

CRITIC'S PICKS: CHICAGO

By Robin Dluzen



Mariana Sissia's rigorous practice of intricately drawn rocks and earth was initially born of an interest in excavated sites. In this earlier work, quarries, trenches, subterranean canals and rock formations were isolated in the compositions, each executed precisely in graphite, evoking a variety of possible narratives and cognitive associations. From the rendering of specific landscapes, Sissia's oeuvre has evolved into representations of what the artist refers to as "Mental Landscape," which happens to be the title of her current exhibition. Sissia's "mental landscapes" are inspired by the microscopic and telescopic—the kinds of perspectives we could never observe firsthand with the naked eye and that necessitate the use of one's imagination to comprehend. Here, the Buenos Aires-based artist's photorealist manner of picture-making has given way to a more abstracted and subjective realism. A 65-foot "mental landscape" drawing on rice paper is the centerpiece of the exhibition, suspended from the ceiling and draped across wooden rods throughout the space, the delicate airiness of its media belying the dense, craggy subject matter. While Sissia's "landscapes" have indeed become intuitive, non-narrative, non-specific and less representational, the viewers truly contend with the work bodily and materially, resulting in an experience that feels quite physical and real. Sissia's "Mental Landscape" can be viewed at The Mission March 13 – April 25, 2015.

"MENTAL LANDSCAPE, WORK 1 AND 2 DIPTYCH"
Mariana Sissia

PHOTO: COURTESY THE MISSION

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When viewing a single piece by **Ryan Fenchel**, one would likely read his composition of flattened shapes and lively chalk pastel as a study in modernist formalism. Indeed, in a pair of works, *OG Carl Sagan* and *OG Emmitt Otter* (both 2014), vessels with yawning mouths and tilted rectangles recall Cezanne's perspective-defying still-lives in which table arrangements threaten to tip into the foreground. The four urns of *Edo, Khem* (2025) aligned upon a blank, white ground cite the unmodulated flatness of Matisse, while a hand emerging from an assemblage of geometric forms in *Parables of Three* (2014) is undeniably Picasso-esque. But, in actuality, Fenchel is not so motivated by modernist notions of intuitiveness or subjectivity as he is the structures of ancient ritualism and mysticism. Fortunately, the Chicago-schooled, LA-based artist doesn't use his art simply as illustrations of enigmatic schools of thought. For Fenchel, the formulas and allegories of doctrines like Freemasonry provide a model for constructing his own visual lexicon. In this exhibition, "Fases and Vaces I've Been," vessels and human visages are repeated throughout, the simple dichotomy blurring the line between animate and inanimate, still-life and symbol. The artist latches onto the image of the eye, multiplying them within faces and peppering them like a pattern on the urns' surfaces. Here, age-old visual metaphors are broadened and complicated, leading us not toward understanding, but ambiguity. Fenchel's new works are on display at Carrie Secrist Gallery, February 13 – March 28, 2015.

"OG CARL SAGAN," 2014, **Ryan Fenchel**

CHALK PASTEL ON PAPER ON PANEL, 25" x 19½"

PHOTO: CRAIG DOTY, COURTESY CARRIE SECRIST GALLERY



For Chicago-based photographer **Jessica Labatte**, her medium's processes are at the forefront. Often, the finished products of these varying methods appear as total abstractions—all-over patterns layered in a collage-like aesthetic captured within the slick, flatness of the photo print. In her first solo exhibition at Western Exhibitions, "Underwater Highway," Labatte alternately exploits and undermines a defining characteristic of photography: illusion, and here, each series is a focused illustration of the physicality at the core the medium. In her *Pond Weeds* series, ribbons of undulating opacity appear weightless upon a dark ground, as if they were plant matter suspended in water. However, these "weeds" are actually strips of curled, cut backdrop paper that have been photographed in multiple exposures onto the same film. The "weeds" may be simulated, but the real materiality and volume captured on film is palpable. When producing inkjet prints from scanned film, the dust particles from the surface of the film become highly visible, and erasing these blemishes from the file is a Photoshop task typically done by assistants. In the *Spotting* series, rather than keeping that banal process invisible, Labatte colorizes those erasure marks, making them a dominant part of the finished composition—yet another way in which Labatte continually transforms the ordinary into the extraordinary. "Underwater Highway" can be seen at Western Exhibitions March 13 – April 25, 2015.

"SPOTTING #1 (EMMA)," 2014

Jennifer Labatte

UNIQUE COLOR PHOTOGRAPH, 44" x 34"

PHOTO: COURTESY WESTERN EXHIBITIONS