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MAY 2022
"THE BEST ART IN THE WORLD"

Light & Matter: The Art of Matthew Brandt



Birch SPDO1A, 2022, 72 x 84 inches, pyro-graph on birch plywood with gold leaf.

Forest Lawn
Museum

April 21 through

September 4, 2022

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By **GARY BREWER**, May 2022

“The random, the unscreened, allows you to find what you don’t know you are looking for, and you don’t know a place until it surprises you.”

-- Rebecca Solnit, *Wanderlust: A History of Walking*

I visited Matthew Brandt at his studio, a vast space- formerly a carpet warehouse- in West Adams, Los Angeles. It is filled with a rich array of tools: blowtorches, a kiln for melting glass, large tubs for processing photographs, and worktables covered with various projects still in development. Outside, in the back, is a small stand-alone shed where he uses more dangerous chemicals for his mercurial imagination to discover novel methods of realizing his work, such as some recent works that use uranium in the process!

Though photography is his medium, he pushes the materials that he uses and the chemical techniques he employs, into the realm of alchemy. His works are about process, discovery, and serendipity; how chance, happenstance and location can become poetic elements in his lush metamorphic images.

As the camera captures a moment in time, the medium or subject matter that he uses often comes from the places where his art takes him- becoming another record: a diary of Brandt’s life as an artist. Through an exhibition in St. Petersburg, Russia, Brandt learned about the significance of the birch tree as part of their cultural identity and their connection to the land. He took hundreds of photographs of birch forests, which later became a series of laser etched images: part of the wood burned black from the laser, while other portions are gold-leafed, creating a poetic chiaroscuro of lightness and dark, of destruction and radiance. A large powerful piece, *Birch SPDO1A*, from this series, is a part of the current exhibition.

When I asked Brandt about his work and its meaning, he replied. “When I first learned about the rich history of photography and the brilliant minds that discovered the varied chemical processes that were created to print photographs, I wanted to find a way to highlight the beauty of these techniques. I found that by throwing

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a monkey wrench into the process, I could reveal the rich chemical layers and alchemy behind the medium-
destruction is an important part of my creative process. My works are metaphors about the unfixed, transient
nature of life: that this is all a temporal moment in time. There is a Buddhist sense to these works in their
expression of impermanence.”



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The exhibition *Light & Matter* is a fifteen-year survey of the artist's work and it shows his endlessly inventive approach to creating an image. A grid of 24 photographs from his *Lakes and Reservoirs* series is a beautiful expression of his aesthetic and philosophical goals. Each piece is a four-color print: he placed each image face down in a pan of water collected from the lake. The bleeding and separating of the magenta, cyan, yellow and black, create lush dream-like colorsapes, which show us the beauty of these inks as they dissipate from a fixed image, to become abstract watercolor paintings. The uncontrolled accidents all take place outside of the artist's control. In many of the images, one air pocket caused by the paper bubbling, leaves a passage untouched- showing a clear image of the lake and surrounding landscape. There is an innocence to these imaginative and playful experiments: as though a child, head buried in the grass, is peering through the blades of grass at the partial views of the world beyond. These are a quicksilver gaze- an alchemist squinting into the phenomenal world to see what it looks like upside down, through a looking glass of wonder.

When we spoke, Brandt mentioned that part of his practice is to include site-specific elements to his images; something he learned or discovered from the various shows he has had throughout the world. Serendipity graces this exhibition, with a sad and humorous backstory for one of his pieces. "After the exhibition was scheduled in 2020, and I was beginning to piece together the work that would be in the show. I read an article about a seventeen-foot tall, marble replica of Michelangelo's *David* that the Forest Lawn Cemetery owns. It had collapsed under its own weight, and broke into pieces. I called the museum and asked if I could photograph it and get a piece of the marble to grind into marble dust to use as a printing medium. They gave me the OK and I came with my camera. A crew with a forklift helped me move the pieces around into a composition that worked. The chunk of marble was ground to dust and using silkscreen, I created this work, *David 1B*." The image has a ghostly presence- the marble dust printed on roofing paper, is a

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subtle, spectral image; the visage of the head and various body parts of the sculpture appear as an apparition. The work conveys a sense of time, gravity, and the slow erosion of this world back to the dust from whence we all came.

Despite photography being a medium where modern chemistry and science are crucial for its development, in the hands and vision of Brandt, it retains a deep connection to the four elements, and conveys a sense of magic and alchemy. Water, air, fire and earth play prominently in many of the work's creation. Earth as the marble dust of *David 1B*; water as a transformative agent in *Lakes and Reservoirs*; air and fire in his burnt, laser etched images of birch forests.



Vantajökull MYCD1, 2018-2020, Heated chromogenic print, with acrylic varnish and Aqua-Resin support, 72 × 240 inches.

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For a giant diptych of glaciers in the exhibition, *Vantajökull MYCD1*, the artist used a blowtorch to heat and transform the image. The materiality of the paper and print medium become rich, bubbling, abstract surfaces, where kaleidoscopic chromatic and tactile dramas play out in a series of lush passages. The image is obscured, transformed into a metaphor about our world, of its impermanence and its continual death and rebirth. These transformations take place both from natural causes and in our current world, man-made ones. The image of the glaciers- the surface of the photograph's pigments melted by the heat of the flame- could be seen as a metaphor of global warming: yet another reminder of our vulnerability. Our world is an ever-changing environment of violent disruptions: the strata of the earth itself, is a geological record of the endless transformations that have come before us and will continue after our time.

During our conversation, Brandt said. "My work is about experimentation and process. I do not know what the results will look like and many times they fail. When I arrive at an image that works- when all of the work and the not knowing what will happen are over, I am done with the project. I do not want to make a product- the results that I arrive at are a record of the journey. That is what I am after."

Matthew Brandt captures not just the image that his camera records. His works are a diary of a creative soul expanding the limits of a medium to capture elements of his life and express the ineffable space between being and nothingness. His images are spectral and dream-like. They are a scrim, through which we perceive the world we know, and the forces of transformation, the active elements of this metamorphic world. He leaves us a trace: the strata of his experiments and discoveries; mapping the trajectory of his imagination.

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GARY BREWER

Gary Brewer is a painter, writer and curator working in Los Angeles. His articles have appeared in Hyperallergic, Art and Cake, and ART NOWLA.

Email: garywinstonbrewer@gmail.com

Website: <http://www.garybrewerart.com>

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