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Altered States @ Bedford

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by [Maria Porges](#)



Tanja Geis, Reef Ball, 2017, San Francisco Bay mud on paper, 75 x 55 inches

In *Altered States*, guest curator Heather Marx has put together a group of artists whose labor-intensive, process-based practices collectively transform the mundane into something magical. The result is a collection of otherworldly objects and images. Kim Abeles, Mari Andrews, Chris Duncan, Tanja Geis, Sonja Hinrichsen, Jay McCafferty, Klea McKenna, Sam Perry and Victoria Wagner, who all live and work along the California coast, are influenced by the environment in a variety of ways. Some actually harness natural forces or the environment itself to make their work; others draw our attention toward nature's power and vulnerability.

The show has nothing to do with the 1980 movie of the same name, which explored altering consciousness through hallucinatory drugs. Instead, it reminds us of how the environment has been altered — whether by pollution, catastrophe or loss of habitat. **Kim Abeles'** 30-year experiment with

smog as an art medium, for example, makes manifest the truth we uneasily suspected: that air will no longer be breathable in the near future (especially if clean air standards are rolled back, as the current administration intends to do). Using stencils to block out a pattern or image, she exposes a surface for up to 60 days to settling particulate matter,



Victoria Wagner, *Woodrock: Night Country*, 2016, redwood burl and oil paint on polished steel, 11 x 17 x 9 inches

then removes the stencil, carefully preserving the resulting image. **Tanja Geis'** exquisite drawings, executed in pigments refined from mud collected at low tide in the Bay, propose imaginary reef structures for the Olympia oyster. This once-thriving species is at risk for extinction, due to overharvesting and pollution. The drawings are accompanied by *Littoral Artifacts* — a tabletop filled with tiny sculptures made of hand-formed mud in shapes that suggest a secret language.

Other participants in the exhibition demonstrate ways in which art can be conjured out of the detritus found in nature. Bay Area sculptor **Mari Andrews** created a cluster of hanging pieces for the show, combining wire and lichen into exquisitely minimal three-dimensional “drawings” (her word) that suggest bird nests or some kind of housing complex for insects. One, set atop a teardrop-shaped pendant of thread-like grey vegetation, recalls Brancusi’s *Endless Column*. Andrews, an avid hiker and camper, uses natural materials in much of her work — a group of delicate minimal drawings made with flower petals attests to the diversity of her production.

Trees and wood are central to the practices of three of the artists included here. **Victoria Wagner's** strange and lovely *Woodrocks* are carved from scavenged pieces with a chainsaw and “endless sanding, sealing, curing, charring, painting, drilling, and hauling” (though probably not in that order). Their complex shapes and patterns of vivid color suggest mutations or, perhaps, hallucinations. A group of floor pieces combining metal, wood and ceramic elements



Klea McKenna, *Automatic Earth #81*, 2017, 4 panel photographic rubbing, unique gelatin silver photogram, 38.5 x 46 inches

were inspired by her impressions of fires that devastated the area near her Occidental home. These sculptures have a kind of speculative energy, presaging a world in which we need to be nimble and use what we can find.

Trees are also at center of **Klea McKenna's** striking photographic rubbings of the cross sections of cut trees. The collages combine multiple impressions, creating bilaterally symmetrical patterns of the rings, pits and scars that designate a tree's life. These hypnotic, mandala-like images are a record of not only time but of accidents of nature and human intervention: drought, the cut of a chainsaw, and the movement of the earth itself. McKenna's short film *Alma*, also on view, shows a group of women dressed in black traversing a startling rock-strewn landscape, though what they are doing and why remains a mystery.

Even if **Sam Perry** does not consider his work to be nature-based, it's the imperfections of wood that attract him — the fact that trees are shaped by the life they lead. He carves fallen trees into abstract and representational forms using methods he learned as a teenager in Honolulu, where his father is a master canoe builder and a competitive paddler.

Chris Duncan and **Jay McCafferty** harness the sun to make their work. Like Kim Abeles, Duncan is willing to wait patiently for change to be effected —six months in the case of the works on view. He places fabric in situations where direct exposure to sunlight will bleach it; his only manipulations are folding or stitching the material. The resulting pieces, exposed to sunlight on the roof of the Walnut Creek Ceramics Studio, have a brooding, spectacularly baroque quality, like curtains opening onto a drama of desertification.



Chris Duncan, June 21, 2018, (red/black, red/brown), 2018, sun and time on fabric, 7 x 5' ea.

McCafferty uses the sun in a way that invokes school science experiments. Using a magnifying glass, he methodically burns holes in paper dyed with pigment and rust until only a delicate latticework of the colored matrix remains. The sizes and shapes of the holes in the compositions that result are surprisingly varied, which may explain how the artist has remained engaged with this technique for more than 45 years.

Though many of the artists in this show work with ephemeral materials, snow is surely the most fugitive. For a decade, **Sonja Hinrichsen** has created patterns in freshly fallen powder that are reminiscent of crop circles or Peruvian Nazca lines. Like those phenomena, Hinrichsen's vast works (made with the help of volunteers) can only be seen from the air. Consequently, their primary life — as with most of Andy Goldsworthy's equally short-lived pieces — is in the form of photographs. For Hinrichsen, the social aspect has become an essential part of the work, her hope being that participation will enhance appreciation of the environment.

In that all of these pieces make us think about our relationship with the world—and what we might do to conserve nature's gifts—it could be said that *Altered States* is both an inspiration and a wake-up call.

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"*Altered States*" @ [Bedford Gallery](#) through March 24, 2019.

About the author:

Maria Porges is an artist and writer who lives and works in Oakland. For over two decades, her critical writing has appeared in many publications, including Artforum, Art in America, Sculpture, American Craft, Glass, the New York Times Book Review and many other publications. The author of more than 100 exhibition catalog essays, she presently serves as an associate professor at California College of the Arts.

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