

Spring Exhibitions

Conversations with:

Saul Becker & Meredith Johnson

Ilana Halperin & Raimundas Malasauskas

Francesco Simeti & Joseph del Pesco

ARTISTS SPACE

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Saul Becker

Nature Preserves

Meredith Johnson: When first encountering the body of work included in this exhibition, I was first struck by the diversity of plants you have been able to collect from industrial areas of New York. What are primary species of plants that are included in this show, and are any specific species of plants unique to a particular site or type of site?

Saul Becker: Most of the plants are weeds, which isn't so much a scientific designation as a term for an unwanted plant. I've been surprised by the variety of plants growing in the city. Wild Carrot, Wild Garlic, and herbs like Evening Primrose and St. John's Wort grow all over Brooklyn. Some of the more interesting plants tend to grow in the most toxic places. *Cyperus esculentus* (yellow nutsedge) is a particularly delicate and beautiful plant that I find mostly around defunct gas stations and oil processing and storage facilities. Coney Island has a lot of prickly weeds like Sand Burrs and Jimson Weeds. I'm getting better at recognizing the ground conditions by what is growing there. How much water is around or how long it's been since someone has cleared the area. I do get surprised though when one season the area is covered in one type of weed and next season I can't find a single example of it anywhere. It keeps things interesting and keeps me looking.

MJ: How do you go about accumulating these specimens? Do you methodically identify sites to focus on, or are they taken at random during your regular walks through the city?

SB: Sometimes I put on an orange construction vest, grab a white bucket and garden pruners, and try to look as official as possible as I slip past the "Keep Out" sign on the fence of a vacant lot to collect plants. Often when I do this I'm going on a collection trip to a specific site. These trips are usually to sites that have caught my interest because they are heavily polluted, like the Newtown Creek in Greenpoint. Other sites of interest are those that are a lost or forgotten natural feature like the Coney Island Creek. It's not only an opportunity to find plants but a chance for me to get to know the city and the natural environment better.

I also collect a lot on walks to and from my studio in Williamsburg. There is a new waterfront park on the way that has a beach that is almost entirely made of broken bricks and old construction debris. Next door a huge condo building is going up and the earth is torn-up all over. They are both great collection sites, and remind me of how Robert Smithson described the construction process as "ruins in reverse".

I find that I now constantly keep making mental maps of where to look for certain species. I'll watch a patch of weeds for a few seasons or even a year until they are ready for me to collect. On more than one occasion the city has mowed the site the day before I go to collect, which is always vexing. A couple of times friends have picked plants for me or sent them from other cities. Mostly I try to collect them myself so I can see what the conditions are like where they grow. I find it really hard to not be constantly on the lookout for interesting plants.

MJ: Each of the plants in this exhibition is electroplated. What is electroplating, and how have you refined its use in your practice?
SB: The electroplating process is both chemical and electrical. The weeds, after being preserved and sealed, are put into a vat of battery acid and copper solution. A positive electrical charge is run through copper plates placed in the tank and a negative charge is put on the plant. Copper is then pulled from the plates and deposited on the plant. Technically the process is electroforming because I'm making a metal part out of an organic non-conductive part. It's like a thin metal

shell is formed over the plant. The metal can be any thickness, the longer it's in the tank, the thicker the deposit.

For the plants in the exhibition the plating time is usually about an hour to two hours per plant. The set-up looks a bit like a mad scientist laboratory in my studio. It is probably about a day for each plant altogether for all the parts of the process. It can be pretty humbling when you realize that you've just spent an hour polishing a blade of grass.

MJ: The method of collection you described, with the construction vests in vacant lots, reminds me of garbage collection or a toxic clean up. However, the plants in these cases that are now electroplated have a preciousness to them that would seem far removed from their original homes. There is a fine balance with these materials between their two identities as detritus and treasure. How do you view this tension playing out in the work?

SB: There is preciousness and a delicacy with all this work, and I have to remind myself that it was all found on the side of the road. I think the tension is in finding beauty and also trying to not pull the weeds so far from where they came from that they seem to be specimens. They are survivors and I admire them, they have a lot of aesthetic value for me but part of what makes them so attractive is that they are so abundant and overlooked. They are almost invisible and yet they are slowly and gently taking the city back from us. They are a lot like artists in a way, the first to inhabit an unwanted space and transform it into a new environment.

MJ: Can you discuss how you have chosen to group the objects in each case? For example, do the conditions of their sites relate to any narrative relationship in the groupings?

SB: I have tried to keep clusters of similar plants together in each case but other than that there is little reference to their specific origins. They are taken from different places and put together to make a confluence of sites, much like my paintings. They are fragments of an environment that become a new fictive landscape. I don't want

them to be illustrative of any specific place. They are attractive to me precisely because they are mostly from invisible or forgotten places. The horticulture books will mostly refer to their habitats as waste places. Each work in the show attempts to be its own unique non-site landscape. Each case is a kind-of pseudo preservation.

MJ: I would love to conclude by discussing how the work in this exhibition relates to the history of landscape painting. I know the collection of these plants has often served as a launching point for your drawings and paintings. Can you discuss your relationship to landscape painting, particularly to Hudson River School painters like Thomas Cole and Frederick Church?

SB: My primary interest in all my work has been landscape, both the history of painting and the larger development of ideas about nature. My paintings and drawings are what led me to this project. I first started collecting images of plants and other fragments of landscapes to make my paintings. Shortly after moving to Brooklyn I started bringing the plants back to the studio where it was easier to photograph them. The work on paper in the exhibition (*Weed Explosion*) is really the keystone connecting the two bodies of work. I was collecting plants while I was doing that drawing and thinking about a story I had heard about one of the Hudson River School painters exhibiting paintings surrounded by potted plants, furthering the illusion that the viewer was actually in the painting. I started to look around and think that I should somehow incorporate the plants that were surrounding me in the studio into the work. I decided against mixing them with 2D work.

This weed project has really been important to my painting practice by taking me out of the studio and sending me into the vacant lots and waste spaces of New York to really start to understand the tense relationship between nature and the built world. The Hudson River School helped shape the American identity through landscape, and I'm interested in finding out how that identity has changed as our relationship with the natural world has changed.

In his essay, *A Tour of the Monuments of Passaic, New Jersey*, Robert Smithson wrote, "That zero panorama seemed to contain ruins in reverse, that is – all the new construction that would eventually be built. This is the opposite of the "romantic ruin" because the buildings don't fall into ruin after they are built but rather rise into ruin before they are built." Robert Smithson *A Tour of the Monuments of Passaic, New Jersey* (1967). Jack Flam, Robert Smithson: Collected Writings (Berkeley University of California Press, 1996), pg. 72.

Ilana Halperin

Physical Geology (slow time)

Raimundas Malasauskas: Do you feel more like a landscape or still life artist?

Ilana Halperin: Landscape.

RM: Are you a sculptor or a storyteller or none of the above?

IH: I trained as a stone carver when I was young, and though I haven't done any carving for years, I still have a gut attraction to the geological world. The Physical Geology project feels, in some ways, like a return to stone carving, which I quite like - except now the geology will be generating the formation of the object - an additive stone carving process rather than subtractive.

They say the study of geology is like reading a book in which all the pages have been torn out and thrown back together again, so a narrative leap of faith is necessary to imagine how one thing could lead to another - it is like a science of stories. I can totally relate to this approach.

RM: What is your geological age?

IH: Less than a millisecond. Saying that, what would life be like if you were constantly aware of extreme geological mortality. I prefer to think in parallel durations - deep time and daily time

alongside each other. A geologist I spoke with recently said the only way you could really feel geological time would be to attempt to feel duration - the ongoing passage of time where each second could be accounted for, primarily through the act of waiting, as so much geological movement happens slowly. In the end, we both agreed that if you adopted this method of lived geological time, you would miss out on your own life and that would be a complete waste of an opportunity.

RM: How deep is your love for caves?

IH: Very. Though my heart is in a milk blue geothermal spring in Iceland.

RM: What was your last research trip?

IH: To the edge of the Port of Rotterdam, the largest port in Europe, for a project called Portscares. The landmass of Holland is about to expand by another 2000 hectares, extending the port far out into the North Sea. They will be building land out of water, digging up the bottom of the ocean floor and repositioning it to make new terrain attached to what is already there (though of course in geological terms the current port is less than a baby - it was made in the late 60s.) The new land has a very particular resonance - landmass made for commerce. How do we think about this type of land? It is an extreme counterpoint to the new island that is forming in the water in Tonga - an emergent island that can be framed as a terrain of possibility.

<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/earth/earthnews/5014854/Video-Undersea-volcano-erupts-near-Tonga-in-Pacific-ocean.html>

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2009/mar/21/tonga-volcano-island-nuku-alofa>

I have been asked to respond to the idea of this new Dutch landmass. I'll be working 'in the field' with volcanologists, local

geographers and geologists to develop an alternative narrative history of a place which does not yet exist.

RM: How do volcanologists and geologists place your findings in the 'field'? Do you think you share an interest with the same 'possibilities'?

IH: Geology is a passionate field. Volcanologists, geologists, seismologists love rocks. As I also do, we tend to get along and have a lot to talk about. We come at the same material from slightly different angles, perhaps even for divergent reasons, but an underlying identification with the geological world is something we share. As a result, we can find an affinity for the 'possibility' you mention - whether talking about how dreams function in relation to field work, or having more open discussions about thinking in deep time while living in 'our time'. It is one thing to use a specific scale to measure time, age, place - but it is completely another to discuss the implications on a personal level.

RM: When did you first become interested in what you are doing now?

IH: Though my first trip to Iceland was in 1997, it was during a residency in the north of Iceland in 1999 that my interests became more pronounced. Two actions took place that summer, that looking back were definite spark points for everything that has happened since. I boiled a small pan of milk in a geothermal pool. This became a photographic work called Boiling Milk Sofataras. Then, I invited a European friend to meet me in a place where the North American and Eurasian tectonic plates converged. There was a deep fissure in the ground between the two plates. My friend stood on the Eurasian side, I stood on the North American and in the middle was this unmarked gap (fissure) which early on I thought about in relation to this 'space of possibility'. This became a piece called 'Meeting on the Mid-Atlantic Ridge'.

RM: What have you learned?

IH: To allow personal responses to landmass.

RM: What is your next research trip?

IH: I am going to Big Island, Hawaii in mid-April to spend time studying all things volcanic. I will be staying seven miles from the place where the main lava flow enters the ocean. This field session will be the first stage of engaging with the 'fast time' component of the Physical Geology project. The lava in Hawaii is considered a physical manifestation of the volcano deity Pele, so it's not a place to forge molten rock, that will have to wait until an accessible lava flow crops up elsewhere. Mount Etna seems the best contender, though current activity is too perilous to reach. The lava forging implements are now ready to go for when the right eruption occurs.

The trip to Hawaii is also a geological pilgrimage of sorts. I have wanted to go there ever since I read Mark Twain's 'Letters from Hawaii' and cannot quite believe that extremely soon I will be on the crater of Kilueau standing next to Volcano House.

RM: What do you think about the future in relation to geological time?

IH: A few weeks ago I spent some time with a group of volcanologists who spoke about past continents, as well as continents of the future. I asked them whether it was possible to sense geological time – deep time – through lived experience. They mentioned that humans are potentially the most powerful geomorphological agents altering the surface of the earth today. Before we were here – it was the Ice Age, retreating glaciers, unexpected meteors, volcanoes transforming life on earth, as well as the colour of the sunset. What is the geological future...everything now is in such high velocity - will Manhattan be under water? Will we become

calcified? The remote future and the remote past are equally abstract.

RM: How do you think living on the island of Manhattan has influenced your interests and points of departure?

IH: I am more comfortable on an island than landlocked. I look for a horizon that is part water. The Ramble, the 'Big Rocks' in Riverside Park, Gems and Minerals, the un-carved sections of Cathedral of St. John the Divine, Fragment of the Head of a Queen (Yellow Jasper, Amarna Empire) at the Met - a brief geological guide to New York.

RM: How do you feel your time-perception is affected by your research?

IH: I would say my time perception has been altered more profoundly by specific events, that have in turn allowed my research to focus in a way it may not have done otherwise. For example, when my father died, I was working on a project about a volcano named Eldfell that was born in the same year I was born. Though I could not articulate it at the time, my research - that of the Eldfell volcano - was a way to think about time and mortality - both in a personal and geological sense.

RM: Does "now" exist there?

IH: Yes. A trace fossil is the perpetual now. It records the actions of an organism - eating or moving - but not the organism itself.

RM: Is cave-diving related to the idea of falling?

IH: I think of cave diving - or let's say wild caving instead as I have never been underwater in a cave - as moving through and becoming part of an internal geologic architecture. Of course there is the secret option that if you took one turn too many and went down

instead of horizontal or up, that you would actually end up in the center of the earth and would not come out again. Is this falling? That fluidity of motion seems more related to the free fall of Empedocles. Into the crater.

Francesco Simeti

Volatili

Joseph del Pesco: Last year you made a series of visits to San Colombano, Italy as the fourth artist in a series of “Acrobazie” residencies that involved making collaborative projects with patients in a psychiatric hospital. Can you describe the hospital and the ten patients you worked with?

Francesco Simeti: First, and to give them credit, the artists names are: Giuseppe Bomparola, Luigi Cremaschini, Luigi Zucca, Patrizia Fatone, Andrea Vicidomini, Umberto Bergamaschi, Curzio Di Giovanni, Claudio Salvago, Elisabetta Catena, and Marco Acquani.

The hospital is called Centro S.Cuore di Gesù-Fatenenefratelli, and is located about an hour outside of Milan. The 1800 villa was converted into a psychiatric institution in 1897. After having peaked in 1960 with 1306 patients, today it hosts only 367. At the very back of the hospital, past the garden, the Atelier Adriano e Michele has been in operation since 1996. It’s a space where the patients with artistic inclination can work and play all day. It has a workspace and a gallery where the work produced in

the Atelier gets shown. Sometimes they show work produced in similar facilities across Europe. In 2005 the curator Elisa Fulco started inviting an artist a year to lead a workshop and exhibition in collaboration with the artists of the Atelier.

I worked with ten artists who have a variety of conditions including bi-polar, schizophrenia, and forms of mental retardation. Of the approximately two-dozen artists who work in the Atelier, these ten are the ones that were interested in working with a visiting artist, and were willing to explore a collective theme and project. They are between the ages of 26 (Andrea Vicidomini) and 63 (Luigi Cremaschini).

JdP: The result of your collaboration, *Volatili* (“things that fly” in Italian), follows your interest in the work of American ornithologist James Audubon. Audubon’s paintings and 435 life-size prints in *Birds of America* have become an important reference for naturalists, and in your project they serve as a metaphor. Could you talk about some of the interpretations suggested by the project?

FS: I had worked with Audubon’s iconographic material in a number of projects prior to *Volatili*. Most recently, I used the background and compositional elements of his prints and watercolors to create a wallpaper pattern substituting his bird portraits with images of plastic hunting decoys; questioning our ability to have a genuine non mediated relationship with the animal world.

Upon my arrival at the Atelier in the hospital, I was struck by the fact that many of the artists there had been producing drawings of animals, and specifically of birds, in great numbers. Audubon, who is hardly known in Italy, thus represented a chance to immediately connect with the atelier artists. I showed them a couple of my patterns derived from his work and then provided them with an ample selection of images from the Birds of North America.

JdP: When we first met in April of last year, you were getting deep into the project. You were saturated by the dense emotional conditions of the hospital, and learning about the complications of life for these patients. What was the emotional landscape of the hospital?

FS: Every morning I would take a bus that, in an hour, would take me out of Milan to San Colombano. Then I would take a 15 minute walk out of the little town and into the country side to reach the Hospital. As I mentioned before, the hospital used to be an 1800's villa that was then converted into a hospital. I would arrive at a grandiose entrance, walk by an ornate fountain full of gold fish and through the lobby of the building to exit in the back and walk out onto an avenue lined with buildings (some built as late as the seventies) as well as big trees and benches. The benches would be occupied by patients of the hospital—some in wheelchairs, some very well groomed and some in very bad shape—all chain smoking. And for the first few days of each extended visit, before I had become a known face,

many of them would approach or shout from their benches, “Do you have a cigarette? Any change for an espresso? How about a candy?”

That walk was probably the hardest thing of my whole experience at the hospital. I felt utterly uneasy and then I would arrive at the atelier where things were not so grim. After a few days of being there I had friends that were eagerly awaiting my arrival and knew that I had something to share.

JdP: During one of our conversations, you mentioned a law passed in the 1970's that both reformed the nationalized system of psychiatric hospitals, which had become horrible ghettos, and that also dramatically changed the way care-providers work in Italy. How does the system work and how does it affect the patients you collaborated with?

FS: Yes, it was the legge Basaglia, passed in 1978 and named after the psychiatrist Franco Basaglia. It basically changed the general idea of a psychiatric hospital from a physical containment type of structure, where electroshock and heavy pharmaceutical therapies were widely used, into a place where the patients were actually recognized as individuals. The acknowledgment of the patients as individuals redefined the hospitals approach to therapy and shifted the relationship with the medical personnel and society at large.

The law represented a true cultural and medical revolution, one that however, needed subsequent modifications and adjustments

that were never carried out, causing a whole other set of problems.

For example, some of the patients I was working with are considered self-sufficient and autonomous to a level that makes them ineligible for permanent or long-term care at a given facility. Yet they are not able to go on by themselves and so are moved from one facility to another every 18 months. These facilities are hundreds of miles away from their hometown and from their loved-ones. Each time they move they are forced to start-over, forming new relationships with the hospital personnel and patients.

JdP: There are three parts to the Volatili project: the framed drawings by the patients, the collaborative wall-paper based on Audubon's work, and your sculptural elements. There's a loose set of connections in the overall project that follow a kind of logic formed in relationship with the patients. For the exhibition at Artists Space we've imposed our own sense of value, making selections and formatting the display. Could you talk about the balance between your own logic, value and interests and those of the patients?

FS: When I arrived at the Atelier, I spent the first few days talking to the artists there and going through their flat files. Most of them look at existing pictures before creating their own. I learned that Giuseppe takes inspiration from fashion spreads, that Curzio adores automobiles, that Luigi is obsessed with

architecture, and so on. Then I started showing them images of my previous work while trying to get a sense of what they liked.

As I said before, Audubon turned out to be a perfect starting point and the wallpaper pattern was the outcome. After that, and you are right, we tried to find a direction that could be respectful of each individual world. Rather than a carefully calculated act, a gut feeling prevailed, and with that, a playful approach in the way we would combine the various elements together. I also think that with the construction of a kind of game, a big role was played by a real longing on the part of the patients for an ideal home—someplace to call their own.