

EXHIBITION REVIEW

Rocky Shores

By Owen Duffy

"Leah Beferman: Cold Color"

Rawson Projects, New York

14 September – 23 October 2016

The prints in Leah Beferman's recent exhibition, "Cold Color," at New York's Rawson Projects update time-honored conventions of landscape painting and photography to address our increasingly mediated relationship with nature. Through digital drawing and digital collage, Beferman manipulates space, density, color and perspective to shape formally conscious pictures of the environment. Rather than offering expansive photographic vistas as Ansel Adams did in the 20th century or Luminist water views à la the 19th-century painter John Frederick Kensett, Beferman confronts viewers with photomechanical snippets of rocks, water and sand. The large digital C-print *Spectrums 1* (2016) includes eight image clusters of gray-green water and steely rocks on a saturated sea-foam-green background. Evenly dispersed throughout the picture plane, and disparately scaled to create figure-ground tension, the clipped photographs of rocks and water are layered with varying degrees of transparency, overlapping and melding.

Beferman took the photographs for *Spectrums 1* on the shores of a harbor in Ireland. As in every littoral zone, solids and liquid meet to form a complex geological entity—both rock and water are a part of the coast, and the coast is a part of both the land and the sea. Today these unstable entities are among the most visible registers of climate change—the waning frontlines of our livable landmasses. The coast, as a conceptual meeting space, can be understood in a larger sense as an metaphor for this work: the liminal ambiguity of the shoreline mirroring the perennial uncertainty of when, exactly, pictures become "works of art."

She offers no concrete answers. In *Monodynamics 2* (2016) she intercuts blocks of solid color with densely sutured clusters of Icelandic rocks and sand, which the artist collected while on a residency and digitized on a flatbed scanner in her studio.



Leah Beferman, *Spectrums 1* (2016), digital C-print, 32 x 48 inches. Courtesy the artist and Rawson Projects, New York.

The photomechanical information oscillates between high-resolution clarity and blurry distortion, between crispness and noise, data and uncertainty. The formal structure of *Spectrums 1* is inverted here: rather than occupying most of the picture plane as a background, the flat black and slate "negative spaces" join together in oblong shapes. Beferman plays the time-honored game of confusing figure-ground relationships, intermingling real-world subjects and formal devices. In place of meditative communion with nature, she offers a cold and distanced artificiality that she hopes, she says, will challenge what viewers "consider natural."

The verdant green *Shores 2* (2016) is not, like the other works in the show, a digital C-print. It is a dye sublimation print on aluminum; color is embedded in the substrate. The result is an image—ocean and rocks and flat digital color—imbued with luminosity and fused to an unyielding surface.

Like myriad artists and thinkers before her, Beferman argues that nature and culture are inseparable, and that digital technologies are, like everything else,

immersed in a material and social web that joins "geology, climate, power and exploitation." Her sophisticated formalism is a seduction and goad to thought. ■

Owen Duffy is an art historian, curator and writer living in New York.

Notes:

All quotes from an interview with the artist, 26 November 2016.