

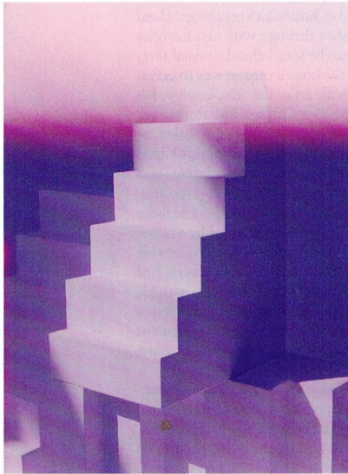
SAN FRANCISCO

Sara VanDerBeek

ALTMAN SIEGEL

The apparent movement of the sun across the firmament is nearly impossible to measure with the naked eye, but human cultures have nonetheless used the changing quality of light to quantify time for millennia. The resulting concepts of “day” and “night” are entirely geocentric constructions, yet they persist. The conceit of a day/night separation structured “Ancient Objects, Still Lives,” Sara VanDerBeek’s two-room show of new photographs and sculptures, but, like the lived experience of a sky’s darkening, the diachronic movement was perceived almost exclusively in hindsight. Shot on film and then scanned, her digital C-prints connoted the passage of time, gradually shifting from light lavender in the front room (day) to dark Tyrian purple in the back gallery (night). (VanDerBeek manipulates the printing process by removing the yellow from CMYK to achieve these tones.) However, the possibility of reading a straightforward chronology in these works was intentionally thwarted by the artist’s divided approach to making the images, which are at times highly constructed (featuring forms made and staged in the studio) and at other times more observational

Sara VanDerBeek, *Ancient Solstice*, 2014, digital C-print, 24 × 17 3/4”.



(portraying found objects or architectural elements in situ). The two sculptures on view contained both high modernist and pre-Columbian references, adding further complexity to the exhibition’s temporal play.

Some of the first photographs encountered—geometric abstractions that varied slightly from one piece to the next—resembled Neo-concretist efforts. Here, systems of figure-ground relationships played out across several works. The diptychs *Synthetic Geometry* and *Incidence* (all works 2014) evince VanDerBeek’s manipulation of light and shadow cast over the volumes of a parallelogram and a triangular form, respectively, to produce soft edges, subtle contrasts, and flattened picture planes. Like László Moholy-Nagy’s filmed and photographed experiments with objects and light, VanDerBeek’s images strain the limits of their own legibility as photo-

graphs, reading instead as drawings, aquatints, or watercolors. Let one think geometry was the province of the moderns, however, *Chorrera*, a photograph of a patinated jug with pentagonal sides, interjected with ancient evidence of modernism’s primitivist roots. Consumed with the task of deciphering each image, the viewer hardly noticed the progressive darkening of the prints.

*Ancient Solstice* (also in the front room) is a more obvious studio setup. Here, geometric forms coalesce into an image of a staircase, with dramatic shadows and contrasts typical of high noon. A sculpture of similar ziggurat-style steps turned on their side bisected the front gallery, reinforcing the theme of passage from one of the exhibition’s temporal moments to the next. *Turned Stairs/Pyramid Steps* was at once a sculptural object and a hanging wall for a single photograph of low concrete steps: *Pyramid Steps, Day*. The doubling here felt needlessly self-reflexive, but the wall served to move the viewer along toward another modernist screen—a chain-link fence photographed at nightfall (*Civil Dusk*).

Once the setting sun first touches the horizon, it takes only minutes for its trailing edge to disappear, and so it follows that dark hues dominated the back room. The draped fabric pictured in *Loose Structure* shimmers and seems almost to move with the indeterminacy of twilight, making it hard to look away. In *Cyclopean Night*, the surface geometries of *Incidence* or *Synthetic Geometry*—the “daytime” studio shots—solidify into dense volumetric forms with the application of deep purples, while only faint streaks of white trail across a field of indigo in the show’s final diptych, *The Visible Universe*. In the end, any disjuncture between photography and sculpture, or staged and straight photographs, supported the slippery nature of VanDerBeek’s real subject matter: time. Part of photography’s appeal, after all, is the way it arrests temporal experiences and renders an instant visible, even tangible. Not unlike the ancients who used ritual artifacts to help map the inconstant moon, VanDerBeek employs photography as a contemporary means to track the passage of time through the interaction of objects and light.

—Elizabeth Mangini