



EILEEN NEFF

*Three or Four Clouds*

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October 3 - 27, 2012

BRIDGETTE **MAYER** GALLERY

709 Walnut Street Philadelphia PA 19106

*Here and There*

2012

C-Print print mounted on Plexi

55 x 76 3/4 inches



## *Three or Four Clouds*

Helen Westgeest

*Here and There* is a large color photograph that Eileen Neff took of the north wall of the Bridgette Mayer Gallery, the exact same surface on which the work is exhibited. In addition to depicting the wall—along with a portion of the floor and track lighting—the image portrays a selection of objects from Neff’s Philadelphia studio that she arranged in the gallery to suggest their original positions in her work space. These include several globes (one wrapped in a sheet of translucent blue plastic, as if to suggest the atmosphere clinging to the earth) and a plastic, three-dimensional representation of our solar system. Other objects were digitally inserted - such as a facsimile of the moon (in low relief) and a square mirror reflecting the green branches of a Z plant as well as a portion of Neff’s studio window. A variation of this mirrored view appears as a separate photograph hung on the adjacent wall to the right. Similarly, the postcard rack, seen propped against the wall in the large photograph, has been placed on a pedestal within the gallery where it displays a single photograph of a cloud divided into so many “postcards”, each a segment of the original image. *Here and There*, when encountered by a viewer inside the gallery, replicates the same space in which he or she is standing, but with a difference. As such, the work

suggests an instant overlapping of the gallery with Neff's studio.

In an e-mail discussion with Neff on the topic of comparing "looking at photographs with the experience of looking through windows," she commented on her studio practice. In particular, she articulated how in this work, "the studio is the window and the camera becomes its twinned, fixing frame".<sup>1</sup> Neff also indicated that this large photograph reminded her of some of her earlier work. In particular, a series produced in 2001 in which she used the window of a moving train as another "viewfinder",<sup>2</sup> and how the windows of her car have also served to frame many of the other landscapes she has photographed. In its doubling effects, *Here and There* also references *The Key of Dreams*, an installation by Neff at Bruce Silverstein/20, (New York) in 2008. For this project, Neff presented an array of works leaning against a wall in one space, while in a second, adjacent space, the exact same works were pictured in a different arrangement and fixed within a large photograph.

Among the many aspects of photography that Neff interrogates in an exceptional way is the almost universal manner in which we assume that views offered by photographs depict places that are absent, which is to say, sites other than the one in which the person looking at the photograph is located. Unlike most photographs, which are satisfied being viewed in a variety of contexts, *Here and There* is meant to be exhibited in the same place where it was taken, thus conflating studio and gallery. Tellingly, in this respect, Neff calls her studio not just a place but also a frame for a heightened form of attention. This quality of attention she likewise directs toward the exhibition spaces in which she presents her work, accommodating their unique features and attributes. This particular space, the Bridgette Mayer Gallery, in which Neff is presenting her work for the first time, also, and inevitably, becomes the ostensible subject of the work.

For the past ten years now, Eileen Neff has been using a studio located on the 29th floor of a building facing north and looking over an open, urban vista that reaches to greener suburban views at its farthest edge. The studio's large picture window offers her a chance to witness a constant display of atmospheric conditions at all times of day. The many pictures she has taken through this window are much more than examples of what might be called landscape photography. They evoke reflections on how photography mediates perception itself.

The window, of course, is often used as a metaphor for visual mediation, but clouds will not immediately call forth associations with photography. What clouds and photographs have in common, however, is that both result from transformations of invisible particles (of water vapor and light, respectively) into "illusive objects." A photograph offers an illusion of the presence of the things it depicts, and, much in the same way, we tend to look at clouds as "objects" crossing the sky, even though we know very well that the appearance of these three-dimensional forms (be they white, gray, or tinted) is the result of particular physical, optical, and spectral transformations. Because we can take these transformations for granted, we rarely contemplate the underlying conditions responsible for them, which include viewing distance, perspective, and angle of illumination, to name only a few. Neff draws our attention to the fascinating changeability of clouds, not only by presenting a variety of types and colors of clouds, but also, and even more so, by capitalizing on photography's range of presentation formats, including diverse approaches to framing. This profligacy of display strategies, which has only been compounded by developments in digitization, suggests an analogous variability intrinsic to clouds.

The act of looking through windows and looking at photographs can be characterized as an experience whereby the observer is in an external position and part of the view at the same time. Neff's photograph *The Ordinary Day*, which depicts a group of clouds outside her studio window along with their reflection on her studio table, demonstrates how complex this inside/outside relationship can get. Despite the fact that the work is an unmanipulated photograph, Neff's precise cropping of the image makes it challenging to grasp what we are actually looking at and encourages us to become more deeply aware of the intriguing conundrum such cropping can engender.

Frequently, critics have pointed to transparent surfaces of both photographs and windows. This is especially the case with glossy photographs or photographs presented in frames. We tend to ignore these surfaces. It is only when dust, dirt or a reflection obstruct our view that our attention is drawn to them. The work *Good Night Rain* offers an interesting example of this. This image depicts raindrops on Neff's studio window, which initially seem to hinder our view of the storm clouds behind them. Once we discover, however, that these drops not only multiply the sky in miniature, as well as in reverse (demonstrating the basic functioning of lenses), we could say that they actually enrich the view.

Both the window and the photograph can appear to flatten the three-dimensional world they present to us, sealing it behind a smooth, material plane. Neff draws our attention to this condition, as well as the multiple readings a single image might be made to bear, in *One and Three Birds*. This series presents a toy bird that seems to be sitting on a flat, transparent surface through which we gain a spatial view of the sky and trees. The composition makes the viewer wonder whether the bird might somehow be suspended in a space between the viewer and the foliage pictured, or if the bird is perhaps actually sitting on a photograph. The faint shadow to left of the bird indicates the latter option. Or do we see a grey cloud in the sky rather than a shadow? Neff frames the image in three different ways. Asking us to consider them together, she invites us to explore this question further while demonstrating how each different frame tempers our interpretation. Each treatment of the identical image sends us in conflicting directions, encouraging shifting points of view that are impossible to reconcile. Neff's three iterations of this "bird on a tree", while deceptively simple when reduced to language, open up a range of beguiling possibilities about the grammar of photography, the rhetorical power of its presentation, and the complexity of seeing.

The window as metaphor for a framed image of the world has a long history. As early as the fifteenth century, Leon Battista Alberti compared paintings and the deep spaces they often depicted with views through windows.<sup>3</sup> Paintings became less transparent—and painters much more self-conscious about the physical medium of paint—however, after the invention of photography, as Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin argued in their book *Remediation* (1999).<sup>4</sup> Increasingly in her work, Neff has deployed the transparency of photography as a tool to reflect on a growing hyperawareness of her own medium. Her photographs can be called reflections on the transparency of photography, in some cases in both a figurative and a literal sense.

By choosing to display some of her photographs as objects in the gallery space, as opposed to pictures hanging on the wall, Neff positions herself with other contemporary photographers that explore the photograph in terms of sculpture. Such examples of Neff's work, including *Postcloud* and *Red Setting*, induce viewers to become more aware of their physical presence in the gallery space in ways that are analogous to the effects of sculpture, as well as installation. Such examples have affinities with the efforts of Leslie Hewitt, whose works confound the materiality of photographs with both their subjects and means of presentation, as well as Sabine Hornig, whose images simultaneously depict and embody the physicality of windows with views directed both at and through their panes. The work of both of these artists, however, reflects earlier examples provided by René Magritte and Marcel Duchamp. The latter's *Fresh Widow*, (1920), a model of a French window fitted with panels of black leather instead of glass, materializes the night sky as an object in the gallery space.<sup>5</sup> A similar effect is rendered employing pictorial means that nevertheless allude to the materiality of images in many of Magritte's paintings. Among these is *Le soir qui tombe/Evening Falls* (1964). In this work, the view of the landscape seen through a broken window is duplicated exactly onto what we can read as its shattered pane, pieces of which have fallen onto the floor inside the room. Neff also shares with Duchamp and Magritte their subtle sense of humor in dealing with such perceptual paradoxes.

As optical and pictorial as they are, Neff's works always address the physical presence of the viewer before them. With *Still Life*, the viewer has the experience of looking from an oblique perspective. In this instance, it is our natural impulse to try and shift our position to be directly in front of the given subject and correct the foreshortening, which, in this and other examples in this exhibition, Neff has built *a priori* into the picture. In the process, she ruthlessly draws our attention to unforeseen assumptions and preconceptions that attend our interpretation of images made with the camera and presented in the gallery space.

Neff presents what we could call "multi-mediated views" that are rich with evidence that reminds us that all visual representations are unavoidably, if not heavily, mediated. How many stages of mediation, for example, might we count in *After Luigi*? This work by Neff depicts a page from a book by Luigi Ghirri on which has been printed an image of one of his photographs picturing the corner of an old master painting bordered by a gilded frame hanging on a gallery wall. The instances of cropping, reframing, replication, inversion, and re-materialization embodied in Neff's image imply untold layers of mediation. Mounted to a piece of Plexiglas, but also framed, her picture re-presents a photograph printed onto a page from a book reproducing a photograph of the corner of a painting. Like all of the works in this exhibition, the image goes well beyond its apparent subject—three of four clouds—to address the world and the many ways we are given to see and imagine it.

Notes:

- 1) Eileen Neff, in an e-mail correspondence with the author, July 12, 2012.
- 2) This body of work was presented in Neff's solo exhibition *Moving/Still* at Locks Gallery, Philadelphia, in 2001.
- 3) Leon Battista Alberti, *Della Pittura [On Painting]*, 1436. With regard to the relationship between the window and the photograph, it is interesting to realize that the earliest photographs by Nicéphore Niépce (in 1826), William Henry Fox Talbot (in 1836), and Louis Daguerre (in 1838) were views through windows. This awareness places Neff in a historical relationship with the pioneers of the medium. Although their concern was mainly the fixing of these window views, Neff contemplates the consequences of this ability for our way of looking at such fixed views.
- 4) Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin, *Remediation: Understanding New Media* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1999). It is interesting to note that Neff was trained as a painter before turning to photography.
- 5) The exhibition *The Window in Art since Matisse and Duchamp*, held at Kunstsammlung Nordrhein-Westfalen, Düsseldorf, in 2012 (curated by Maria Müller-Schareck in collaboration with Melanie Vietmeier), presented artworks reflecting Alberti's metaphor of the window.

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*Birdwatching*

2012

Pigment print mounted on Plexi

9 x 9 3/4 inches

