



"Wharf House, Claudia"

Photos courtesy of Bates College Museum of Art

Bates awash in Jeffery Becton's unique imagery

By DANIEL KANY

Viewers entering the Bates College Museum of Art are greeted by a very large photograph, showing a woman seated low behind a round table so we only see her head and shoulders. She wears a lacy white blouse with a wire clasp that, like everything in the undoubtedly old coastal Maine clapboard interior, exudes a previous-century feel. This is reinforced by smoothed-by-time wood, candles and sconces instead of lamps, a painted primitive portrait of a ship hanging on the wall, and the many-times-painted architecture peeling despite its fastidious inhabitant's best intentions. Now-antique objects look as though they had always been there.

ART REVIEW

WHAT: "The View Out His Window (and in his mind's eye) – Photographs by Jeffery Becton"

WHERE: Bates College Museum of Art, 75 Russell St., Lewiston

HOURS: 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. Tuesday, Thursday, Friday and Saturday, 10 a.m. to 7:30 p.m. Monday and Wednesday; through March 26

INFO: bates.edu/museum, 786-



"Grace"



the scene is of a brushily painted seascape. It is a brilliant handling of what could be a one-liner in a less-nuanced artist's hands. (This digitally blended approach, after all, is prone to cliché, which Becton completely avoids.)

This is an important facet of Becton's work: It is not simple conceptualism driven by one-dimensional wit. Becton follows his ideas with depth. "March Morning," for example, seems simple and clear until you look closely at the large print. Then, then distinction between the photo and the painting gets folded into the singular, slightly pixilated entity of the digital print.

This pushed me to see Becton's works more like monotypes than paintings or photographs. They are structured bit by bit like paintings, but they have the unified and instantaneous surface of the photograph. The one kind of work that achieves this is the monotype – an image painted on glass and then transferred like a print onto paper. Where Becton's work differs from traditional prints is in the sense that he works with a full color palette (and layers) throughout his process.

While the show includes a few (quite beautiful) black and white images, they underscore Becton's

The diminutive woman and her tufty shock of thick gray hair takes up only a tiny portion of the large image, and she stares back at you from its very center.

What is unmistakably contemporary about the picture, however, is the large format color print. It is no snapshot: Despite being 6 feet wide, the ceiling lines run straight across the entire image. It is up-to-the-minute technology.

Oh, and the surface of the round table at the front edge of the image is ocean water, which continues off the tabletop and through the left side doorway into a far room where the surf breaks among the beach rocks by the bed on the floor under a window – on the inside of the sunlit room.

This work, "Wharf House, Claudia," sets the table for the exhibition "The View Out His Window (and in his mind's eye): Photographs by Jeffery Becton." It is a show of interior dream scenes of old coastal houses in which the ocean appears to have become a reasonably well-behaved (though irrational) occupant.

What is challenging and, to a certain extent, misleading about the title is the term "photographs." The photographic component of the images is undeniable. But because Becton heavily works his images in Photoshop, it is arguably more accurate to call them digital prints or photo-collages. This initial problem, however, becomes one of the most conceptually intriguing and challenging aspects of this gorgeous exhibition.

Moreover, the introduction of the exhibition by means of a single, outlier image – there are no other figures among the 20 works – sets

viewers up to reconsider any of Becton's works they may have viewed elsewhere. To begin, I have never seen Becton's images printed as large as even the smallest work in this show – a gorgeous study in white of an empty interior hanging just above the gallery desk. "Grace" is a small, unadorned whitewashed room with a single window on the flat, far right wall. The floor is calm ocean water that, in this case, continues on the same landscape plane we see out the window. Around the walls of the room is what appears to be a high-water mark, below which the wall takes on the color of stained drywall. (Though make no mistake, these are old-school Maine-built wooden walls, not drywall.) What we appear to be seeing is that the tides have been coming in much, much higher than had been anticipated by the folks who built this house so many years ago. On closer inspection, however, the stain line is revealed to be a superimposed photographic layer showing the surrounding tree-edged landscape that continues

around the entire (now ghostly) room.

Matching an apparent high-water mark to the landscape line becomes increasingly legible as a leitmotif throughout the exhibition. Its impact conveys an indirect but potentially powerful environmental message. However, there are so many compelling aspects to Becton's work that the content of the show will undoubtedly be left to each viewer. While some will see a dire, environmental warning, others will get caught in Becton's impressive sense of abstraction – in particular his virtuoso knack for combining color and texture.

I think my personal response to Becton's painterliness will not be the norm. What I especially enjoy about Becton's touch is that he doesn't try to hide his Photoshop tracks (layers, cutout photos, filters – particularly Photoshop's "watercolor" filter – etc.) just as many painters don't try to hide their brushwork. "March Morning," in fact, is all about this: The view out a window includes the leafless winter trees from a photo, but

that he is arguably the best colorist in Maine in any medium.

Becton's work generally pushes toward one of two modes. His highly textured surfaces of old, metal ship hulls – painted, peeling, covered in barnacle and mussels and, apparently, left for dead – present as handsomely textured abstractions. Becton's room interiors, on the other hand, are often anchored by a single, centered piece of old furniture. They are more dream images than anything else – but so vivid as to feel hallucinatory. They have a certain wit about them, but with a potentially disturbing edge not dissimilar to the uncomfortable symmetry of Stanley Kubrick's centered cinematography in "The Shining."

Becton has gone beyond his own previous high-water mark. His prints feel as large as they can be, and this sense of limit is exhilarating insofar as it celebrates a compelling upper edge. What you will see in his work, however, is what you will want to see. If you prefer fantasy and fiction, it's there. There is wit for those who want to laugh. There is mystery for those who prefer preternatural powers. And there is environmental messaging for those with a predilection for cultural morality. As well, Becton's technical abilities as a photographer are formidable. For me, finding Becton's painterly strengths – abstraction, structure, layering, color, composition, stylistic system and texture – made "The View Out His Window" immensely enjoyable.

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"Ephemera"