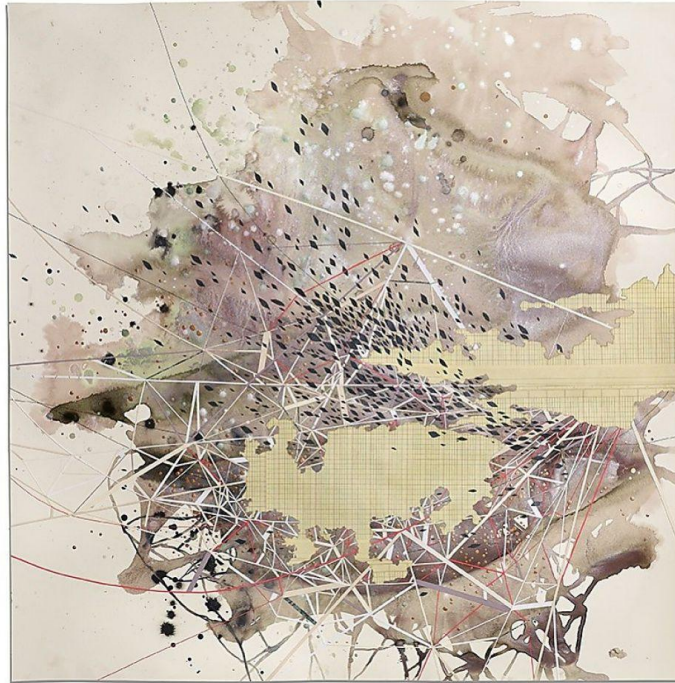


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Exhibits of work by György Kepes, Val Britton

Kepes exhibit at Cantor Center illustrates his restless search for perfection



"Reverberation #25" (2014), an ink and cut paper collage by Val Britton, is an object of visual contemplation, suggesting the remains of something blown up.

By **Kenneth Baker**

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György Kepes, a Hungarian-born artist whom I knew in the early 1970s, had a remarkable eye and a literary mind fevered with perfectionism. He produced several influential books of design theory, but never finished the grand synthesis, which I briefly helped him edit, ever dissatisfied with the latest form he had given it.

The Stanford University Libraries' Special Collections possess a vast trove of Kepes' publications, papers and images from which Stanford graduate student John Blakinger has drawn a striking small exhibition, "The New Landscape: Experiments in Light," at the Cantor Arts Center. The show packs a lot into a very tight space. It combines photographs and photograms made by Kepes with images he borrowed from, among other sources, research scientists at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, whose

Center for Advanced Visual Studies Kepes founded in the late '60s. Replicating to an extent an exhibition concept that

Kepes had used in the early 1950s, the Cantor display mingles scientific images hung from open metal strutwork with artist-made images plus graphics on the walls.

László Moholy-Nagy (1895-1946), exiled veteran of the embattled Weimar-era Bauhaus, invited Kepes (1906-2001) to join the faculty of the so-called New Bauhaus in Chicago in 1937. Kepes' photographs and photograms clearly reflect the influence of Moholy-Nagy and other Bauhaus camera workers. An enlarged print such as "Photogenic Painting" (1942) - "photogenic drawing" being an early term for camera-less photography - seems to mix shadow and substance inextricably and blur the technical trail of its own making. Kepes believed that the dynamics of design and imagery could speak to modern eyes of their historical moment in terms more immediate and transparent than language.

In writing he struggled to find what he felt was language adequate to span disparate realms of knowledge - between phenomena apparent to the eye and through the microscope or strains of curiosity excited by analysis as opposed to aesthetics. Despite a very practical temperament, Kepes saw his efforts at synthesis in a utopian light, as potentially dissolving conflicts that arise unconsciously from needlessly distinct visions of the real. That spirit, and something of the resistance it faced, can be felt even in the modest Cantor exhibition. Maps in search of their territory: Since the turn of the 20th century, visual artists have sought ways to evoke in static media the agitation of experience caused by modern speed and by the very passage of time. The new technologies of transport - the railroad and later, flight - along with cinema, posed the big challenges then. San Franciscan Val Britton enters this stream late, gauged by the fact that digital media have created whole new fast lanes for inquiry, recall, amnesia and exchange.

Britton's show at Wendi Norris offers a fair taste of her approach. It contains complex works on paper in mixed media and a large installation of hand- and laser-cut paper hanging from the ceiling on fine transparent filaments. The paper cutouts look now like clouds, now like islands or continents: an oscillation of aspects that touches our memories of flight. Under shifting daylight, combined with gallery lighting, the installation takes on a softly kaleidoscopic quality, wholly satisfying without interpretation.

But the ensemble can suggest the remains of something blown apart, beyond reassembling, by chance echoing feelings anyone may have had closely following reports of recent world events. Britton's installation even seems to respect a broad sense of modern history as a rampage of forces, lately intensified by global warming, redrawing the maps of nations and alliances. A hint of foreboding enters that the shapes long identified with territories or land masses may soon pass out of recognition.

In view of this reading of "Deluge," the installation piece, Britton's framed mixed media works on paper look like searches for a way to notate, or simply to imagine, the complex of forces and dimensions impinging on our experience of life today. In this ambition, they occasionally stray too close for comfort to the work of Julie Mehretu, but a piece such as "Reverberation #25" (2014) holds its own as an object of visual contemplation irrespective of what other artists are doing.

The New Landscape: Experiments in Light by György Kepes: Photographs and ephemera. Through Nov. 17. Cantor Arts Center, Stanford University, Stanford. (650) 723-4177. www.museum.stanford.edu.

Val Britton: Passage: Works on paper and an installation. Through Aug. 2. Gallery Wendi Norris, 161 Jessie St., S.F. (415) 346-7812. www.gallerywendinorris.com.

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<http://www.sfgate.com/art/article/Exhibits-of-work-by-Gyorgy-Kepes-Val-Britton-5647764.php#photo-6638570>