

A Thousand Words: Literary themes and allusions to paintings play an important role in the photography of Eileen Neff



Beckett, an homage to Irish playwright Samuel Beckett, plays with the relationship between interior and exterior space.

Posted: Sunday, June 28, 2009 1:00 am | Updated: 2:08 pm, Wed Dec 12, 2012.

Tom Patterson

Eileen Neff was a student of literature before she studied painting, but she ultimately settled on photography as the medium best suited to her artistic aims.

Given that career trajectory, it's not surprising that literary references and allusions to painting are prominent features

in Neff's photography, showcased in an exhibition on view through Aug. 16 at the Weatherspoon Art Museum in Greensboro. "Eileen Neff: Between Us" brings together 23 of the color photographs that she has made since the late 1990s.

The ostensible subject of these images is the landscape, and their sizes vary from about 12 inches square up to about 3-by-9 feet. Neff's approach involves selecting and sometimes digitally manipulating color landscape photographs, then giving them evocative, often literarily referenced titles. Several of these images are titled after the names of widely read writers, including Edna St. Vincent Millay and Henry David Thoreau.

In relationship to the blurry green and gray pastoral landscape in the background of Neff's *Anecdote of the Tree*, the straight, vertical tree trunk in the central foreground appears to occupy a fixed position, like an axis around which the surrounding world dizzily spins, as if seen from a sped-up carousel. The title of this image, dated 1999-2000, is probably inspired by "Anecdote of the Jar," one of the more well-known poems by Wallace Stevens, whom Neff has acknowledged as a favorite writer.

Neff employs a panoramic format, especially suited to landscape imagery, in several pieces, including *Homesick* and *Over the Hill*, both made in 2007. Initially these images appear to be straightforward, wide-angle views of verdant landscapes crossed by intersecting streets or roads. But on closer inspection, it looks as if Neff might well have created each of these images by combining parts of two or more originally separate landscape photographs, using a photo-montage approach more overtly exemplified in some of her earlier work.

She clearly used the latter approach in two of the show's earliest works, from a series titled "Western Wind," dated 2000. To create *Western Wind #1*, she evidently excised a cloud from a photo of the sky, then superimposed it on a close-up image of the choppy waters in an ocean or lake, so that the cloud appears to float on the water's surface. And in

#2, the same cloud appears to occupy much of the space in a domestic interior room.

The show's smallest work, *Narcissus*, dates from 2001 and is also clearly the product of digital manipulation. To create it she made two versions of a single photograph of a large lake bordered by woods, then turned the two images on their sides and seamlessly combined them. In the resultant mirror-image composite, the tops of the trees onshore point outward toward the left and right sides, while the watery surfaces at the bottoms of the original images are fused into a central vertical band of water. It's the photographic equivalent of a Rorschach ink blot.

By contrast, the fusion central to Neff's 2007 image *Winter (The Couple)* -- namely two trees growing so close together that the branches of the smaller cedar envelop the trunk of the taller hickory -- appears to be the result of natural growth circumstances rather than digital manipulation.

Neff plays with the relationship between interior and exterior space in a number of works exhibited here, including the one titled *Beckett*, in homage to Irish playwright Samuel Beckett. Rather than digitally combining two images to create a single work, as she did in several previously discussed pieces, here Neff has printed them side by side on a single sheet of photographic paper, separated only by a narrow, white vertical band. In the image at the left an unmade bed, a floor lamp and two books on a table occupy what appears to be a hotel room, while the image at the right is a wintry-looking landscape. If not for the intervening white band, the horizontal line traced by the top of the tallest ridge in the landscape image would be continuous with the surface of the rumpled bed in the image at the left. The sense of absence or vacancy evoked in each of these images and amplified by their combination is consistent with the mood evoked by Beckett's best-known play, *Waiting for Godot*. Other works here that highlight the interior-exterior dynamic include *Thoreau*, *Millay* and *Falls by Car*, all of which are also from 2004.

The most pronounced painting reference in Neff's show is

her 2001 piece titled *This and That*. With its dense network of yellow, green, blue and red striations, both vertical and horizontal, this large, square-ish piece looks a lot like a contemporary, post-minimalist painting. It is virtually impossible to discern what she photographed in order to create this striking piece.