

REPORT

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Jane Alden Stevens at Weston Art Gallery

The Multiple Temporalities of Jane Alden Stevens' *The Thread In The River*

By C.M. Turner



Twelve Summers, 2016, video still. Courtesy of the artist

Stevens presents twenty years' worth of posed self-portraiture in the form of blown-up black and white contact sheets of her original negatives. Twenty-seven individual, forty by nine inch photographic strips from *The Long Arc*, installed over thirty feet of wall space, produce an alluring visual rhythm that downplays the tinge of pastiche exhibitionism inherent in the work. By privileging formalism and installation technique in the presentation of *The Long Arc*, Stevens pulls the viewer's focus away from the individual body on display, shifting personal documentation into a powerful illustration of chronological progression.

Stevens brings forth a similar sentiment in *Twelve Summers, 1999 – 2014*, a two minute, thirty-two second video which features the artist's children posed at the same location, year after year, as they move from adolescence to adulthood. As one image dissolves into the next in a poignant, exaggerated time-lapse, Stevens' twins age before the viewer's eyes, almost unperceptively at first, then exponentially, only to revert back to their younger selves as the video ends and begins anew in looping circulation. The soft light and high contrast of Stevens' black and white portraits project an eerie feeling as they oscillate and dissolve in superimposition, creating a dream-like ambiance of simultaneous growth and regression.

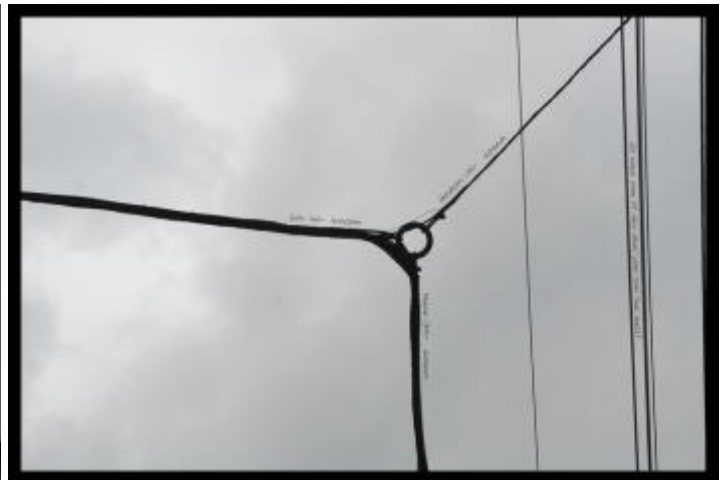
In February, *The Thread in the River: Photographs by Jane Alden Stevens* opened at the Alice F. and Harris K. Weston Art Gallery in Cincinnati, Ohio. Consisting of eighty-four individual archival pigment prints, from four photographic series, plus two video pieces, the latest solo exhibition by venerable image-maker Stevens traces the evolution of her family's expansion and development over the past four decades. Far from being an insular meditation on the artist's familial network, *The Thread in the River* invites viewers to examine not only relationships between relatives, but perhaps more profoundly, our relative relationships with the all-encompassing phenomenon of time.

Serving as an unofficial introduction to *The Thread in the River*, twelve black and white prints from *The Primitive Streak* series (1992 – 1999) are hung on a fourteen-foot long wall to the left of the gallery's entrance, welcoming viewers with scenes of the unencumbered play of youth. Focusing on Stevens' nieces and nephew, whom she photographed throughout their childhood summers on a farm in Vermont, *The Primitive Streak* draws parallels to Sally Mann's work collected in *Immediate Family* (1992). But where Mann's images are often imbued with an aura of danger or wistful melancholy, hinting at an impending future that will undoubtedly alter her subjects, Stevens' work in *The Primitive Streak* communicates a different kind of energy. Stripped of the brooding poses acknowledging the inevitable march of time, the photographs of *The Primitive Streak* offer more than a candid slice of rural adolescence, evoking an immediacy forever distilled in sixteen by twenty-six inch frames. Here, Stevens has captured the vitality and imagination of children living in the moment, where greenhouses become jungle gyms, hanging bed sheets become performance backdrops, and Band-Aids become war paint.

While *The Primitive Streak* offers playfully striking photos arranged in a tight grid, the most arresting body of images in *The Thread in the River* deals directly with Stevens' own body. Begun in 1995, the ongoing series *The Long Arc* charts the transformation of the artist's physical self through her pregnancy with twins, continuing the series with documentation of her postpartum body every year on the children's birthday. In a confrontation of the passing of time,



Installation view of *The Primitive Streak Series*, 1992-99, archival pigment prints. Image Tony Walsh/Weston Art Gallery



The Wind Telephone Series (At What Time Does Your Soul Feel Best), 2012 - Ongoing. Image courtesy of the artist

Building off interplay between text and image, *The Wind Telephone* series (2013 – Ongoing) seeks to answer questions of individual and group identity, exploring connectivity across generational and geographic lines. Employing a minimalist economy in composition and text, each of the thirteen by twenty inch, black and white pigment prints in *The Wind Telephone* features an intersection of telephone wires against a backdrop of open sky. Handwritten text within the compositions reveals the truncated, numeric answers to probing existential questions that Stevens asked members of her family. The works are titled with one of the questions posed to the multi-generational group, spanning the emotional spectrum from *How Many People Do You Wish You Had Never Met*, to *At What Time of Day Does Your Soul Feel Best*. The nine images in the series are installed in a tight grid along the shortest wall in the gallery, lending a required intimacy to the viewing experience of *The Wind Telephone*.



Installation view of *The Thread in the River* at The Weston Gallery. Image Tony Walsh/Weston Art Gallery

Taken as a whole, *The Thread in the River* works to translate Stevens' personal journey of family growth and development to the broader experience of bodies and minds changing with the passage of time. This is not a nostalgia-fueled trip through an aestheticized family photo album, but multiple, nuanced ruminations on being and becoming. Here, Stevens has stretched time, compressed it, forced it to stand still, and urged it to move forward. In doing so, she has made the viewer keenly aware of our own interpersonal relationships, and of life lived in stages, reminding us that to cultivate a rich and connected life is to invest our time thoroughly and thoughtfully.