

# photograph

## The Return to Reason

### San Francisco

— By Glen Helfand 01/30/2015



Stephen Gill, *Talking to Ants*, 2009-12. Courtesy Gallery Wendi Norris, San Francisco

At first glance, the works in *Return to Reason*, on view at Gallery Wendi Norris through February 28, compose yet another exhibition of conceptual, process-based photography. It features five artists who fabricate ephemeral objects to be photographed, generate low-tech visual effects in and out of the darkroom, and display their works in installation format. Such tactics pop up frequently in surveys of new photography, perhaps because they counteract the offhandedness of Instagram. This show, organized with Allie Haeusslein, associate director of Pier 24, mines this increasingly familiar field, but with a particular thematic thread: the use of alternative processes to depict specific sites.

Titled after a 1923 experimental film by Man Ray, the show emphasizes process, yet each of the artists' works evokes distant locations, both actual and constructed. This motif is most emphatically explored by the tropically hued panache of Lorenzo Vitturi's mixed-media works, inspired by an East London market that caters to immigrants, with brightly colored Afro Caribbean produce and medicinal powders. He throws in varied strategies-- constructing edible arrangements for the camera, playing boldly with scale, displaying works on stacks of bricks, and placing vinyl texts and patterns on walls and floor. Despite some undercurrents of exoticization, it's an insistent, ebullient presentation.



Hannah Whitaker, *Difference Engine no. 1*, 2014. Courtesy Gallery Wendi Norris, San Francisco

A calmer, dreamier vibe is evoked by the largest of Chloe Sells's unique analogue C-prints. *Katoyissiksi*, 2014, is a vertical strip of photo paper with a doubled image of a tall pine in the Rocky Mountains augmented with ghostly photograms and rainbow-producing darkroom effects. Sells's work resonates with a large piece by Hannah Whitaker, *Difference Engine No. 1*, 2014, an image of blue sky photographed with an angular paper cut out placed before the lens, so the image resembles a surrealist backgammon board. Yamini Nayar's photographed constructions engage with architecture and sculptural practices, yet thematically the works seem a little stranded here.

Stephen Gill's assured square-format London streetscapes appear to be mixed-media works, but they are, in fact, single exposures, what the artist describes as "in-camera photograms." Into the picture, Gill adds bits of refuse, toys, threads, broken glass, dust, rubber bands, objects that have been collected at the site and placed inside an apparatus attached to the front of his camera. The resulting images combine straight photography, the graphic quality of a photogram, and conceptually nuanced imagery of place. Like most of the works here, the sense of place is otherworldly, meandering wonderfully beyond reason.