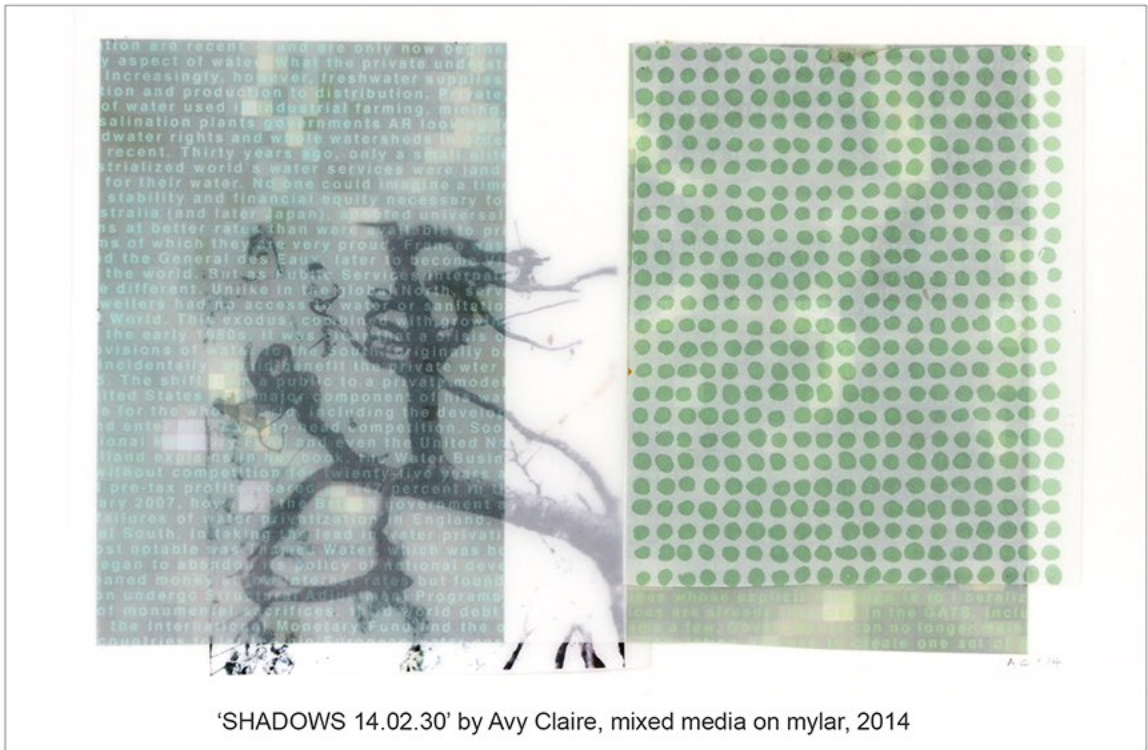


# THE PORTLAND PHOENIX



'SHADOWS 14.02.30' by Avy Claire, mixed media on mylar, 2014

## Upsetting the natural order

PhoPa's three artists re-interpret their environs

By NICK SCHROEDER | May 15, 2014

In our media landscape, bare facts about the environment are constantly subject to spin. In a show of captivating works on paper using radically different approaches, three artists reaffirm that truism, using the visual vocabulary of environmental studies to create art that engages our capacities for politics, poetry, and metaphor.

A regionally acclaimed artist whose work rewires the modes of perception used to assess the natural world, Avy Claire, of Blue Hill, might be approached as a poet of symbols and materials. Her mixed media pieces each build from a foundational image on translucent film (mostly photographs of shadows), onto which Claire adds hash marks, ink puddles, scribbly nonlinguistic characters, and other spare, codified images. Her palette echoes the hues of the earth — verdant greens, cavernous blues, and soft yellows mounted onto a brilliant white — and the effect is a tone that radiates feelings of positivity, appreciation, and abundance. Lest that get a little precious, Claire incorporates some subtle hints of ecological disaster into her works — thinly legible text copy accounts of environmental catastrophe mounted onto the film.

The product is so attractive as to arouse suspicion. Is she utilizing an aesthetics of eco-politics to make essentially decorative works? The agreeable colors, rustic landscapes, and vaguely Zen-like use of script suggest these pieces could be mounted onto the mantle of any upper middle class home, their activist inspirations buried under the fashions of the Midcoast fine art market. I don't think that's what Claire's intending here. Her signature as an artist is too strongly developed, the images too carefully crafted and personal. Yet the question nags, one of the corollaries of art that flirts with a universal beauty.

A student in geothermal sciences — wind circulation, plate tectonics, climate change, and all that — Nancy Manter's surfaces revisit this sort of imagery through a host of mediums, the material properties of each a sort of distant echo of those in the natural world. By Manter's hand, gesso bleeds thick swaths of snowy white texture; white pencil grids introduce a scientific lens while thin lines simulate a topography. Many within the framed series "Cross-Track" use red and blue ink to add another dimension, fusing with the gesso in rich deposits of mysterious volume, as if spotlighted by an aerial object. "Endless Landscape," a series of unframed paper works assembled in a wide, panoramic spread in the gallery corner, is a raw, original take on landscape painting, subverting its traditional subject onto a more ethereal plane.

Manter's paintings are intuitive — they're not the methodical geothermal studies they could pass for — but her employment of precision focus and haphazard play give them a capaciousness that transcends their simplicity. And while it never leaps beyond the level of subtlety, these pieces contain more than a hint of peril: There's no dodging the concomitant questions that arise from any observation of climate study.

Owing to a novel design, the primitive pinhole photography methods of Stonington artist Anne-Claude Cotty are the show's most obscure. She uses cardboard boxes for cameras and strips of tape for shutters, the images boring themselves onto photo paper through several microscopic holes in the surface. Rendered in black and white onto paper roughly a square foot in size (though Cotty colors a few in by hand), these images are resolutely poetic, emotional works. Several images blur into a field of non-representative shades, the meaning suffused into planes reserved for far outside the field of photography. In the excellent triptych, "On the Salt Breath of an Evening Breeze," you can barely make out a visual vocabulary of buoys and lobster traps, while the final image is far outside the aesthetic of Maine waterfront art. Any larger and these photos would become too documentarian, too about something. Cotty, like her accomplices in this fine show, prefers not to grant us such stable footing.

**"Beneath the Surface," mixed media works on paper by Avy Claire + Anne-Claude Cotty + Nancy Manter | through May 31 | at PhoPa Gallery, 132 Washington Ave, Portland | 207.317.6721**