

Art in America

DECEMBER 2014

EXHIBITION REVIEWS



Elizabeth McAlpine:
Mother and Child 5,
2014, black-and-
white contact
print, photographic
emulsion, paper,
steel, magnets, 26¾
by 26 by 5 inches; at
Laura Bartlett.

ELIZABETH McALPINE

Laura Bartlett

Elizabeth McAlpine's series of 10 photographic works is elusive, even deceptive, but not in the way we typically think of photography as being. It is not that what they show may not be what we think it is, but that we are not sure what they are or what they show. Although they were made by an artist whose work has been characterized by her exposure of the means by which filmic and photographic images are produced, and therefore by an emphasis on medium over narrative, or medium as narrative, it is at first difficult to determine their medium. Plate-thin and mostly hung on the wall, the works are based on the square or rectangle—to this extent they resemble a painting or photograph—but their matte black surfaces reveal a white aggregated texture that one associates with frottage. Are they blackboards marked by chalk? No, because their corners have dog-eared folds. (Two are folded into the angle between floor and wall.) Rectangular and circular magnets are arranged on the surfaces, implying a metallic component.

The methodological inscrutability of the works involves the viewer in a process of deciphering that is analogous to the effort one brings to decoding an image. They could be paintings, drawings, photographs or sculptures, and they have qualities of each. A year ago, McAlpine began making rubbings of paving stones that she subsequently subjected to a series of technical experiments. Photographic emulsion was applied to both sides of the paper, impregnating it with a semi-transparency that functioned as a negative through which to project light onto photographic paper. Unmarked areas registered as black, the rubbings as white. The folded corners represent the fragmenting of the individual stones to fit the "mosaic" of a pavement, and signal McAlpine's attraction to particular formal configurations she happens upon. The prints were ultimately mounted onto metal plates, explaining

the magnetic pull.

The protraction of my technical description reflects the protracted process one undergoes in apprehending the works. Layers of contradictory associations are revealed. One of the most primal acts of causal representation—a rubbing of the ground under our feet—has produced an ethereal image, which might depict the mottled surface of the moon or a nocturnal landscape through a fine mist. A "down-to-earth" motif has produced objects invoking the most rarefied of art forms—modernist constructivism. The shadow of Malevich's *Black Square* (1913) is present, as is the reduction of painting, by Robert Ryman or Frank Stella, to what Michael Fried has called "deductive structure." But the folds, breaking the plane, have a metaphorical import: they are ruptures in the categorical cohesion of the formalist art object, setting the works off-balance. They are turns at which the abstraction of geometry cedes to the intimacy of memory. The magnets suggest a cartographic diagram with their rectangular blocks as cars or buildings. The illusionistic depth implied by this reading contradicts the one-to-one scale of photograph to paving stone, opening up the works from a negative of drawn marks to aerial views of cityscapes. These are, after all, representations of the ground the artist walks on, and are, therefore, autobiographical documents. The magnets, through their attraction, embody our desire to perceptually penetrate the images. Invoking the magnetic pull of the metal backing, they connote the fact that the photographic paper has an image of rubbing on both sides: there is another image partially revealed by some of the folds. Something is being uncovered, unearthed, restored to the light. When McAlpine explained to me the difficulty of storing these fragile works to prevent damaging the folds, she said, "Paper has a long memory."

—Mark Prince