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Christine Elfman's anthotypes reflect a murmur from the past

Kimberly Chun

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Above: "Looking Back" (diptych), "Veil" (2014), "Looking" (2014). Below: "Pillars of Salt" (diptych), "Crone" (2014), "Back" (2011). Photo: Courtesy Of The Artist And Gallery Wendi Norris

"Don't look back," the works of Christine Elfman whisper to the viewer, even as the East Bay artist tussles with the delicate challenge of capturing both the durable and decaying.

Elfman makes anthotypes using plant extracts and sunlight in a process invented by John Herschel - who also discovered photographic fixer - and juxtaposes those light-sensitive images of ancient Greek sculptures with her silver gelatin prints of modern-day women in works included in her solo show "Fix & Fade."

"It's interesting making them because I don't know how long exactly it will take for an image to form - some pigments are more sensitive than others," she says of the anthotypes that bask on the deck of the sailboat she lives on in Alameda. "Every time I open them up to check on them, it's like opening an oven to check on a cake, only you're using a wood-fire oven, with no temperature gauge and a recipe that you can barely read."

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We talked to Elfman, 32, from her boat in the Oakland Estuary.

Q: Tell me about these artworks' genesis.

A: I think they reflect my long-standing interest in photography as something that reflects our desire to capture things and something that reminds us of the inability or futility of ever really doing that. I tend to be inspired by photographs that are out of context or unknown, when you're reminded of all that is lost.

Q: How do these objects of antiquity fit in with your own past?

A: I had been working with flowers in the past - the image is created out of fading light-sensitive juices I extract from plants, so if the image was made of morning glory juice, I used morning glory as the subject. I was inspired by 19th century photographs of sculptures that seemed to be fading. Here is a sculpture that is such a symbol of permanence, and at the same time, it's amazing that these things have lasted for so long and have such an enduring legacy in mythology and literature. I wanted to use this subject to create a tension between a sense of monumentality and fading.

Q: You photograph a sculpture of Lot's wife - what does that story signify?

A: I think about nostalgia's place in contemporary culture. It seems like something that can be easily dismissed and is seen with a certain amount of wariness. I think it's interesting how there's a sense that it's something that we can be punished for doing, and it can be traced back through time, and we have these symbolic stories that relate to our view of nostalgia and what it means to be turning back to look at the past rather than the present.

If you go

Christine Elfman: Fix & Fade: Reception 6-8 p.m. Thursday. Through Aug. 2. 11 a.m.-6 p.m. Tuesday-Saturday. Gallery Wendi Norris, 161 Jessie St., S.F. (415) 346-7812. www.gallerywendinorris.com.

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