

CEAM

CRISP-ELLERT ART MUSEUM

Crews, Roz. "Information, essay and interviews with Elizabeth Atterbury, Strauss Bourque-LaFrance, and Katy Cowan about their exhibition *Mirages*," *Crisp-Ellert Art Museum*, September 3, 2021.



Kristy Luck
"sunbreaks pile, gentle and across," 2021
Oil and enamel paint, graphite on cast aluminum
28 x 150 x 5 inches

The great joy of organizing this exhibition has been the collaborative and generative nature of the work. So many projects arise from the genuine desire of artists, curators, and arts workers to share knowledge and to support each other. The genesis of *Mirages* dates to early 2018, when friend and curator Staci Bu Shea introduced me to Elizabeth Atterbury's work, having included it in a group exhibition at CEAM entitled *heroic in its ordinariness*. Her work's sparseness of form, and repetition of a handful of marks and symbols that made their way from two to three dimensions and back again, all drew me in. In the ensuing three years, Elizabeth then introduced me to Strauss Bourque-LaFrance and Katy Cowan's work. What was originally one relationship doubles, triples, quadruples, and after several phone conversations, a studio visit in Portland, Maine, and a handful of emails and zoom calls during a pandemic year, *Mirages* (on view at CEAM from September 3 to November 6, 2021) was born.

What happens when artists are given the freedom to make work that they might not have had the resources or capacity to make otherwise? A poetic accumulation of paint, wood, sand, and metal that reveals new connections between disparate artistic practices, and perhaps a reconsideration of materials, form, and content. *Mirages* accomplishes this, and just as importantly encourages the viewer to rethink familiar objects as well as bring their own limitless number of personal associations to the work itself.

During the course of this exhibition we hosted several first year seminar courses. We treated this as an introduction to CEAM, but quite often we were introducing contemporary art to students at Flagler College for the very first time. One student said that she'd never considered photography in the same light as painting and sculpture. Another student who had never before been to an art gallery or museum revelled in the scale of Elizabeth's *Folding Fan* and *Sandal* sculptures, and stood with me in front of Strauss' painting *Charging Moons*, discussing all of the possibility contained within the work's collaged elements, marks, and gestures. Almost every student was struck when I explained that Katy's *sunbreaks pile, gentle and across* wasn't actually made of rope, but was a simulacrum, a *trompe l'oeil*—cast aluminum that has been lushly painted.

Every work in *Mirages* is a point of entry to talking about something else—what is contemporary art? How do these objects relate to the world around us and our own lived experiences? Does art matter? Yes! But why?

These sentiments are lyrically touched upon in the following essay by fellow artist and educator Roz Crews. The works included in *Mirages* resonated with her in a physical, visceral way. Each piece, from painting on canvas and paper, to peach pit, to metal sculpture, set off a litany of associations.

In this unconventional piece of writing, Roz leads us through the exhibition, describing the work through a very personal lens rather than in any sort of academically prescribed way. Roz juxtaposes the artist's words, gathered from email interviews, italicized and woven throughout, with quotations from various sources, creating a structure that reads more like a prose poem than an academic text.

Mirages are magical, disorienting, phenomenological, real to the eye, yet just a set of visual circumstances. They can suspend our beliefs and understanding of what is real versus what is perceived and force us to think about our relationship to time, space, and landscape. They are about the act of looking.

Mirages brings together the work of Atterbury, Bourque-LaFrance, and Cowan for the first time. Though geographically separated (in Portland, Maine, Los Angeles, and Berkeley, CA) their conversations over the last year have helped to shape the trajectory of this exhibition. The exhibition title makes reference to the process through which each of these artists transforms materials and objects (wood, paint, images, rope, canvas, aluminum, photography) in order to reinterpret and reimagine the familiar. The artists embrace a simple premise: can a thing be a thing but also another thing?

Katy Cowan's work blurs associations with material, subject matter, and viewer experience. By working in cast aluminum reproductions of common objects, and drawn responses to those very forms, she asks the viewer to look deeper, stranger, and with the ability to get lost within their own looking. For the past several years,

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drawn responses to those very forms, she asks the viewer to look deeper, stranger, and with the ability to get lost within their own looking. For the past several years, Cowan's subject matter of choice has been rope because of its ability to reference things beyond itself. Cowan's sculpture/painting hybrids start out as rope affixed to a plywood backing, that are then made into solid aluminum pieces, which result in vibrantly coated oil and enamel paintings. During the mold-making process, she either leaves the rope intact and recognizable, other times she unbraids or unravels the material, and other times she will cast the entire arrangement (wood and all) in aluminum. Cowan paints and draws on the cast's surfaces with vividly colored oil, enamel, and graphite, embracing the capability a surface has to hold, hide, and be consumed by her mark-making. Like her metal works, her drawings follow suit—absorbing marks, suggesting diversions, or entering a conversation entirely of their own making. Cowan's work suggests both the landscape and the body, fluid and unfixd. Rope spreads out, blown by the wind. Cobwebs, mopping, a head, river deltas, crossed legs, a spill of colorful entrails.

Embedded within the works included in *Mirages* remains the question: can a thing be a thing but also another thing? Together, Atterbury, Bour- que-LaFrance, and Cowan reveal what is possible when materials and objects are transformed into one or more other things, and when ideas and interpretations aren't fixed, but rather can be experienced in a multitude of ways, through an act of close looking.

(excerpted)