousands of years later in Sawa's *Trail* (2005). Sawa's digital video is, in essence, an updated shadow play—a fairytale in which silhouetted exotic animals traipse through a modern-day domestic scene. Similarly, Bueno's multi-media installation *Breeze* (2010) is also a reincarnation of the backlit-screen technique. Using cut and collaged paper set between LED lights and a sheet of Plexiglas, Bueno creates a landscape of telephone poles, street lamps, laundry lines, windmills, picket fences, and tall grasses. Two rotating fans in the "back stage" area simulate a natural draft, which not only adds motion to the scene but also brings an alluring sense of dimensionality and temporality to the technically flat picture plane. The dancing shadows in Yoon's large-scale installation *Structure of Shadow* (2009) reference the seamless lyrical movements of silhouetted puppets. In the case of Yoon's piece, however, the artifice used to create the shadow play is intentionally exposed. *Structure of Shadow* consists of hundreds of male and female doll parts hung with invisible thread from a three-tiered, 7-½-foot, industrial-style scaffold. The individual limbs, torsos, and heads dangle at seemingly random levels but, incredibly, cast shadows of whole figures onto the gallery walls. Yoon creates an astonishing illusion but allows the viewer to see how it is achieved—quite simply, actually, through manual manipulation of light and shadow.

Von Goeler's *The Shadows Cast by Ordinary Objects* (2009) has conceptual and stylistic affinities with phantasmagorias (pre-cinema projections onto smoke, a screen, or a wall, often meant to give the impression of ghosts and spirits). In von Goeler's installation—a table set for dinner complete with formal stemware and fine china—a miniature toy train glides along an electric track while carrying a flashlight that casts roving, distorted shadows onto the walls of the gallery. The components and execution of this piece are quite straightforward, but the overall effect is mystical—suggesting that the spirits of the guests who once dined at this table have returned to the scene as haunting apparitions of light and shadow. Of all the works in this exhibition, Yamashita's *Seated Woman* (2008) takes

shadow-illusionism to perhaps the most extreme level. This wall-mounted piece consists of a silhouetted seated figure apparently resting on a sliver of shelving jutting out from the wall. Upon closer inspection it becomes clear that there is no visible object casting the shadow. In the case of this piece, Yamashita privileges shadow over physical object to such an extent that the object disappears completely, leaving only shadow. Working in a similar conceptual vein, Eerdeken's manipulates copper wire and overhead lighting to create shadows of startlingly legible words and phrases. *Bad Writing* (2006), for example, is comprised of two squiggles of copper wire that, when lit from above at a precise 45-degree angle, cast a shadow depicting the title of the piece. Eerdeken's ability to produce readable language via the shadows cast by apparently abstract forms represents another jarring reversal of the conventional object-shadow hierarchy.

Reflection and Refraction

Rebecca Hackemann, Susanne Kessler and Herbert Cybulska, and Charles Matson Lume create illusions by manipulating perspective and reflection. Hackemann's work relies on catoptric anamorphosis, a technique that involves drawing intentionally distorted images designed to be displayed with special cylindrical mirrors. The drawings, which are presented on separate pedestals and are perpendicular to precisely placed mirrors, appear visually adjusted in the reflections. Hackemann's work relies on an optical illusion in order to be "correctly" seen. In this way, it reminds us that perception is subjective—a variable as opposed to a control. Working with just two elements, acetate and light, Matson Lume generates fanciful and evocative imagery. The multiple curled sheets of acetate used for *We know that knowing is not our way II* (2009) are arranged on the floor, and when lit by an overhead spotlight they project a surprising assortment of Brancusi-like elliptic forms directly onto the gallery wall. Artistic collaborators Kessler and Cybulska use hundreds of small mirror fragments combined with carefully calibrated lighting to create an environment that effectively takes over an entire room of the gallery, filling it with glimmering and continually changing reflections and light refractions. The fantastical experience of *Beauty lies exhausted in the streets* (2006/10) is the result of these artists exerting control over what we typically understand in the real world only as momentary apparitions. The piece enables the viewer to linger amid a suspended state of sparkling light and shadow play.

Smoke, Residue, and Forces of Nature

Jim Dingilian, Heather Lewis, and Oscar Muñoz create tangible works of art using materials that are intrinsically transient under natural conditions. By capturing typically quick-to-dissipate byproducts such as smoke residue and dust, these artists seem to approach divine intervention. The materials and processes that they employ are especially astonishing in that they belie the natural order wherein fumes disperse, dust scatters, and forces such as gravity and magnetism are invisible. Dingilian's process involves coating the interior surface of assorted empty glass bottles with candle smoke and then painstakingly erasing

select areas of the residue to create highly detailed landscapes. The miniature vignettes he depicts, such as the curious abandoned car next to a stream in *Valley Slope* (2009), appear to hover tenuously inside the bottles, suggesting that the subjects themselves are as vulnerable as the medium in which they are represented. Similarly, Muñoz flaunts the delicacy and impermanence of his unusual chosen medium in *Narciso* (2001). For this video piece, Muñoz created a line drawing of his own face using charcoal dust, which he then screened directly onto the surface of standing water in a sink. As the water drains, the self-portrait becomes increasingly distorted—conveying a sense of fragility and ephemerality that extends well beyond this particular artwork. Lewis's gravitygrams, on the other hand, are straightforward representations of a fundamental (albeit invisible) natural force. Her drawings of ordinary objects are created by capturing the deflection of metal granules under the influence of gravity on paper. Lewis's end results are quite literally documentations of the effects of gravitational force.

Seen together, the artworks in "Smoke+Mirrors/Shadows+Fog" are a refreshing reminder of how relatively simple interventions, such as the careful manipulation of light, shadow, and reflection, can make for astonishing and moving sensorial experiences. Although breakthroughs in science and technology have provided, and will continue to provide, an evermore sophisticated understanding of the natural world and our relationship to it, it is somehow comforting to know that our perception of reality has not changed to such an extent as to make us impervious to age-old manmade illusory techniques. Whether we are looking at the murals by Suzanne Song and Mary Temple or the shadow plays of Claudia Bueno, Hiraki Sawa, and Bohyun Yoon, it is simultaneously humbling and exhilarating to realize that our awe and delight may not be that far from that of the original visitors at the Palace of Mysteries in Pompeii or the shadow-puppet audiences in ancient China.

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