

Truth in the Visual Arts

Skepticism in the Work of Ellen K. Levy and Patricia Olynyk

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Ellen K. Levy and Patricia Olynyk

Some Provocations from Skeptical Inquirers: Painted Prints, Photographs, and Videos

THE MISHKIN GALLERY AT BARUCH COLLEGE

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In *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, Márquez describes a rain of yellow flowers falling on the town of Macondo; it is a miracle and has no scientific explanation, but in the context of fiction, it needs no rationalization. What value is there in the exercise of commenting on truth versus falsehood within the framework of art, which makes little or no distinction between truth and fiction? In the collaborative exhibition *Some Provocations from Skeptical Inquirers*, multimedia artist Ellen K. Levy and photographer Patricia Olynyk seek to refute anti-science skeptics such as climate change deniers and creationists via visual media. Rather than fulfill that goal, *Some Provocations* opens the gate to a discussion of whether any kind of argument at all can be expressed successfully in a medium that is, at its heart, predicated on the fact that it can render both the real and the imagined with equal footing. Their output is aesthetically rich: by turns playful and lighthearted, as in Levy's vibrant colorful manipulated prints, and poetic and tragic in Olynyk's darkling photographs; but the embodiment of skepticism and open discourse, which they desire to evoke, is inconclusive.

The Skeptical Inquirer magazine, fast approaching its fortieth anniversary, was founded on the premise that a scientific approach to paranormal and anti-scientific ideas would frame those discussions in a rational context and speedily remove questions of faith and superstition, allowing a concrete answer to emerge. This works within a textual medium, an inherently artificial system to begin with. But there is a reason why the phrase "I'll believe it when I see it" holds such sway in human culture. Levy's radiant series of four prints, *Brooklyn Slime Mold #2* (2015), *Transporting Salmon (whoosh)* (2015), *Lichen Vegetation* (2014), and *Jellyfish Rods* (2015), read as a series of illuminations of saintly miracles from a medieval manuscript. For instance, *Jellyfish Rods* displays a barrage of painted squiggly medusozoa (looking like fragments of a Francis Bacon canvas), intercepted by the stern rigor of a steel grate and the rods of a nuclear reactor. This image in particular, which aims to illustrate the collision of the organic and the man-made, sees its rational impulse bedeviled by the artist's use of color to evoke a sense of wonder and the miraculous, reminiscent of Márquez's rain of yellow flowers.

Similarly, Olynyk's affecting series of photographs *The Mutable Archive* (2015) and its accompanying video deal with applying a modern psychological and sociological approach to the interpretation of evidence with an equal dose of poetic interpretation. Olynyk explored the 139 skulls from the collection of Dr. Joseph Hyrtl in the Mütter Museum in Philadelphia, and photographed the notes inscribed on the crania of these individuals—terse dictums detailing the enigmatic lives of the deceased: “suicide,” “prostitute,” “child murderer.” In the nineteen exhibited photographs, the skulls are placed next to the index cards which accompanied them into storage. Both the skulls and cards contain very little data, but enough to generate a narrative: age, sex, cause of death, and occasional details of a profession or major life event. Seeing these words literally tattooed onto the bones of the individual sets up a situation of immanence: these people are circumscribed by the details of their respective lives, as we all are, but Olynyk seeks to dispel these boundaries and demands of us how we would apply these parameters to ourselves. The eponymous video is part of a larger collaborative work in which artists of all disciplines were invited to assess individuals from the Hyrtl collection and generate a creative narrative based on the sparse facts. The video includes interpretations by artist Buzz Spector and Olynyk's Mishkin Gallery collaborator, Ellen K. Levy. While these interpretations are deceptively meticulous—detailing, for example, the volume of Google responses to specific terms listed on the skulls—the fact remains that the invented lives are pure fiction inspired by true events. Does this redactive methodology embrace deductive reasoning, or the more teleological thinking of Olynyk and Levy's perceived adversaries in the science debate? In the end this built-in confrontation between fact and fiction was the basis of the *Skeptical Inquirer* itself and its playful willingness to consider the most unlikely phenomena.

Levy also plays with this openness to interpretation in her video *Anomalies and Artifacts* (2015) which contrasts the sometimes competing tools of scientific investigation and digital enhancement. In an effort to represent truth and to highlight a particular biological/chemical/physical concept, what constitutes excessive toying with reality in attempting to better represent reality? Who can be trusted when legitimate scientists create fantastical animations approximating reality in order to activate the viewer's desire for the miraculous, while quack creationists create museums and documentaries in an effort to emulate the dry respectability of science? It is Olynyk's portraits of prosthetics such as *Isomorphic Extension I + II* (2011) that offer a blunt solution to this debate. Two prosthetic legs, positioned as if they were attached to an invisible body, are photographed with an attitude of quiet awe—the practical need of human beings to often step in to replace nature forces us to do our homework (science) in order to create something miraculous (a leg), and it is one of the many jobs of art to tell this story.