

# Eileen Neff

## Retrospection

Essay by Richard Torchia



L O C K S   G A L L E R Y

# **It is posed and it is posed.<sup>1</sup>**

Richard Torchia

*[T]he appearance of the figure rediscovers its mysterious virtue when it is accompanied by its reflection. In effect: a figure appearing does not evoke its own mystery except at the appearance of its appearance.<sup>2</sup>*

RENÉ MAGRITTE

*I want to make a case for the beauty of thought and of the mind, for the thing seen and the imagination's way with it.<sup>3</sup>*

EILEEN NEFF

*Retrospection* is an exhibition of digitally constructed photographs by Eileen Neff made between 2001 and 2008. Despite being comprised of previous works (half of which have never been presented at the gallery or exhibited in Philadelphia), the show should not be confused with a “retrospective” in the typical sense of this term.<sup>4</sup> Instead, the exhibition offers viewers an unusual opportunity to investigate a select group of existing pieces, each chosen and precisely located in the gallery by the artist to explore and advance the themes of doubling, quoting, and cross referencing that have become increasingly pertinent to her work. Here, the view backwards cannot help but be a look both back and forth, a generative form of recollection that creates as it rearranges works in the gallery space and the picturing mind of each viewer. As such, *Retrospection* becomes an unprecedented platform for exploring Neff’s belief that seeing might be closer to a form of recognition, an alertness to resemblance and the elastic, unforeseen spaces that can open up to the imagina-

tion when we attend to differences, however slight or variously manifest.

Framed by the gallery entrance and taking center stage in the project is *The Key of Dreams* (2008), a digitally constructed print comprised of representations of seven individual artworks by Neff, photographs mounted between aluminum and Plexiglas that are also installed in the gallery. The largest and most recent work in the exhibition, *The Key of Dreams*, is seen first, independent of the pictures it represents and isolated from the baroque set of pictorial relations it activates for viewers once they enter the gallery. Significantly, this composite image is the only piece bordered by a frame as well as a mat, two conventions that the artist has deliberately taken pains to avoid since she started presenting her photo-based work and installations in 1982.

*The Key of Dreams* immediately establishes a compelling equivocation: the images that constitute the work can be called

pictures of artworks by Neff as well as pictures of the world. Moreover, the images of the depicted artworks (each with their own title, date, and dimensions) are sourced from the same digital files that yielded the originals, making them less like representations or copies and more like genetic, identical twins (or clones), despite any physical differences. That is to say, *The Key of Dreams*, as a photographic artwork representing other photographic artworks as artworks, permits a deeply complex, idealized, and exacting form of replication, a mode of material quotation that can only be realized within the categorical parameters of a given medium. It is tempting here to think of Georges Seurat's *Le Poseurs* (1888) at the Barnes Foundation, which includes a faithful, full-scale representation of the right half of his own *La Grande Jatte* (1884-86), rendered at a slight angle in his studio populated by models. If *Le Poseurs* could ever be hung in the same room as *La Grande Jatte*, we might approach something analogous to what is happening in *Retrospection*, albeit without the deliberate authorial intention and radical mode of equivalence offered by *The Key of Dreams*.

The beguiling effects produced by Neff's doubling of her own artworks, what we might call self-quoting or self-appropriation, are further enabled by her characteristic use of images devoid of cues to specific time and place, subjects that serve as examples of a class of object, phenomena, or situation. In this particular case, we are offered representations of domesticated landscapes (fields, roads, parks) and interiors (three artist studios). The one abstract work depicted, *This and That* (2001), is actually a photograph of a landscape taken from a speeding train, the colored streaks of its wavy blur doubled and then turned ninety degrees on themselves to create the warp and woof of its plaid-like grid.

Drained of any narrative connotations and stripped of the pictorial buffers of mats and frames, these borderless works by

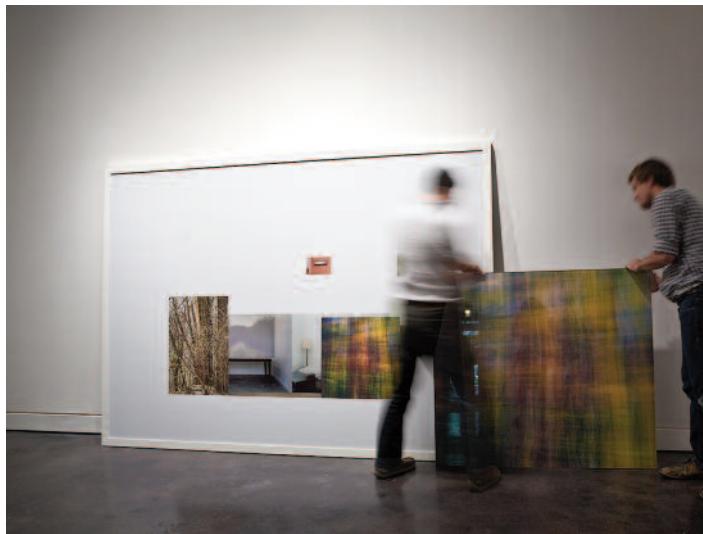
Neff are free to adhere themselves to each other as well as the various surfaces of the world with which they make contact, including the walls of the gallery. This is analogous to the way that a cutout of a forest, for example, might attach itself to a piece of furniture in Neff's earlier works from the 1990s. As such, the pieces that comprise the exhibition are ripe for the physical/sculptural compositional operations of pre-digital photo-collage that have always been at the core of this practice invested in "inverting or at least identifying the apparent conventions of seeing and picturing."<sup>5</sup> Neff has always paid close attention to what is over or under, adjacent or behind, and has applied these relationships to inform compositions that allow the viewer to experience these dynamics more vividly in the imagination (regardless if they might be possible in reality). In *Retrospection*, we witness her adding her own artworks, as well as how she sees them, to the list of what she can consider.

Floating in a spatially ambiguous field of white, the images of the seven works in *The Key of Dreams* read both as flat representations but also suggest the provisional condition of artworks we associate with installation views, artists' studios, or photographs taken to document the inventory of a storeroom. As a portrait of works standing in line waiting to be hung on the wall, while, nevertheless, also on display, the image poses a paradox that is emblematic of artworks in transition and on the move. Quietly staged and halted by Neff, these preparatory conditions (not often seen by the general public), become another subject that is extended into the site of the gallery. In this regard, *The Key of Dreams* alludes to forms of institutional critique developed by artists Michael Asher and Louise Lawler, among others, but camouflages its commentary, however playful or subversive, in a cultivated and earnest pictorial formalism.

As pictured in this composite image, Neff's artworks are momentarily robbed of their individual identity as the discrete,



Installing *The Key of Dreams*, 2008 at Locks Gallery



physical things we know them to be. Their materiality, however, is returned to them via a composition that asserts the works' condition as objects resting on the floor, propped against the wall, or each other. Printed on a continuous surface, they are both fixed in place while just as readily suggesting any number of other possible and imminent arrangements, including a reading of *The Key of Dreams* as a visual and conceptual magnet for the installation that envelops it. Exerting a kind of gravitational force on the room (either attracting or dispersing the other works on view depending on where you stand and how you look at them), the piece accounts explicitly for the presence as well as the location of all the other pictures in the exhibition. (The three works that are not specifically quoted by the composite nevertheless comment on the issues it raises, a matter addressed in further detail below.) *The Key of Dreams* thus functions as a literal key, a guide or a legend for navigating the room and inviting the viewer to explore the myriad forms of likeness and difference it sets into play.

Looking to the right of *The Key of Dreams*, for example, one sees two of the actual works it represents arranged very much like they way they are pictured. *This and That* is on the floor, leaning over the studio interior entitled *Beckett* (2001), the live shadow cast by the larger, abstract work crossing the striped sheet covering the studio bed, just as it does in the composite grouping. It is as if *The Key of Dreams* were a magical map that unfolded to the right and deposited two of the actual works it depicts in the real space of the gallery.

Photography has always been endowed with the capacity to represent the images it generates without leaving its own fingerprints and the advent of digital technology makes this increasingly, if not maddeningly so. What the viewer is asked to consider here is not so much an example of verisimilitude but a mode of representation in which real, actual things might register as depictions of themselves and vice versa. This inversion of subject/object relations initiates a form of reciprocal representation that opens up an unexpected exercise in seeing in which the dif-



Installation view of *Dickinson*, 2004

ferences between thinking and picturing are obliterated and distinctions between the works and the spaces in which they are presented are erased. In the process, the boundaries separating studio and gallery, image and object, artist and viewer also disappear.

Each of the rest of the individual works as installed in the gallery contributes to the conversation about resemblance, amplified, or augmented in some way by its particular if not idiosyncratic presentation. *Dickinson* (2004), which is displayed twice here, is a particularly telling example of this. The third studio interior in the exhibition, it proposes different versions of the same landscape, one vertical and unfocused (outside the window cropped at its left edge), the other horizontal and sharp (represented as an image of a framed "picture" hung on the wall that otherwise blocks the view depicted). This is a highly volatile and disorienting work, in part, due to its life scale. When seen in

the gallery context (as opposed to on the page), it triggers a sequence of pictorial theatrics that make the viewer acutely self-conscious of the act of looking at any picture, the presence of the wall on which this picture is hung, even the location of the room in which he or she stands. Like many of Neff's works, it is an editioned piece that would ordinarily never be presented in the company of its other numbers, let alone directly adjacent to itself. This paired presentation, licensed by the thematics of the exhibition and supported by the image's capacity for illusion, confronts the viewer as a visual conundrum, opening up the work to multiple readings that are further confounded when we return to its representation in *The Key of Dreams*.

To the right of the paired *Dickinsons* is *The Field and The Plane* (2007), another instance of the co-presence of equivalent identities engendering uncanny pictorial consequences. Comprised of a single photograph of a field that is copied and

stacked upon itself, the resulting work's two receding planes cohere to establish an abstract, illusory space (at once flat and dimensional) that can only be apprehended in the mind. Neff's ascribing two different words to the identical image not only suggests the slippage between sign and signifier that is the hallmark of the work of René Magritte but also summons the unaccountable relativism released by such deceptively straightforward duplication. Magritte's work has long been an inspiration for Neff and his title *The Key of Dreams* (which he used for several works dating from 1930), serves as a springboard for this project. Equally germane to Neff's practice are the numerous examples of this Belgian artist's work that present two images of an identical subject on the same canvas, as well as paintings representing the world as a series of vertical panels occluding each other as if they were stage flats. Works such as *The Birds I* and *The Birds II* (both 2007), along with their unorthodox presentation in the gallery, reflect these influences while taking them into territory that belongs entirely to Neff. Placed close together in the gallery's southeast corner, the right hand panel of the pair is hung so that its left edge touches the adjacent wall. This subtle gesture conceals the actual corner of the room and suggests, among other things, that the photograph of the woodlands is either being cut off by the gallery wall or in the process of slicing through it, asserting the work's dual status as both image and object.

*Narcissus* (2001), one of three works in the show not catalogued in *The Key of Dreams*, offers the exhibition's lone example of doubling by mirroring. Installed on the exact center of the wall it shares with *Birds I*, its location reiterates the vertical spine that bisects this perfectly symmetrical image. The work holds fast to its singular position on the wall as if the two *Birds* were not there, likewise confirming its independence from the composite work.

*Winter (The Couple)* and *Summer (The Couple)*, both 2007, are also absent from *The Key of Dreams*. Placed opposite the composite on either side of the gallery entrance, they are, ostensibly, seen last and conclude the exhibition. Each of the two photographs was taken from the exact same location approximately six months apart and record what Neff has referred to as her readymades — a small red cedar embraced by a large walnut tree that she discovered in a field in southern New Jersey. The circumstance of these embracing trees, as given, is a startling anomaly in and of itself that might have gone unnoticed by Neff had her years of working with collage and her interest in doubling not attuned her to recognize this symbiotic pair. What is equally striking, however, is the mutual illumination the two photographs offer to each other. The cedar's green upholstery, conspicuous in the winter view, becomes camouflaged by the walnut's dense canopy in the summer version. The two representations are so dissimilar that an act of the imagination is required to ascertain that their subjects are the same. In the end, both images' status as the only straight (unaltered) photographs in the exhibition support the natural form of doubling they demonstrate. In their quiet defiance, the two *Couples* confirm that the origins of Neff's artistic vision, beyond her ongoing engagement with the poetics of seeing and picturing, remain rooted in the world.

*Richard Torchia is the director of Arcadia University Art Gallery (Glenside, Pennsylvania), a position he has held since 1997. In addition to independent curatorial, writing, and teaching efforts, he maintains an artistic practice based on the optics of the live image.*

Notes:

1. This sentence is the first line of Wallace Stevens' poem "Add This to Rhetoric", first published in *Parts of a World* (1942). It is followed by the line "But in nature it merely grows." (Thanks go to Eileen Neff for suggesting this title.)
2. Suzie Gablik, *Magritte*, (London: Thames and Hudson, 1970), p. 141.
3. Eileen Neff and Patrick T. Murphy, "A Conversation," *Eileen Neff: between us*, (Institute of Contemporary Art, University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia; Royal Hibernian Academy, Dublin), p. 31.
4. Retrospectives are not usually the purview of commercial spaces such as Locks Gallery. It also important to mention that in 2007 the Institute of Contemporary Art, University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia presented a survey of Neff's work spanning 1990 to 2007, including several works presented in this exhibition. The work *The Key of Dreams* (2008), around which *Retrospection* is conceived, was first exhibited in at Silverstein/20, New York City, in 2008.
5. Eileen Neff and Patrick T. Murphy, p. 26.