

CAROL SZYMANSKI: *Pareidolia*

by Lynn Maliszewski

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Carol Szymanski's most recent Cibachrome prints float in their white frames, matted on white, looking sanctimonious as ever. Their modest size encourages getting close enough to fog the surface. How do impressions effect present-day clarity? The gallery feels like a soundstage when I arrive, sizzling, lit by floor-to-ceiling windows. Bombastic colors are a reminder of the velveteen garb of a Titian quattrocento painting: musty mauves, kiwi green, marigold, and moss render oozing landscapes like Fauvist backgrounds. Wisps of movement within each image are cause for deeper contemplation: What are these? How can we salvage precarious diction for more effective communication?

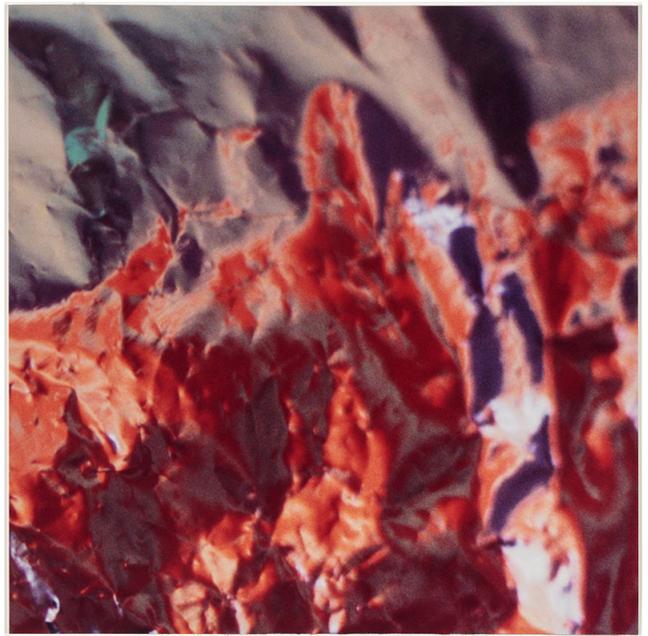


Installation image of Carol Szymanski: *Pareidolia*.
Courtesy of TOTAH Gallery, New York.

Szymanski's solo exhibition at TOTAH announces a microcosm, a tidbit, of a meandering, dense, series of work with a gentle touch. The title of each photograph alludes to a prolonged obsession with language, particularly phonemes (the smallest unit of speech that distinguishes one utterance from another). The artist has dipped into music and performance, even going so far as to generate new brass instruments inspired by entangled symbols from phonetic charts. Her series "Songs of Solfège," last shown in New York in 2016, consisted of seven inflated sculptures and two monochrome paintings derived from the artist's interest in the two-letter words made famous by Julie Andrews in *The Sound of Music*. The photographs at TOTAH were borne from that series, capturing the reflection of the paintings on the corresponding mylar sculpture with the same symbol. The direct attachment to "Songs of Solfège" ends there.

Prior incarnations of this series have exposed Szymanski's process and personal definitions of the

meanings of her chosen syllables, words, symbols, and images—seemingly determined at random. She lets you inside her head, into the associations and perhaps unintelligible jumps that arise from hopping between musical, visual, and personal languages (e.g. from *12 tone interjection series*: the number eight, "BLAH," "So many days," "bored," and *Si* are equivalent). Rather than walk us through this process, *Pareidolia* summons these apparitions, these outwardly incoherent interpretations. *The Grip (re.Do-o)* (2017) reflects this impulse to zoom both in and out on these compositions: a recess of deep plum is pronounced by flares of pink at its edges and mustard smudges on two external masses. Like a sea anemone, the content of the image seems to be resting but pulsating, susceptible to movement at any moment. Maybe abstraction makes you hold your breath, pray the artist gives you something that resonates in your own experience, but this display seems to be about masking Szymanski's language to dig deeper into our own.



Carol Szymanski, *High Noon(re.Di-1)*, 2017, 5 × 5 inches, Cibachrome unique print, custom maple frame, white, mounted on plexi, internal float, courtesy of TOTAH Gallery, New York.

The phenomenon of pareidolia—after which the exhibition is named—most commonly defines our brain's ability to look at an object and find a face within it. This embedded facial-recognition strategy initially distinguished animals from human beings, and gradually became our saving grace at dinner parties, imbuing us with an ability to recognize emotion and (ideally) interact more efficiently. These photographs capture a liminal space, suspended between two forms of verbiage (monochromatic painting, inflatable sculpture) slotted into the artist's visual vernacular, but impenetrable to the viewer. We are on the outside, forced to recognize beauty, momentarily incommunicable. But, alas, language! We can interpret these however the hell we can, and herein lies a paradox: is this a pretty exhibition, or the messy mapping of linguistic explication?

I don't have the answer, but a show like this encourages one to think about how language is not only constructed but realized. Freed from their predecessors, the photographs in *Pareidolia* deny a documentary or archival categorization, thus redefining themselves from the start. These images refuse compression, substantiated beyond the context that birthed them. The artist seems to have removed herself completely, but perhaps then these are a more intimate rendering of her progress on the series to this point, rendered in ambience rather than explicit text. This self-inflicted opacity is a reminder that something that walks and talks like a duck may actually be a doorbell.

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RECOMMENDED ARTICLES