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Landscapes of the Mind: Metaphor, Archetype, and Symbol: 1971-2012

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YWCA Women's Art Gallery

By Jonathan Kamholtz

In Jane Alden Stevens's "Windbreak Netting," a mesh curtain hangs between us and the apples growing on a tree in Aomori Prefecture, Japan. The curtain protects the apples, but also serves to keep us at a distance, like a theater scrim. It also serves to remind us that in Stevens's work, we see and experience nature through a filter of human intention and intervention. Stevens wants us to understand that Japanese apple-growing is labor intensive, and though she does not really ask us to get to know the laborers who appear, if at all, as blurred, partly-visible figures, their work is to be seen everywhere. Each developing apple is covered with a red bag which is covered with a second silver bag. The best fruits are stenciled in red before they are picked. The harvest is repeatedly culled, making it clear that what a Japanese consumer has a chance to purchase as an apple represents a series of human judgments about what the best apple might look like, and, indeed, what an apple is.

In "Red Inner Bag #1," the bags hang from the fruits like bright red stylized flowers. In "Ripening," the growing apples are bursting through the red bags, the silver outer bags having fallen away around them and scattered on the ground like autumn leaves. (In other pictures, those bags will be burned.) The fruit is starting to blush red, though they may never become quite so bright and saturated as the bags. Stevens's work belongs to the tradition that notes that the nature we experience is not carefree, but a world in which humans have worked; in return, nature gives to the human world a capacity to become like nature itself, as the apples allow their growers to make these richly red flowers. In "Bagged Apple #1," an apple is tucked inside its envelope-shaped bag. Backlit and almost a ghostly presence, the apple is small but growing, confined by the bag but of uncertain shape and size, an image that could be part of an ultrasound examination or a frame from Alien. It is a reminder that we are dealing with sex and birth, powerful forces indeed.

The human element is, literally, most sharply in focus in "Imperfect Apple," a close-up of an apple of uncommonly beautiful color held up to the camera in a worker's hand. Perhaps it was too small, or shaped, on closer examination, too much like a plum. The picture is a human judgment made tangible. Who knows? Perhaps in a few years, we'll all be clamoring for small but delectable plum-apples.

Stevens's photographs also remind us of the complex networks of ways that photographs communicate with their viewers. Some, but not all, are conventionally beautiful; some, but not all, exemplify the crispness that contemporary technology allows the photographer to capture; some, but not all, could have been drawn from a National Geographic documentary about the values and rituals of other cultures. The photographs of Judi Parks, who also curated this strong and significant show, are deeply interested in the porous boundaries of photography's documentary capabilities. Though her work seems deeply rooted in the look of black and white street photography which tends to document circumstance and the individual, Parks has written about how individuals, especially those outliers who have been apparently disowned by mainstream society, come to constitute timeless archetypes. In Parks's photographs, there are no clean or tidy fingernails in sight; caked with dirt, they stand for a type of life lived, and it is the work of other photographers to explore how they got that way. I am not sure if Parks wants us to think that life has exposed their archetypal nature and the photographer faithfully captured it, or that the photographer sees through the mask of the everyday and uses photography to reveal what might otherwise pass unseen.