



Betray the Grid: Elizabeth McTernan and the Black Square

By Kika Jonsson

In an era when we live in a flood of images and data, Elizabeth McTernan's artwork stands firmly against the tide, demanding that the viewer stop, look closely, and pay attention. Her artwork is based on her first-person research in some of the extreme environments of the world: the Gobi Desert, the Himalayas, and the taiga above the Arctic Circle. For *Heaven Is A Place Where Nothing Ever Happens*, she presents work developed during and after successive residencies at *Ars Bioarctica* in Finnish Lapland and *Villa Eläintarha* in Helsinki.

At the top of the world, during the white nights of the year when the sun does not set, the artist and her frequent collaborator, mathematician Dr. Luke Wolcott, embarked on a scientific expedition. They built a square with posts and ropes, imposing a rigid grid to count wildlife, filling it with the significantly less rigid and square Finnish taiga. Relying on what they saw, the duo kept detailed logs during observation periods, absorbing information through a vacant square, echoing our interaction with that other landscape where the sun never sets, the Internet.

Elizabeth transformed this narrative research into decidedly non-narrative forms, such as gridded objects, light, and images, in a constellation that points out the contradictions that occur when we impose a grid on the slippery and unfathomable natural landscape. Using the black square as a launching point, Elizabeth uses abstraction and form to examine the interlinked nature of our scientific classification systems: meteorological, astronomical, and geological. The artist explores how we use the perfect square, a shape that rarely occurs in nature, to define nature.

Within the exhibition, a formal extension of the square exists in an ethereal, floating image of a square-shaped "hole" in the sun, along with rocks from the Baltic sea that have been painstakingly hand-painted with perfect white and copper grid lines. A low lamp affects a radiometer (a device that measures the radiant flux of electromagnetic radiation), causing the four perfect squares inside the airtight partial-vacuum bulb to spin. A folded and formed copper sheet mimics topographical maps with a rigid white grid overlay that counters the irregular metallic surface.

Elizabeth's artwork asks: how can we relate to hyper-objects like outer space and our natural world? How can we understand our planet when our own methods are so susceptible to human error? What if actual understanding lies in that error? And, if "seeing is believing," how do we comprehend that which we do not see?

Skalitzer Straße 68
10997 Berlin
info@kn-context.com
www.kn-context.com
