

# Continuum: Aspen Mays & Dionne Lee



**Silver Eye**

Gallery Guide  
Sep 5–Oct 26, 2019

## About the Artists

**Aspen Mays** (b. 1980) received her MFA in photography from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago in 2009. Solo exhibitions of her work have been mounted by the Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago; Hyde Park Art Center, Chicago; Light Work, Syracuse; and the Center for Ongoing Projects and Research, Columbus. Mays was the recipient of a 2006 Rotary Fellowship and was a 2009 Fulbright Fellow. She lives and works in the San Francisco Bay Area, California, where she is Associate Professor at California College of the Arts.

**Dionne Lee** (b. 1988) received her MFA from California College of the Arts in 2017. Her practice is based in photography, collage, and video, and engages ideas of power and racial histories in relation to the American landscape. Lee's work has been exhibited at Aperture Foundation and the school of the International Center of Photography in New York City; Aggregate Space and LAND AND SEA in Oakland, San Francisco Arts Commission, and Root Division in San Francisco. In 2016 Dionne was awarded the Barclay Simpson Award and was a Graduate Fellow at Anderson Ranch Arts Center. She currently lives and works in Oakland, CA.

## Continuum

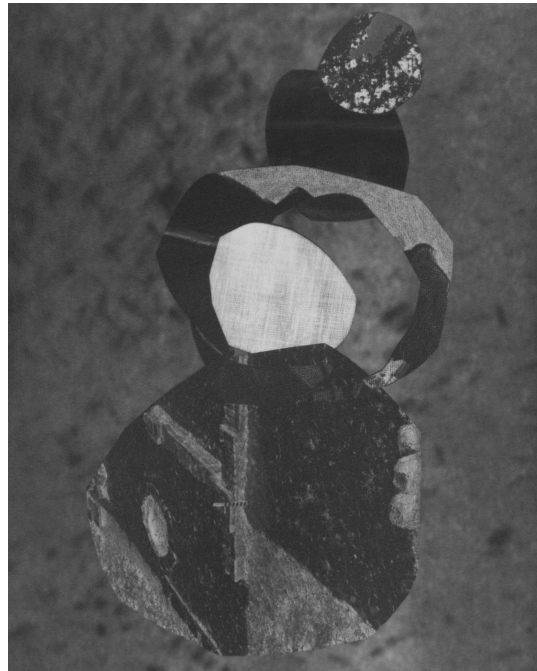
David Oresick  
Executive Director,  
Silver Eye Center  
for Photography

*This is the second in a series of exhibitions that explores ideas of creative influence, mentorship, partnership, and collaboration in contemporary photography. The focus of this exhibition is a duo that first met as teacher and student, Aspen Mays and Dionne Lee. Mays is an internationally renowned photographer and Associate Professor of Photography at California College of the Arts. Lee was Mays' graduate student at CCA and now lives and works in Oakland, CA.*

Creative influences are often thought of as the ideas and encounters that change our path, and altering how we understand the world. Most obviously, influences manifest through emulation and appropriation; the copying of a style or aesthetic, or the borrowing (or stealing, or critiquing) of a concept or idea. This conception of influence leads to questions about the limits of intellectual property and the possibility of original thought. However, exploring influence in this way feels too narrow and reductive. Creative influences are rich, messy, and always baffling.

The notion of creative influence is one of the most often discussed ideas in contemporary art, but also one of the most difficult to define. *Continuum* attempts, somewhat absurdly, to map out creative influences like one would with a family tree—a family tree of creative influence. Here, the hereditary genetics are ideas, aesthetics, and values, passed down from generation to generation; accepted, altered, rejected, and transformed over time. But unlike a traditional family tree, creative influence is not simply a journey from past to present; it stretches out across any number of different timelines, descending and ascending, circling, growing the tree in all directions. This exhibition focuses on one particular connection within that tree, that of Aspen Mays and her former student, Dionne Lee.

There are of course, the obvious influences of Mays' practice on Lee's: the interest in collage, appropriating images, the subject of water, the relationship between the self and the natural environment, and working to hand craft objects in the darkroom. Lee was a member of the first graduate student class that Mays taught upon joining the California College of Art



Images from top: Aspen Mays, *Pam Psalm*, 2019;  
Dionne Lee, *Fleet*, 2019, Dionne Lee, *Cairn #4*, 2019

faculty in 2015. Mays watched Lee as she found her footing in the program, searching to find her artistic voice. Mays recalled seeing what she thought of as a breakthrough from Lee, a drawing of the word “now” on simple copier paper, repeated seven times. Lee had written the words over the course of an hour, writing as slowly as she possibly could. Mays saw the work as elegant and affecting; beautiful in its simplicity, with a piercing wit.

What began as a mutual interest in materials and the general subject of water shared by these two artists has become an urgent, beautiful, and terrifying statement on the key crisis facing our world, climate change. Natural forces that we once thought of as having been tamed by humankind are now getting further and further beyond our control. Together these artists explore a multitude of ideas: what forces can and cannot be controlled; the body in the landscape; the scale of human experiences in the natural world; what we have wrought and what we might be able to do to survive in the face of it. While the show is not an explicit call to action, it is a powerful reflection on the existential peril we face, and powerless we feel.

Mays’ series, *Palm Psalms* is rooted in a revelatory experience the artist had as a child. Mays was nine years old when her family was living in Charleston, South Carolina when Hurricane Hugo struck. The storm was one of the most devastating of the past century, killing dozens of people, leaving thousands without power, and thousands more homeless. Mays’ elementary school closed, and her family lived in their battered house without power for several months. The experience was utterly terrifying, but also a new kind of thrilling adventure for a child. The might of the storm was so incredible that it was beyond Mays’ comprehension. Hugo’s wrath showed the young Mays that the veil of order and logic in our world is thin, that there are really no rules at all.

The sublime nature of storms has been an enduring subject in art, usually depicted in paintings with great billowing storm clouds, small ships being tossed about, and lighting bolts like pitchforks across the sea. Mays was attracted to less dramatic images of storms for her work, and for years collected pictures of hurricanes from magazines, weather cameras, and news footage. For Mays, storms became the ultimate symbol of the sublime; the clearest way to express the sensation of being utterly overwhelmed

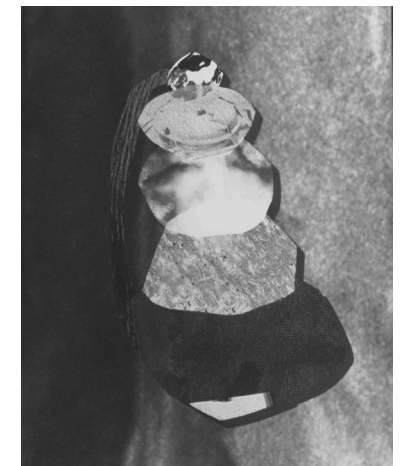
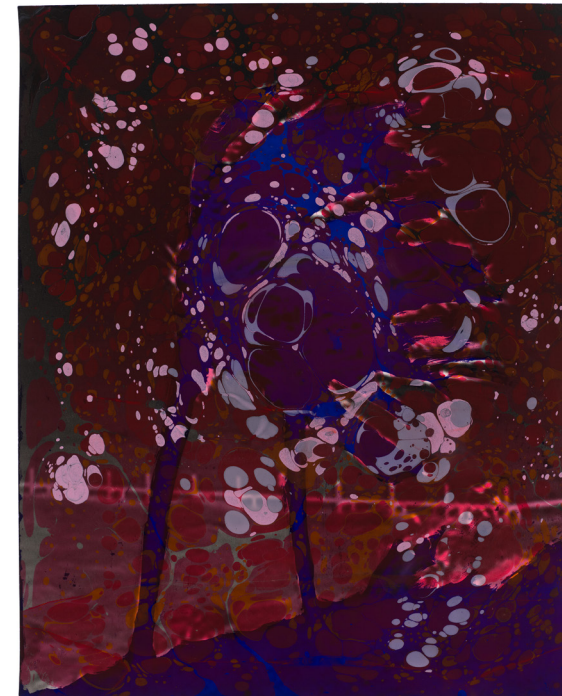
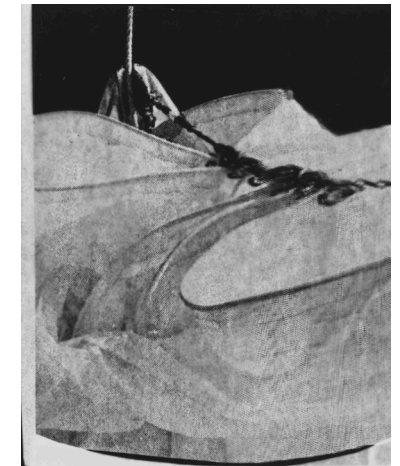
by the magnificence and violent, terrible power of the natural world. These found images became the foundation of *Palm Psalms* series.

Two common tropes of storm imagery appear in Mays' collection of found images featured in this exhibition: windows hastily boarded over and taped up in anticipation of the coming winds, and palm trees bending to the power of the storm. These subjects subtly convey the strength of the storm in such a way where the lack of drama adds to further tension to the images. Palm trees, so often used as the symbol for a tropical paradise, look particularly helpless in these vernacular images.

The archive of storm pictures are fashioned into unique and beguiling objects. Mays makes her found images into negatives, from which she makes a silver gelatin print. The print is then dyed and then some are dyed again with a marbling effect. The paper marbling process was appealing to Mays because it adds another layer of unpredictability to her process, evoking the mayhem of the storms that inspire her. This dying process produces deep, luscious colors that add a psychedelic anxiety to the images. One image, marbled in dark blues, maroons, and pinks, shows a palm blowing violently away from the shore. There is a supernatural chaos in the print that powerfully captures the beauty and terror of the scene.

Two photographs of Mays that do not feature palm trees are enormous stacked panels with cryptic phrases spray painted on plywood. They read "THE STORMER THE WAVES" and the other "SEA WERE HUSHED." These pieces were based on a boarded up storefront Mays saw in a photograph online. On the boards someone had spray painted the 107th Psalm, also known as the mariner's psalm. The passage describes sailors in a storm who cry out to the Lord for help, and the Lord answers their prayers by calming the tempest. The poem has been cropped, so to speak, its original wording playfully and mysteriously rearranged. This prayer for deliverance from the storm is itself pummeled to the edge of coherence. The prints, dyed a dull green, command an ominous power over the room.

Lee's photographs, sculpture, and videos are also based on experience and memory, as she considers the power and history of landscape. To understand the connection between nature, photography, and her own relationship to land, Lee describes returning again and again to an image on a postcard circulated



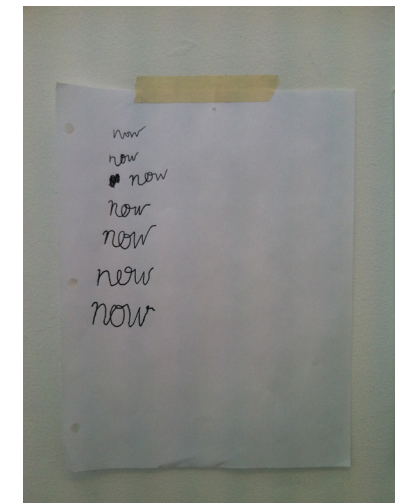
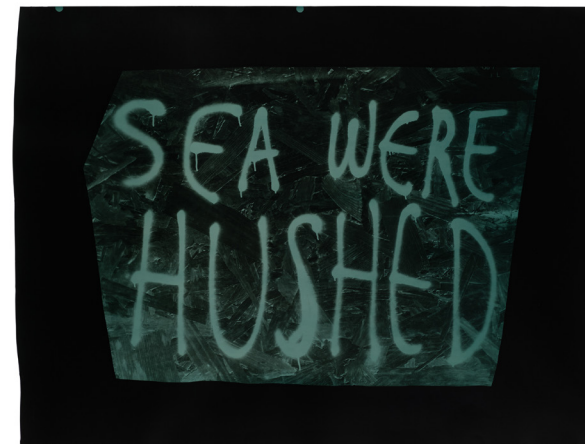
in Texas in the early 20th century. The picture shows five people lynched on a dogwood tree with a poem printed below it that relays a warning to slaves, and aligning the tree itself with white supremacy. Lee states, “In my work, and often when I am in the wilderness (as I like to be), I am haunted by a ghost of sorts, a constant feeling that after a long climb uphill, the dogwood that sits atop the mountain will greet me waving its dainty white flowers where red fruit once budded and died, inviting me in to enjoy its shade. I want to sit in coolness, despite knowing that stranger fruit has lived and died on its branches.”

These connections between land, race, history and violence are deeply present throughout Lee’s work. *Fleet* is an alluring and atmospheric sequence of six images of a boat’s sail, with the rigging rope running along it. The images are sourced from an instructional sailing book, and the sequence shows the same image repeated, with different manipulations Lee created by maneuvering the picture on a scanner as the scan in being made. This movement abstracts the sail, morphing it into billowing shapes, beautiful but perhaps also monstrous. Lee then created a paper negative on a copy machine and brought into the darkroom to create a contact print. This produces a graceful, soft, woven effect in the final print. The sail serves as a complex symbol that evokes the freedom of travel and excitement of exploration, but there is also an underlying wickedness to these images. The sail reminds us of the evils that exploration has brought; that sails brought the genocides of native peoples, and the transatlantic slave trade. In a similar fashion, a sculpture of Lee’s titled *Running*, rigging, wading consists of a simple sailing rope, hanging from a pulley mounted to the ceiling, The rope calling back painfully to the ropes in the image of the dogwood tree.

Another of Lee’s series is centered around cairns, the stacks of rocks used to make hiking paths. Building a cairn is a humble gesture of creativity, exploration, and goodwill—quick sculpture made in the wilderness to aid a fellow, unknown traveler. Lee’s images depicting cairns are made from cut up pictorico negatives sourced from maps of the atlantic, books about the ocean, and disaster survival guides. A video also uses a cairn as subject; here, Lee’s arm reaches into the center of the frame to gingerly stack the rocks, one at a time. Beneath the rocks there

are rolling images of maps and terrain. This background changes with astonishing subtlety, moving from green forests, to floods, to houses almost completely under water, decimated.

Long fascinated with survival in the outdoors, Lee hand writes fragmented passages from wilderness survival books on some of her prints. These passages are unnerving yet lyrical segments of instructions on how to start fires, scrawled over top of images taken from the same books. In her videos Lee performs different activities related to finding and securing water. Her approach in the first video *Untitled (collecting dew)* has a hint of the absurd. Holding a handkerchief, Lee’s hand pokes in from out of frame to soak up the morning dew from the grass, and wrings it into a pot. In the video *Challenger Deep*, we watch from Lee’s perspective as she holds dowsing rods in her clenched fists. Dowsing is the centuries old technique of searching for underground water by observing the motion of a pair of bent wires as they supposedly move in response to unseen forces in the environment. There is a dark humor in these videos, as if bent rods and handkerchiefs could ever save us from catastrophe. But perhaps they could, and perhaps we need something like water dowsing to save us, something spiritual and mystical. As Lee states, “in the end survival seems to come from a marriage of practical knowledge and faith in something unknowable.”



Images from left to right: Aspen Mays, *Sea Were Hushed*, 2019; Dionne Lee, *Now*, 2016




In all of the videos, as well as the photograph Ready, where the artist hold semaphore signaling flags in the “ready” position, Lee’s physical presence is noteworthy. For Lee, her presence suggests who she is talking about in the work. Her body becomes a larger representation for the black body. She says, “while I don’t try to speak for any sort of larger black experience, it is important to me that the black body be able to stand for more than the black experience, but also the human experience, rejecting the overall view of whiteness being ‘neutral’ or the only representation of the body in the natural world.”







Lee’s interest in water, nature, and survival has many sources, like the time she nearly drown in a public pool as a young girl while a nearby lifeguard failed to notice her struggles or her early interest in foraging for herbs and roots, despite living most of her life in New York City. She also seeks to understand her experiences through the lens of history, and often considers the absence of black bodies in landscape painting and photography. Most of her ideas about water come from the realities of the changing climate of our planet, the rising waters waters around the world, and the impending suffering we cannot bring our species to halt. This also relates to her interest in survival and ideas of power, as she states, “as the land continues to shift against us, survival may be determined not only by who has what, but by who knows how.”

Viewing these two artists’ bodies of work together, the mutual creative influence is clearly present, yet mapping this influence remains difficult. What this exhibition asks of us is that we consider that a creative influence might not be the outside force that changes your direction and forms you; perhaps it is more the force that guides you steadily to the truth of who you already are. A mentor’s influence does not create, it reveals.

There is a delirious urgency in the way these works depict our changing world. This urgency feels present even in the first drawing of Lee’s that caught her mentor’s attention, the slow and steady writing of the work “now.” Now is the time for dramatic, systemic, collective action, now as the storms bear down on us, now there is a guttural cry for equality, now you must learn to survive on your own. Now is too late. Now is too late? Now, now, now.

	Aspen Mays	<i>Palm Pslam</i>	2019 Silver gelatin print with dye 10x24 inches Edition 1/1	Price on request
	Aspen Mays	<i>Palm Pslam</i>	2019 Silver gelatin print with dye 16x20 inches Edition 1/1	Price on request
	Aspen Mays	<i>Palm Pslam</i>	2019 Silver gelatin print with dye 16x20 inches Edition 1/1	Price on request
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	Aspen Mays	<i>Palm Pslam</i>	2019 Silver gelatin print with dye 16x20 inches Edition 1/1	Price on request
	Aspen Mays	<i>Mica</i>	2019 Silver gelatin print with dye 16x20 inches Edition 1/1	Price on request

	Aspen Mays	<i>The Storm Er the Waves</i>	2019 Silver gelatin print with dye 50x40 inches Edition 1/1	Price on request
	Aspen Mays	<i>Sea Were Hushed</i>	2019 Silver gelatin print with dye 50x40 Size Edition 1/1	Price on request
	Aspen Mays	<i>Hugo 17</i>	2018 Transparency Print 30x40 inches	Price on request
	Aspen Mays	<i>Hugo 3</i>	2018 Transparency Print 30x40 inches	Price on request
	Aspen Mays	<i>Window 10</i>	2018 Transparency Print 30x40 inches	Price on request
	Dionne Lee	<i>Fleet</i>	2019 Six silver gelatin prints 8x10 inches Edition 2/4	Price on request
	Dionne Lee	<i>Cairn #3</i>	2019 Silver gelatin prints 8x10 inches Edition 1/3	Price on request
	Dionne Lee	<i>Cairn #1</i>	2019 Silver gelatin print 8x10 inches Edition 1/3	Price on request
	Dionne Lee	<i>Cairn #4</i>	2019 Silver gelatin print 8x10 inches Edition 1/3	Price on request
	Dionne Lee	<i>Ready</i>	2019 Silver gelatin print 8x10 inches Edition 2/4	Price on request
	Dionne Lee	<i>Untitled</i>	2019 Silver gelatin print 8x10 inches Edition 1/1	Price on request

	Dionne Lee	<i>Untitled</i>	2019 Silver gelatin print 8x10 inches Edition 1/1	Price on request
	Dionne Lee	<i>Together on the ground to form the base</i>	2019 Silver Gelatin Print 11x14 inches Edition 1/1	Price on request
	Dionne Lee	<i>Untitled</i>	2019 Silver Gelatin Print 11x14 inches Edition 1/1	Price on request
	Dionne Lee	<i>Untitled (collecting dew)</i>	2019 Digital video 15 minuntes	Price on request
	Dionne Lee	<i>Challenger Deep</i>	2019 Digital video 19 minutes	Price on request
	Dionne Lee	<i>Untitled, (map)</i>	2019 Digital video 19 minutes	Price on request

**Silver Eye Center for Photography**  
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