

Artslant

Perception: Laini Nemett and Meg Rorison, MFA's from MICA

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**Assignment:**

This year, I've been teaching as an Adjunct in Art History and Curatorial Practice at Maryland Institute College of Art (MICA). Because of my work at MICA, the editors at Artslant asked if I'd be interested in contributing to an MFA focus edition. I chose to profile two young artists who received their MFA's from MICA this month, Laini Nemett and Meg Rorison, a painter and a filmmaker respectively. Nemett studied with painter and critic Joan Walthermath, Rorison with critic and curator Timothy Druckery. Both Nemett and Rorison are working with the concept of space, both linking various spaces. I interviewed these two artists in their studios, and since then I've been mulling over their reflections.

**Hypotheses:**

I want to think about perception. I think I perceive from multiple perspectives. I think my gaze is multiple. Looking is roving, disorganized, not fixed.

As much as the vast majority of us are involved with technological culture, we interact with massive immaterial currents, looking at the evidence of that interface as often as we choose to walk on physical streets or look out, off bridges.

Our technology is an enveloping technology. It records perception and it instructs. It instructs in how to see. Maybe more than ever we could now be equipped for the possibility of immediate, searing sight. We can stream multiplicities, try to harness the power of that roving gaze, the search engine that seemingly can picture precisely everything, precisely everywhere. Objects are where they don't appear to belong. Mixed-up content is swelling--a loaded show.

Back in 1948, Maurice Merleau-Ponty wrote: "We can no longer draw an absolute distinction between space and the things which occupy it, nor indeed between the pure idea of space and the concrete spectacle it presents our senses." (See Merleau-Ponty, *The World of Perception*, Routledge: 2004.)

An art student might take up an older technology--Bolex camera or scissors or paint brush and palette knife--but because of their knowledge and experience of digital technology, this art student's gaze is nimble, un-restricted by the determinations of time. They can rapidly calculate to compress, jack or jack up the distance between points, adjust the frame in the moment of creation.

Back in 1986, Paul Virilio wrote: "The revolving door is succeeded by data banks, by new rites of passage of a technical culture masked by the immateriality of its components: its networks, highway systems, and diverse reticulations whose threads are no longer woven into the space of a constructed fabric, but into the sequences of an imperceptible planning of time in which the interface man/machine replaces the facades of buildings and the surfaces of ground on which they stand." (See Virilio, *The Overexposed City*, Zone Books: 1986.)

**Lingering Questions:**

- We live in the digital age. We see more than ever before, and perhaps differently. But, even if we see, or if we sense, our seeing and our sensing surely doesn't necessarily mean--does it?--that we digest, that we always process or understand all that we sense and see.
- And, what about a little healthy nostalgia? I'm OK with imagining a better time in times past. It IS possible that a past time could have been better than now in some ways.

• What about slowing down? What about meditative work? What about dignified work? I would like to think, today, we could do some methodical, thoughtful, dignified work.

Study 1: A 16 Millimeter film, *Scansion*, 2012

In one short segment, less than a minute from *Scansion*, I see a plastic bag and a hunk of tree stump stuck almost at the top of a barbed wire fence, both bag and stump caught in an old race, both cold, stabbed and stuck forever on some pokey urban boundary. Intercut, I see a truck moving a pile to another pile. Perhaps the dispatch can only afford to send one truck to this mound because this mound is not a mountain; it is residual, not majestic.

Then, at knee level, I see a series of frames, then I see one frame. Where I want to see frames, there are actually railings in front of a dam.

The camera's gaze moves easily over space--from neighborhood to outskirts--mattering a series of visual impressions. The gaze deliberates by zooms, edges the mountain, snakes...

**Meg Rorison:** There is something about working with my hands and editing with my hands, it triggers a way of thinking and working that I really find necessary... When I would initially show my 16 millimeter films, my program director, Timothy Druckery, wanted to know why I was working with 16 millimeter. I wasn't quite articulate about the draw towards this medium, but from the start it felt right. The process of shooting, editing and capturing movement with such a heavy machine really intrigued me. I also loved the process of setting up and projecting the film--it felt ritualistic. I started learning that there are, in fact, a lot of younger artists also working with 16 and 8 millimeter right now. There is a nice dialogue going on between the newcomers and the filmmakers who started in the 1970s. I hold the sentiment that perhaps we want something to be more material--to see the grain again and that the antiseptic, sterile, digital image is just not enough and we need something deeper. For me, I like the language and materiality I attribute to film more than video. Over time, film gains and collects more scratches and dust which all works to develop its own personality...

... With *Scansion*, I told myself to edit the film like a song, searching and selecting through my footage to find its own inherent rhythm. I had maybe eight hundred feet of film and I broke it down to maybe three hundred. I also started to realize, that I like gathering landscapes... I make a lot of shot lists of familiar places that I must capture. I would get to location and respond differently, but I would still write it down first. It helps me focus and get my thoughts organized.

**Marcus Civin: You like the fences.**

**MR:** I think for their geometric shapes and how they diagram space.

**MC: Where are the people in this film?**

**MR:** I fixated on the more desolate places, I thought if I added people there needed to be a reason for these specific people and I didn't think this was necessary... I thought more: I wonder if we all stayed inside, I wonder what the land would look like...

**MC: What the land outside would look like with all of us inside, on our computers...**

**MR:** I'm thinking about why this medium and why landscapes together and I think this is a response to feeling very detached from people when often, our first mode of communication is e-mail. You can create and define an identity solely through virtual space... Baltimore specifically, I am very aware of the desolation here and it feels like a war zone. For the soundtrack, I took a lot of excerpts of field recordings of helicopters and sirens and abstracted them through post-production. It just feels haunting here and I wanted to gather these places in Baltimore. All the places I gather are places I go to a lot and I guess this is an ode to Baltimore, both how I remember and how I feel... There's a great experimental music scene in Baltimore. There is more analog than digital. For example, many musicians distribute their work on

cassette tapes--they don't typically use CDs or MP3s. People are always making their own analogue synthesizers, people are building their own instruments. It's very active and material-based and so I think that's also influenced me.

**MC:** *This other piece, Gowanus Haze, shot in Gowanus, in Brooklyn, is partly about your grandfather, Harry Bennett, who you were telling me about before. He worked as an artist and illustrator. He speaks in the film.*

**MR:** His memories of New York, what he would do there... He made paintings that would be turned into book covers for gothic novels and mystery novels. He would deliver his paintings to a publishing company in New York, and he loved going there, but he has dementia now. It was his 93rd birthday the other day and I played this film for him. He was confused. He liked it. He liked hearing his voice. He's there and then he's not... I have a lot of friends who are obsessed with the idea of the post-human and feeding back with the machine and that there is no idea of the individual self anymore and I don't want to adhere to that. A lot of things about how we live today feel very unnatural to me. I still taste things and need a lot of time with my own thoughts to process the external world.

### **Study 2: Paintings of Stairwells, Machines, and Entries**

Baltimore has an old Street Car Museum, a reliquary, open weekends, run mostly by volunteers. A few days a week, a crew works on restoring street cars. The crew works down the road from the museum in a long, long shed filled with engine hulks and even hulkiest machines for manipulating metal.

So what are we doing here? Laini Nemett and I decided to go. Nemett frequents this space for inspiration. One of the restoration crew was around when we went, so we got a tour, Nemett taking iPhone snaps. "This might be my next series of paintings," she said.

The space reverberates, piles everywhere, to the ceiling. I see an old crane. I see a driveway overhang rotted out, timbers disjointed but hanging on. It wouldn't matter if they fell, the timbers, they'd only take down with them paint flakes from the salmon-pink-and-blue-green flaky steel beams. But--wait--is that a shipping pallet stuffed up in there? It occurred to me suddenly: someone might be living up there, nesting up there above the driveway.

Outside, out back, I stepped over an oil puddle, I stepped over a pair of underwear. Our tour guide said: "We find all kinds of things around here..."

**Laini Nemett:** I'm interested in how packed quiet spaces can be. For me, painting is about offering a personal experience with a space.

**MC:** *This is Umbrian Stairwell 3. Did you photograph this scene and then paint it?*

**LN:** No, I painted it there... My more straightforward paintings are about meditation and experience. It slows me down to paint. I've been really lucky to be brought up in an artistic family. My dad has taught at an International program in Umbria every summer for five years, so for three of them I was living in Spain and it was eight dollars to fly over to Italy. It's this little medieval town that hasn't been touched since. There are so many places to paint there, but I tend to return to the same places, like this stairwell.

**MC:** *What set up do you need to paint there?*

**LN:** Nothing. A tiny little wooden board for oil. If I'm lucky, a small piece of glass for a palette, a palette knife. The small paintings are mostly palette knife. I keep it all in a backpack. I take off my shoes and I prop the painting on one shoe to make an easel.

**MC:** *What?*

**LN:** I sit on the ground, take off my shoes, turn over one shoe and make it an easel. I put the other shoe under the palette. When I'm finished, I wipe down my palette, put on my shoes, hold the palette under the painting, and walk back. When I travel I have a bunch of small boards like this. Muslin--a dollar a yard--pasted on masonite... I'll go somewhere with a lot of squares and a few rectangles in different sizes. I'll see something and I think: this size canvas is perfect for that, and then I'll start painting and sometimes realize the canvas needs four more inches, so in that case, I just add on another canvas.

**MC: *What about your collages?***

**LN:** That's the wall of The Studio Center at MICA. This is Hampden, in Baltimore, on The Avenue--part of it. This is São Tomé, in Africa. A bunch of this is made up. This is Baltimore... So, all the collages, they're pieced together from all different places. These are photographs that I took and put together, so they're not actually spaces that exist. And in most cases, they can't exist, because they're not spatially or structurally sound... I think if I leave some things out or make up a transition or fudge a situation where it might be structurally impossible, I think that's where I can understand lived or remembered space in a different way. When I went to São Tomé, everything was collaged, most of the structures that exist there are pieced together--

**MC: *All of the building materials are salvaged and re-used.***

**LN:** So that kind of led me to this way of working.

**MC: *What are these breaks, these crevices in the painting, where two painting panels meet and the image links them?***

**LN:** In one instance, I mentally planned out the painting in a small sketch and then I painted it large and I didn't like it large; it felt like somebody was pushing down on the top of the painting, so I realized it needed sky on the top. I opened it up, just added on another panel... because I deal with windows and gridded beams a lot, it made sense to me to add on another panel, to make another plane...

**MC: *You never cut the plane down?***

**LN:** No.

**MC: *You're not a cropper, you're an expander. What's the opposite of a cropper? There's gotta be a better word for that.***

**LN:** An augments?

**MC: *My eye is telling me this painting, *Entry*, is an actual physical space. Is it? Or is it a collaged space?***

**LN:** Most of it exists. This evolved from a watercolor sketch I made on the spot in a village in São Tomé. I re-composed it on a larger scale when I returned to Baltimore. I opened it up a lot. It had this really claustrophobic space, I needed some kind of sky, some kind of way out. I kept painting it until I could breathe.