This catalogue is published on the occasion of Compound Vision, an exhibition organized by the Mills College Art Museum showcasing the work of the MFA Class of 2013, Evan Barbour, Claire Colette, Lauren Douglas, Keegan Luttrell, Nadja Eulee Miller, Barbara Obata, Meri Page, Simon Pyle, Jenny Sharaf, Kate Short, and Katy Warner. The exhibition was presented at 5000 MacArthur Blvd, Oakland, CA, 94613, May 4th through May 25th, 2013.

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The Mills College Art Museum is a forum for exploring art and ideas and a laboratory for contemporary art practices. As a teaching museum at a dynamic liberal arts college for undergraduate women and co-ed graduate studies, the museum is dedicated to engaging and inspiring the intellectual and creative life of Mills students through innovative exhibitions, programs, and collections.

This exhibition is supported through the generosity of Bill and Wendy Hull Brody ’68. All photography is courtesy of Phil Bond, www.philbondphotography.com and Keegan Luttrell. The class of 2013 would like to thank the Museum Staff and the Mills Art Department and Faculty for their support and guidance.
Perusing the work of this year’s MFA graduates, it struck me how attuned these eleven artists are to the world around them. Their works seemed remarkably extroverted and intentional. You will find no diaristic outpourings or abstract expressionism here. There is no open-ended process art devoted to unconditional exploration of materials. While their inner lives might color their efforts or provide a point of departure, it is contemporary culture and politics that drives the form and content of their work. The grassroots and “slow” movement, environmentalism, the impact of technology, and new artistic tendencies embracing collaboration, interdisciplinary and the self-taught, among other currents of the day, all show up in their work.

Evan Barbour’s work alludes to the fears around genetic modification and industrial farming. In his decorative photographs, real squid and seaweed lay strewn in colorful pools of real paint; elsewhere, insects swarm over candy colored morsels. Meri Page similarly combines the materials of the art studio and the laboratory. Page’s meticulously crafted environments made from sand, salt, soil, raw pigments, and cyanotype, could be mistaken for—especially in their final form as photographs—microscopic geological samples and vast satellite views. Her photographs operate in a no man’s land between abstraction and representation that is made more disorienting by shifts in scale and perspective. Like Barbour’s miniature sculptural specimens fashioned from natural and artificial materials, these hybrids also engage the long-standing dialogue on reality versus fantasy—or versus simulacra—that has been reinvigorated by virtual reality.

The allusions to the natural sublime in Page’s photographs come to fore in Lauren Douglas’s work. Her dreamy photographs isolate iconic views such as the night sky, the sea, and towering evergreens in a manner that reflects their inspiration in both 19th century romanticism and modern science. At the same time, these somewhat casual shots remind me of smart phone snapshots. How might this habit of seeing—and remembering—life through excessive documentation effect the experience of time, presentness, and awe? Croped so as to appear infinite and usually shown as fragments in groupings, Douglas’s photographs aim to reinstate these familiar scenes with a sense of wonder.

This line of inquiry continues in the work of Simon Pyle who takes digital photography as he says, “to the point of annihilation.” He corrupts digital images by recopying jpegs thousands of times, until the image becomes abstracted and possesses the surprisingly abject quality of rust or compost. Abstracted reality is also the basis of the work of Claire Colette and Kate Short. These artists focus on the metaphysics of perception through meditative abstractions and sound works, respectively. Colette’s minimalist drawings in graphite on white paper derive from the graphic patterns found in seismic recordings, heartbeat monitor printouts, and radio frequencies. An abstract, handmade representation of ceaseless physical and metaphysical forces beyond
sensory perception, the works also reflect the formal elegance of these phenomena. Short rigs up her towers of stacked speakers to form intimate theaters of sound. In her latest piece, however, the speakers issue frequencies so low that they are not perceptible audibly, only physically as a vibration. Like Colette, she experiments with transcriptions of geophysical reality at the outer edges of experience.

Today’s talent emerges from not only from MFA shows and Juilliard recitals but also from YouTube and American idol. Likewise, the boundaries that once separated amateur or “outsider” artists from those with a formal education are fading. (Such artists are particularly prevalent in the Bay Area, home of three internationally acclaimed art centers for artists with physical and mental disabilities including Oakland’s Creative Growth Center.) Katy Warner’s work reflects these new attitudes towards art and artists. Her installation features the studio apartment of Maxine Heeding, a made-up reclusive fantasy writer—not to mention the artist’s alias in a common feminist trope—addicted to candy and People magazine. Her cosmic chalkboard drawings and philosophical jottings share the space with second-hand furniture and personal effects. Keegan Luttrell parachuted out of an airplane to research the work for the show. Her daredevil artistic process seems to relate to the fashion for extreme experiences popularized by reality television shows. Both her video and architectural installation offer unfamiliar, disorienting environments intended to give the viewer a taste of these heady experiences. The latter comprises a claustrophobic hallway with a glass ceiling containing a floating parachute resembling moving clouds.

A new artistic genre known as social practice eschews the creation of objects in favor of instigating communal events and experiences. These situational forms of art making involve the participation of others, be they gallery visitors, colleagues, or invited guests. Barbara Obata’s work seems to have absorbed some of these tendencies. Often collaborative in nature, she approaches art making as a shared experience or a game to be played with others. Or as a job to get done: a drawing is accompanied by a container of brooms and other tools fitted with charcoal tips that serves as her drawing utensils. Like all her materials, these are handmade from scavenged material. Another installation-cum-communal action consists of rustic setting for a book group with the reading material left on chairs and a dressed, seated mannequin awaiting discussants.

Feminist art with its collapsing of boundaries separating disciplines such as craft, dance, and fine art played a significant role in the current interdisciplinary of artistic practice. These ideas seem to have trickled down to the work of Nadja Eulee Miller. Her references range from ballroom dancing (Miller’s other profession) to cakes in eccentric mediums including the outdated slide show and large-scale ceramics. She and Obata have collaborated with a third partner on collaborative drawings set to music using a tripodal easel around which the dancing drawers circulate and add successive marks. Seminal feminist artists such as Barbara Kruger and Hannah Wilke railed against the representation of women in the media and its impact on societal attitudes towards women and female identity itself. Jenny Sharaf might speak for the current generation of women when she describes feminism as “an unfinished revolution.” Installations of minimalist Pop-style paintings in shades of pink and orange topped by a blonde wielding a pistol, Bridget Bardot in black face, and an entrancing video of kaleidoscopic blondes in bathing suits cannily yet mysteriously manipulate stereotypes and styles.

Art is a continually evolving, ever-changing entity that reflects on its generational era. Aesthetics and virtuosity aside, artistic production is material culture, a sign of the times. This year’s MFAs seem to have grasped their role as purveyors of the cultural moment. They fulfill it with curiosity and clear-eyed purpose.
Trained as a naturalist and a biological illustrator, I have experience rendering animals – mostly birds and insects – through finely detailed paintings. As an artist, I now focus on crafting biomorphic sculptures, photographs and paintings of imagined organisms that are realistic enough to be believed while also referring to a world of genetic mutations and modifications. Whether derived from fungal, botanical or zoological forms, each piece is part of an ecosystem – it is part of something greater than itself. While the rigorous attention to detail inherent to my process is rooted in scientific research, I make a string of subjective transformations along the way that only makes sense as art.

Increasingly, we are confronted with bizarre situations where organisms of radically different origins intersect in ways sometimes beneficial, but often detrimental, to environmental and human health. Non-native species from around the globe surround us whenever we step outside. The foods on our plates and pharmaceuticals we ingest derive from plants and animals that would never have mingled while alive. If art is an imitation of life, then this body of work mimics a hybrid life, where the divisions between species is indistinct and the seed of human production has been implanted in every habitat.

www.evanbarbour.com

Common yellow jackets, thin-shelled rock crab marble, mescal tree bean, unidentified oyster shell, unknown lichen, spray foam insulations, steel rods, acrylic paint, and super glue.

Claire Colette

My work is a persistent exploration of the immediate and the infinite. I investigate relationships between personal experience and scientific truths—what lies between the phenomenological and the empirical. Working with abstraction and repetitive mark making I am de-constructing experiences to explore our shifting interpretations of what is known, what is real and how we see.

With an interest in consciousness and the subjectivity of experience, I study moments of psychic focus such as states of intense fear, meditation, and bliss. I am curious about how, while in these states, time appears altered—it can seem to collapse and expand, speed up or stand still. Looking to parallel physical occurrences such as nuclear blasts, earthquakes, and black holes as visual reference, I work with elemental materials, primarily graphite, to render these heightened conditions. Through a gradual accumulation, my pieces develop over extended periods. My delicate and meticulous process feeds largely into the concept of the work itself and speaks to the idea of time and the drastic but elusive role it plays in our lives.

www.clairecolette.com
Bottom: no vestige of a beginning, no prospect of an end, 2013. Gold and silver leafing on stone.
Lauren Douglas

I use photography and installation to explore ideas about how we perceive reality and how we operate within the constraints of the space-time continuum. Approaching my surroundings intuitively I photograph the intimate and galactic in my everyday; crack formations on the surface of a rock or the horizon line of the ocean will hold my focus and prompt exploration. The images that result are simultaneously familiar and elusive.

My photographs are installed in groups to focus more directly on specific themes. Using poetry as a reference point, my images push and pull against one another to invite contemplation of the fragility of our experiences and time’s effect on how we comprehend them. I compose relationships between the photographs through image placement and shift in scale while the thematic repetition of symbols anchor the installation. My video projections further explore these themes by creating illusionary spaces that emulate the complexities of dimension.

“Eureka” is a two part investigation of memory association and the phenomenon of being in the middle of an experience. The title of the installation is taken from an essay by Edgar Allan Poe, the first to theorize that space and time are different perceptions of the same thing. Poe was also my personal introduction to the world of poetry. Primarily comprised of isolated winter landscapes the images evoke a sense of solitary exploration and uncertainty becomes the same as exiting it.

www.laurendouglasprojects.com
Eureka, 2013. C prints and video projection.

On March 27th, 2013, in anticipation of my graduate thesis exhibition, I strapped on a parachute and jumped out of an airplane. In addition to parachutes, I have worked as an artist with air bags and firecrackers, and on roller coasters and ladders. The loss of control - the thrill and the fear associated with it - is pivotal to my drawings, photographs, videos, sculptures, and installations. It is also at the heart of my creative process: standing between two ladders while hanging pieces of a parachute, drawing on plexiglas while riding a roller coaster, and jumping from an airplane.

With the adrenaline from a 13,000 foot jump still coursing through my veins, I created a two-channel video installation that emulates what it feels like to fall. Then I submerged a parachute in water destroying its protective function. Its sense of uselessness fascinates me because it can no longer be trusted. With these works, I evoke the moment just before we fall, then the fall itself, and finally a landing. We contemplate those three stages that recur relentlessly in our lives: the moment of reckoning, the struggle, and the aftermath. With a parachute beneath sinking waters, I pull away control and trust.

Keegan Luttrell

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www.keeganluttrell.com

Please note that the video in the room on the right is edited found footage from a NASA test jump made by Joe Kittinger in 1960 from 103,000 feet. This work is dedicated in loving memory to Travis Bielaski and his family.
2013. Two-channel video installation.


103,000 Feet, 2013
Two-channel video installation.
Nadja Eulee Miller

Communion can be as simple as sharing your lunch or agreeing to a dance. I find the value of art in moments of everyday life. Quotidian morsels become the building blocks of sculptures, performances, and collaborations. The relationship between freedom and structure is an essential theme that I am chasing to understand.

What forms or situations could encourage the facility of interaction? Think of a pair of ballroom dancers; the controlled structure of two straight spines engaged in the solid frame of the partnership permits a fluid freedom of movement around the dance floor. Rarely is it allowed for perfect strangers to share such an intimate interaction. What would it be like to visualize this framework of trust?

I use materials that relate to everyday life. Along with cardboard, ceramic, fabric, and wood, I incorporate a fourth dimension with music, light, breath, and movement. Open space, boredom, balance and tension are all modes I use to bring a form or situation alive in time and space.

My process is patience, building and waiting, feeling the tension between expectation and fruition. I find freedom and beauty through structure. It is the framework of trust that facilitates collaboration, creativity and expression. Structure is, as described by ballroom dancer Photis Pishiaras, what makes you feel powerful, soft, strong and free.

www.nadjaeulee.com
Installation view of Shim - Me - Sha - Wabble and Untitled (Arch Project).

Untitled (Arch Project), 2012 - 2013.
Porcelain, Cinder Blocks, Wood.
A large drawing immediately calls for a ladder. When that ladder fails to appear, necessity steps in. A broom handle, spool of tape, and piece of charcoal combine into the necessary drawing stick. The first marks are made. My focus is not the stick or the drawing, but in the act of combination, the moment when the necessary and the environment drive towards each other.

A local journal assigns me ten drawings. Why not let a bit of chance stir up the authorship? In this case the historical environment suggests a John Cage-ian response and I ask the drawers to roll the dice. Two by two they make that number of marks, each marking over the previous. The single-mindedness of the count and the mark create a randomized authorship as each draws over the last. This shifts the initial drawing assignment from object to action.

I intercept materials on their way to the garbage, and prefer ordinary household tools found within arm’s reach. The objects that result from these everyday combinations create a slight snag in categorization despite their ordinariness. What is their function - traveling pedestals out of palettes, sculptures that double as planters, or serve as silent participants in a reading group? What value do they have? Where are they going? How can we stretch out the meaning of being inside or being outside of the building?

My goal for viewers is to catch something out of the corner of their eye. This glimpse will be unique to that viewer, possibly wonderful, and might have little or nothing to do with the objects just passed.

www.studiowabi.com
Detail of Dice Drawing Table with Drawing Sticks, 2012 - 2013. Porcelain dice, reclaimed lumber, wood, charcoal, graphite and tubing.

Meri Page

I have always been drawn to systems, order, maps, and patterns in nature. Whether exploring the tension of magnetic energy fields or manipulating the growth pattern of crystalline structures, I am interested in revealing the liminal space where abstraction becomes form.

My work calls into question the authentic and artificial, reality and fantasy. Referencing geography, satellite views, and geologic forms that exist outside our normal perception of time. These organic materials represent the microcosm and macrocosm.

Working with cyanotype, sand, salt, soil, raw pigments and other elemental materials, the resulting forms are ambiguous and multifaceted. They invite shifts of perception and bring to mind questions of our place in the physical universe; time revealed through pattern and process.

www.meripage.com
Simon Pyle

My work deals with preservation and loss in the digital age. I explore the ways that visible evidence of decay creeps in even as we attempt to prevent experience from being lost to the caprice of history, time, and memory.

The promise of digital media and high-resolution screens is to archive and display limitless records of experience. My current approach is to seek out the visual gaps introduced by technologies of representation - the screen, the digital camera, the jpeg file - even as they present a hyper-realistic simulation.

Jpeg files condense an image into a series of blocks 8 pixels high by 8 pixels wide. In much the same way, a screen reduces visual information into a series of points with values of red, green, and blue. Even with these reductions, we can easily lose ourselves in the image of the screen and lose sight of the screen itself as an object entirely. Flickers and gaps can help us attain that state of awareness of the screen as an image and as an absence. Through a focus on visual loss, the work considers what is discarded in a world dominated by representation and simulacra.

As is evidenced by the cultural idea that the antidote for too much screen time is to go outside, there is a dialectic between technologies of representation and the natural world. That said, technology has always mediated our experiences of the physical world we inhabit: the campfire, the printing press, and the 35mm slide all shape the ways we view each other, ourselves, and the landscape.

I am interested in the different kinds of sensory experiences we have in natural spaces compared to our sensation when looking at a screen or through a camera lens. (Or increasingly, the collapsed sensation of looking at a camera’s screen). What is that gap between representation and experience, and how does it shift with technology and culture?

www.simonpyle.com

Above: Screens (Sun), 2013. Archival pigment print.
Jenny Sharaf

My work explores ideas of women and the media. Strongly influenced by the folklore of Hollywood history and LA as pop art playground, I use a promiscuous collage method and abstraction to compose a visual language rooted in powerful female iconography.

Ingrained in culture and exported globally for the world to digest, the “blonde story” is fragmented and complex. Through painting, video, works on paper and installations, I point to a deep relationship to the vernacular of California and the discourse of blondness.

Using imagery that encompasses trashy reality media, sophisticated starlets of pop culture and abstract and skin-referencing forms of color, I attempt to illuminate and challenge the mythology of the California Girl. While mapping a history of blondes in the media, I adopt tropes of pop art, abstract expressionist painting and low-brow media. As a blonde looking at blondeness, I attempt to deconstruct beauty, power and a new feminist ideal.

This body of work centers around the evolving generational shifts of feminism and notions of the gaze. The female’s relationship to the camera is layered, something between want, desire, pain and exhibitionism. While examining the complexity of feminism’s legacy, I work with images that seem to reflect on this loaded history and explore my niche within a generation of women who are disconnected from the struggle.

[Image: The Blonde Experience, 2013. Paint, canvas, TV sets, make-up, carpet, fabric, archival prints.]
Installation view of The Blonde Experience, 2013.
Paint, canvas, TV sets, make-up, carpet, fabric, archival prints.
Kate Short

Silence is at the root of my fascination with sound. Though silence is understood by most as being something that is heard, I conceive of silence as a psychological state that has an emotional resonance within a specific time and place. Going beyond the concept of absence or presence of sound, my work explores the physical sensation of silence and how it is experienced through both mind and body. In this way sound is an essential tool for me as I explore the psychological ambiguity of space.

Using sound, video, photography and sculpture I construct spaces that are both enticing and disruptive to the senses. In creating slight shifts in auditory and spatial cues, I am interested in inviting the viewer to become more aware of their own habits, expectations and desires. Through this process of disorienting and re-orientating experience, I am calling for a reevaluation of space and our physical and emotional roles within it.

The body of work in this show was inspired by the composer Eliane Radigue and her seminal work, Trilogie de la Mort (A Trilogy on Death). As “a spiritual acoustic journey reflecting on the transcendence of death”, it relates to the Tibetan Buddhism concept that hearing is the last sense to be lost as we die. Grounded in this idea, the three pieces in this show are my attempt at using sound and space to come to terms with the passage from life to death.

The Oculus being the initial entry into death, it is expansive and inclusive, disorienting yet grounded. The Interstice is a solitary space. Literally meaning the space in between, it represents the transference of energy into a tone only felt and never heard. The final stage being Dissolution, a place where the voice of the dead once again becomes embodied in one last effort to be present on this plane before it is dissolved into a space of silence.

www.kateleeshort.com
Left: Outside view of Oculus, 2012. A 12 channel sound installation with 275 salvaged speakers, 40 amplifiers, a Mac Mini, a MOTU Audio interface and wool acoustic flooring. The installation plays an undulating soundscape of brown noise with 38Hz playing through one single channel.

Top Right: Interstice, 2013. Salvaged speakers, four hand built subwoofers, amplifier, wood, MDF, Kreg screws, enamel, paint. The installation plays an undulating soundscape of 19Hz, one frequency below audible hearing.

Katy Warner

My body of work acknowledges the underrepresented artists that live all around us. From the tween who draws homages to her favorite pop stars, to the DMV clerk who works on constructing a language every night, these individuals express the emotions and arduous drive that professional artists possess, but they are not recognized in the same way as I might be from my standing as an MFA recipient. Art that is created for self-fulfillment by non-professionals does not follow the same rules because it is not formally critiqued. I want my work to embody that. At the same time I want there to be an access point for those who may not understand the subcultures that these obsessive artists inhabit. My approach is to create characters that function as a proxy to myself and provide an additional layer of narrative to my semi-biographical pieces.

One of my characters is Maxine Heeding, who has retreated from time and social interaction to focus on writing her fantasy narrative “Written and Illustrated By,” which is heavily influenced by Japanese Anime of the 1990’s. I have designed her studio apartment under the assumption that her passions are contained in that space, and that she has devoted all of her energy to a world of her construction - eating, sleeping and working a nine-to-five job are just means to that end. Her room is rife with a confounding array of chalk diagrams, hastily scribbled plot notes on Post-its and yellowed journal paper, deteriorating concept drawings, and aged furnishings that illustrate her priorities.

The other character is deathundothee, the experimental linguist and rock and roll fangirl that is my web video identity. I become a part of one of my videos by transforming into a silhouette against a rear projection screen, yelling the lyrics of “Common People” by Pulp as the screen shows a high-contrast rebus corresponding with the song. The viewer must trust that my loud and gesticulative translation is true, since the rebus itself flashes by too quickly to be read in real time. Here the obsessive system I have developed is being illustrated via audio and video, but it is not being explained, for that would defeat the purpose of creating a system for my own satisfaction. The contrast between the cultures of fan art and gallery art are what I am examining by presenting this work. I am a part of both subcultures, but I am creating a hybridization of both forms of art making. Professionals polish for the standards of the art world, isolated creatives develop their own miniature utopia. Between the two is the underrepresented and misunderstood place that I inhabit, and that is the land I want others to tread.

www.deathundothee.com