



LEIGH MERRILL  
Garden of Artificial Sugar

23 September 2023 - 13 January 2024

Patrick Kelly, Old Jail Art Center Director and Curator,  
interview with artist Leigh Merrill (August 2023)

PK: Let's first begin by informing readers about your creative practice. Without getting too technical, can you describe the process(es) that you employ to complete a work?

LM: My practice explores two core concerns—perception and our impact on place. Over the past fifteen years, I have investigated these interests through meticulously pieced-together digital collages. I begin by making photographs and video source material from various locations. In the context of this exhibition, I mostly gathered source material from forests, gardens, and parks. This collection of source photographs (upwards of 30,000 source images made for the works in this exhibition) becomes the foundation for the collages. Then, the process shifts to my studio, where I sort through these digital files and build my work in Photoshop. The digital collaging process has a lot of similarities to a physical collaging process. Working in Photoshop, I delicately trace around the edge of an element to cut it out from the original photo and place it into a new composition. Each final piece can include somewhere between ten source photographs and up to a hundred or more. In addition to collaging, there is a significant amount of digital manipulation of the individual elements within the collage—such as shape, color, light, and shadow—to create the final piece. Some collages are more connected to reality, and others, in contrast, have a more reductive approach, distorting elements and abstracting the world into fields of color. In the newest work, I'm incorporating physical collage as well. I print color



or texture on a thin rice paper, then cut out the forms by hand and with a mechanical cutter. The physical collaging is intentionally subtle—from a distance, the work appears like a flat print—as one gets closer, elements resting slightly above the surface of the print become visible. These elements are often leaves or small, colorful shapes. The different processes I use push and pull at one another, providing space to challenge our perceptions and consider how we construct and impact the world around us.

PK: When I first saw your work you were using the same process but creating urban environments that were completely void of nature. What caused the shift?

LM: Over the past five years, the natural environment has become more significant in my work. After years of examining architecture, I wanted to push in a new direction while still considering how we impact the world around us. I felt a pull to explore these landscapes in my practice. Our built environments are forged through a complex web of personal and cultural desires and expectations. However, just as our homes and buildings pull from various historical and contemporary visual styles and aesthetics, our front yards and gardens demonstrate a similar variety to display beauty and cultural values. Throughout this exhibition, the work mostly depicts gardens and forests, considering not only areas we impact individually, but larger, more vast natural spaces we impact on a grander scale. I focused on trees and forests when I started shifting towards the environment. It seemed important to look towards these spaces before wildfires, invasive pests, and other human activity further compromised them. I wanted to consider the forest in the same manner as our built environment; our actions, conscious or not, are shaping those places, too. Beyond environmental concerns, I am also interested in the idealization of place and how our imagination impacts notions of place. I grew up in New Mexico, and although there are some gorgeous forests in the state, my immediate landscape was not forested. My earliest experiences of forests were introductions through books and media. For example, I first learned about the California Redwoods through the film *Star Wars: Return of the Jedi* as a child. Trees so otherworldly and spectacular, they could be on an extraterrestrial planet! I am interested in our perceptions and how cultural references can shape how we might feel or think about a place without ever knowing it. As a result, the forests I create in my collages are much more idealized than an actual forest and often take the shape of a highly synthetic space, stage set, or diorama. These controlled environments speak to these open spaces' dwindling size and cultural construct.

PK: I'll come back to that reply. I cringe slightly asking, but why no people or animals in your images? I know the answer I'd provide; I'm interested in yours.

LM: People and animals are purposefully missing in places where we might expect to see them (a few insects do show up). All the spaces I create reflect human actions; artifacts of human presence abound even without the people. I'm not interested in the story of an individual but a broader, more collective story about a place. I find joy in the color palettes and compositions, and the lack of individuals creates a subtle undercurrent of loss, longing, or deterioration. The absence of humans and animals provides a space to contemplate loss, initiating an emotional tension that ranges from mild unease to apocalyptic. Perhaps we can't or don't exist in these places—or these environments are no longer inhabitable.



PK: "Unease to apocalyptic" is a fantastic way to describe the way the urban spaces in your previous body of work—and to a degree, the newer works—make me feel. I was thinking that the interjection of human forms forces a narrative centered on the human subjects rather than the environs. I just finished reading *The Road* by Cormac McCarthy so unease and apocalyptic are fresh on my mind. Are there books, movies, or works of art that inform or influence your past or current work?

LM: Although it may seem like an unlikely pair, the deadpan photographers associated with New Topographics and painters associated with Mannerism have equally influenced my work. I am intrigued by how both manipulate the visual experience of realism or reality differently—the perception of a perfected observation within deadpan photography and the purposefully affected lines within Mannerism. If the straightforwardness of a Hilla and Bernd Becher photographic grid was combined with the exaggerated lines and color palette of a Mannerist painting (say, the *Madonna with the Long Neck* by Parmigianino), I hope my work would reside somewhere in that space. The unnatural and the seemingly obvious.

In terms of books, writings by Jean Baudrillard have been of interest. My copy of his book, *America*, has a lot of earmarked pages. The Jorge Luis Borges short story "On Exactitude in Science" is also a favorite.

PK: I can see all those in your work. I think the vast majority of people think a visual artist's inspiration derives from a void rather than layers and layers of knowledge and inspiration.

Finally, do you already have an inkling of what's next in your work or will you continue to investigate the manipulated landscapes?

LM: Not sure! But I know that the newest works in the exhibition will be the starting place. My work has always been fictional, even when it might pass as a document of reality. In past work, the digital collaging has been so seamless that in most instances, if someone was unfamiliar with my practice, one of the first questions was often, "Where is this place?". It is sort of like my work has been a litmus test for our belief in photography and our desire—or willingness—to believe in its connection to truth and objectivity, even when we know it doesn't. My newest work is just as fictional, but the manipulation is not hidden; it is at the forefront. I know that will continue to impact future work. When I start creating, there is always a delicate balance between researching ideas and allowing myself to respond visually and emotionally to the subject matter. Because of this, I never know how the work will manifest. And I love the surprise of not knowing.





**Image Credits:**

(cover)

Leigh Merrill, Grove, 2023, archival pigment print and collage on Hahnemühle watercolor paper, 34.5 x 43.5 in.

(inside)

Leigh Merrill, Forest (east - west), 2022, archival pigment print on Hahnemühle baryta paper 39 x 49 in.

Leigh Merrill, Double Pine, 2023, archival pigment print on Hahnemühle watercolor paper, 34.5 x 34.5 in.

(back)

Leigh Merrill, Forest Scan (Cypress), 2022, archival pigment print on Hahnemühle baryta paper 39 x 49 inches.

Leigh Merrill, Lost Pine, 2023, archival pigment print on Hahnemühle watercolor paper, 34.5 x 34.5 in.

All works courtesy of the artist and Lilliana Bloch Gallery, Dallas, TX. Images courtesy of Leigh Merrill.

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