

InVisible:
Art at the
Edge of
Perception

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Amidst a world saturated with a relentless stream of images and stimuli, moments of visual quiet can take on unexpected power. *InVisible: Art at the Edge of Perception* features works by artists who exploit such instances and explore the line between visibility and invisibility. In so doing, they invite viewers to participate in a deeper act of looking.

The exhibition examines the demands and subtleties of the viewing experience and includes works that test the limits of perception. Drawing attention to what is often unnoticed at first glance, many of the works heighten our awareness of inconspicuous details of the artists' materials or those of mundane objects. Others focus on the spaces in our surroundings that are often overlooked. Some of the works, pushed to the edge of legibility, disappear into the gallery space itself and diminish the distinction between medium and ground. Several artists manipulate ephemeral phenomena, harnessing the potential of light and shadow, while still others use strategies of erasure and find the "something" in what might be otherwise described as "nothing."

InVisible brings together a small selection of international artists working in a variety of mediums, and features Uta Barth, Christian Capurro, Joanne Lefrak, Janet Passehl, Jaime Pitarch, and Karin Sander.

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Organized by Katia Zavistovski, the exhibition is on view at MASS MoCA from February through June 2010.

MASS MoCA

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Uta Barth

b. 1958 in Berlin
Lives and works in Los Angeles



Throughout her career, photographer Uta Barth has focused her lens on ephemeral moments, subtle details, and passing glimpses of light and shadow. Eschewing conventional subject matter and central compositional elements in favor of images resonant of emptiness, her work inverts the traditional distinction of foreground and background, and instead highlights the overlooked backdrop—the unoccupied spaces of our everyday lives.

Works such as *Sundial (07.14)* draw attention to the incidents that lie at the periphery of perception. Photographed over a period of several months, the pictures that make up the *Sundial* series chart the effects of the changing qualities of sunlight as it moves across floors and walls of the artist's home at different times of the year. Barth took many of these photographs at dusk, when the ambient interior light was fading and the setting sun outside projected blazing pools of light across the walls in her living room. Though the photographs don't focus on anything in particular, they quietly evoke a sense of movement and the passing of time.

Barth also creates pictures that represent the retinal afterimage that appears upon closing one's eyes after staring at a brightly lit object or scene. Emphasizing the physicality of vision, the second panel of *Sundial (07.14)*—resembling a photographic negative—is expressive of this visual phenomenon. With *Sundial (07.14)* Barth captures a still moment that is reminiscent of what we might see when our eyes are at rest. The artist has said, "The question for me is how can I make you aware of your own activity of looking, instead of losing your attention to thoughts about what it is that you are looking at." The subject of Barth's photographs is, in essence, the act of looking itself, bringing attention to that which is so familiar that it has become invisible.

Sundial (07.14), 2007. Mounted color photographs. 4 panels, each panel: 30 × 37½ in.; Overall dimensions: 30 × 153 in. Edition of 6; 2 AP's. Private collection.

IMAGE COURTESY OF THE ARTIST AND TANYA BONAKDAR GALLERY, NEW YORK

Christian Capurro

b. 1968 in Dampier, Australia
Lives and works in Melbourne



“Two magazine pages come together face to face, one relatively white and empty—the ‘host’ sheet —, the other with more printed bodies and goods to give up under the hand-pressure of erasing the pages’ reverse sides. Stain-like forms and silhouettes are imprinted, transferred from the face of one page onto the other. The host sheet is kept, the other discarded. Lastly, the original contents of the kept sheet are whited-out: only that and the image transfer remain — a COMPRESS.” — Christian Capurro

Focusing on the very act and process of making art as much as the ideas behind it, Christian Capurro’s practice includes photography, drawing, and site-specific installation. Since 2001, the artist has been making *Compress*, a series of works on paper. *Compress* is created through the pressure of erasing pictures from the pages of magazines. The artist lays one page on top of another and, by erasing the top page, imprints images onto the bottom one. This results in ethereal traces of the artist’s physical gesture and of the initial image’s form. Capurro at times erases illustrations completely, or leaves parts of them untouched. Rather than producing a rough, abraded surface, as would be the case if erasing a toothier, more fibrous paper, here the semi-reflective sheen of the glossy magazine pages remains intact. The existing shapes, figures, and text on the receiving page are then painted over with correction fluid, a means

of literally “whiting-out” the image.

The notion of “un-making” an image at work here is particularly meaningful in a culture increasingly obsessed with image — particularly that of the body — as commodity.

Using pictures from fashion, lifestyle, and pornographic magazines, Capurro executes a second act of erasing. The artist rubs out bodies and landscapes that have already been airbrushed and manipulated, their blemishes and imperfections now entirely stripped away.

In this series, Capurro also uses the act of erasing as a generative, creative process. Delicate, intricate, and haunting, the six *Compress* works included in *InVisible* present the viewer with a dense, if visually spare, layering of ghostly images. The works on paper inhabit a multifaceted spatial and temporal presence, a palimpsest of past and present forms.

Compress series, 2006–2008. Ink, correction fluid, magazine pages with erasure, and pins. Each approximately 8½ × 11 in. Courtesy of the artist.

IMAGES COURTESY OF THE ARTIST

Joanne Lefrak

b. 1977 in Long Branch, New Jersey
Lives and works in Placitas, New Mexico



Joanne Lefrak creates surprisingly detailed “drawings” using light and shadow. Working with paper, plastic, and Plexiglas, she draws using processes of subtraction and elimination — cutting, burning, and scratching into the surfaces of these materials. The artist’s subject matter, derived from her own photographs, addresses the temporal nature of existence and the cyclical processes of death, decay, and regeneration. In previous work, Lefrak has depicted endangered plant species, burned forests, and ghost towns in various states of dilapidation. She has also engaged emotionally charged historic events. For example, *Flanders Field* (2006), an immersive environment of red Rubylith suspended from the ceiling, references John McCrae’s 1915 poem which describes a field of poppies growing around graves of fallen WWI soldiers.

In two new works created for the exhibition at MASS MoCA, *Trinity Site (Ground Zero)* and *Trinity Site (at the instrumentation bunker)*, light passing through etched Plexiglas sheets casts shadows onto the gallery wall. The lines incised into the Plexiglas are barely visible, and create wraith-like silhouettes. However, these images of a barren — yet historically loaded — desert landscape are crisp, and the shadow’s gradations of gray convey depth and space in almost photographic detail.

The inspiration for these works was the site of the first atomic bomb test in 1945, conducted on the White Sands Missile Range in southern New Mexico. Coincidentally, the artist discovered that the Sprague Electric Company, the previous tenant of the factory complex that now houses MASS MoCA, manufactured electrical components used to produce the bomb at the Los Alamos National Laboratory. Like many of Lefrak’s works, which conflate absence and presence, foreground and background, the *Trinity* series also mingles past and present, linking the history of her current home state — one which has become shadowy in our minds — with that of the exhibition site.

↑ *Trinity Site (Ground Zero)*, 2009. Scratched Plexiglas, archival ink, and shadow. 34 × 26 in. Courtesy of the artist.

Trinity Site (at the instrumentation bunker), 2010. Scratched Plexiglas and shadow. 42 × 54 in. Courtesy of the artist.

PHOTO: ERIC SWANSON

Janet Passehl

b. 1959 in Braintree, Massachusetts
Lives and works in Essex, Connecticut



Poet and visual artist Janet Passehl creates subtle sculptures out of swaths of cloth. Preoccupied with arrangement and visual balance, the artist employs an intuitive, minimalist approach to art-making through her use of a distilled palette and simple shapes and lines.

In her *Grain* series, two pieces of which are exhibited in *InVisible* (*Untitled*, 2001 and *Untitled*, 2003), Passehl cuts her fabric into geometric shapes, discretely stains it with tea, folds it into specific configurations, and then carefully irons it to form deliberate creases. The lack of any representational imagery draws the viewer's attention to the inconspicuous characteristics of the texture and weave of the raw material — the cloth itself is the subject of the work. Frayed or unevenly cut edges, which at first seem to be imperfections in the fabric, are in fact precise visual traces of Passehl's material manipulations. Appearing like veins of marble or wisps of smoke, the tea stains are painterly and bear traces of the artist's hand. The ironed folds and delicate working of color and stains take the place of the drawn line,

creating, as the artist has said, “a mark that isn't a mark.”

Accompanying the two *Untitled* pieces is *Moonlight*, a new sculpture which grew out of the *Grain* series. Here the cloth is left pristine, and Passehl has introduced color into the work — a spotless white length of fabric folded several times lays nestled in a piece of folded navy cloth. There is a visual push-and-pull in the juxtaposition of the two colors, an optical illusion in which the bright white seems to float above the expanse of dark blue.

Untitled, 2001. Ironed cloth, tea. $\frac{1}{16} \times 22\frac{1}{2} \times 22\frac{1}{4}$ in.
Courtesy of the artist.

Untitled, 2003. Ironed cloth, tea. $\frac{1}{16} \times 11 \times 5\frac{1}{2}$ in.
Courtesy of the artist.

↑ *Moonlight*, 2009. Ironed cloth. $\frac{3}{8} \times 36\frac{1}{2} \times 21\frac{1}{2}$ in.
Courtesy of the artist.

PHOTO: CHRISTOPHER PASSEHL

Jaime Pitarch

b. 1963 in Barcelona
Lives and works in Barcelona



Working in many modes, including sculpture, drawing, photography, video, and installation, Jaime Pitarch revels in taking apart familiar objects and materials and reassembling them to create new meanings. Everyday items such as chairs, rulers, and cocktail umbrellas are manipulated and re-presented. Resulting in both droll and poignant reconfigurations of the original, Pitarch has described his work as “a phenomenal taxonomy of the absurd.”

Preliminary Drawings for Show, Erased, is a sketchbook in which all of the drawings and text have been erased. The resulting rubber eraser fragments are compressed and reconstituted into a whole rectangular eraser. The work embodies the artist's transformation of materials and ideas through destruction and reconstruction. Calling attention to the crucial, yet unseen part of the drawing process, in this work the act of erasure becomes the art object itself.

In addition to Pitarch's erased sketchbook, *InVisible* features an in situ installation titled *106 Layers*. Created by applying 106 layers of latex paint directly onto the museum's wall,

the work took over two weeks of manual labor by the artist to make. Devoid of any narrative elements, *106 Layers* is essentially invisible, inseparable from — and disappearing into — its surroundings.

This work, like others in the exhibition, interacts with the architectural space in which it exists. Humorously referencing the repetitive process of painting and re-painting the gallery walls with each new exhibition, *106 Layers* acknowledges the almost imperceptible physical transformation of the museum, which slowly becomes smaller and smaller over time with each new layer of paint. At MASS MoCA, for example, there are approximately 38 coats of regular paint on the gallery walls underneath the 106 added by Pitarch.

↑ *Preliminary Drawings for Show, Erased*, 2006. Erased notebook and compressed rubber eraser fragments. Notebook: 8 × 6 in., Eraser: 3½ × 1 in. Collection of Gérard Mavalais and François Michel.

106 Layers, 2010. 106 layers of latex paint on wall. 48 × 72 in.
Courtesy of the artist and Spencer Brownstone Gallery, New York.

IMAGE COURTESY OF THE ARTIST AND SPENCER BROWNSTONE GALLERY, NEW YORK

Karin Sander

b. 1957 in Bensberg, Germany
Lives and works in Berlin



At first look, the entry gallery where Karin Sander's work is installed may appear empty. Except for minimal signage, the walls are bare, and traditional artwork, pedestals, and objects of any kind are absent. After closer inspection, however, a shiny square in the center of the wall to the left of the glass entrance doors becomes visible. The smooth texture of this glossy white plane stands out against the rougher, matte wall surrounding it. Capturing nuanced changes in light, Sander's *Wallpiece* reflects indistinct and vaporous impressions of the gallery space in its mirror-like surface. The resulting images are ethereal apparitions that change as the viewer moves through the space.

Sander has been creating her polished wall pieces since 1986. The artist believes that a work of art should simultaneously reveal and conceal, and is as preoccupied with the process of making as the end result. Her wall pieces — though nearly immaterial and verging on invisibility — are extremely labor-intensive. The wall piece at MASS MoCA is the result of six days of physically demanding work.

It was created by repeatedly sanding layers of emulsion paint with increasingly finer grades of sandpaper. Polished to a liquid sheen, the finished section of wall resembles lacquer or porcelain.

Through her architectural interventions, Sander considers the relationship between subject, object, and environment, challenging preconceived notions about how a work of art functions in a gallery space and the individual experience of viewing. Becoming an active participant in bringing the work to life, the viewer's own perspective and position in relation to the work determine its appearance. *Wallpiece* dissolves into the rest of the wall, materializes as a brilliantly glassy surface, and suggests depth, seemingly expanding beyond the confines of the museum's walls.

Wallpiece, 2010. Polished emulsion paint on wall. 48 × 48 in.
Courtesy of the artist and D'Amelio Terras Gallery, New York.

WALLPIECE, KUNSTMUSEUM BONN, GERMANY, 1996.
IMAGE COURTESY OF THE ARTIST.