

BECCA ALBEE

at 356 S. Mission Rd., Los Angeles

Brica Wilcox

The squat basement of 356 S. Mission Road shows the building's guts; pipes crisscross the ceiling, massive columns segment the space. The symbolic interpretation of a basement as the unconscious seems appropriate. Near the bottom of the stairs, a grouping of four Himalayan salt lamps cast a soft, pinkish light on the studs of a structure in the center of the room. Provisional, like theater flats tacked together, the exterior feels like a backstage. A rigid beam of light shoots from the doorway of this room-within-a-room and projects onto locked doors, compelling you toward the light's source: cyan, magenta, and yellow beckoning from a machine. Inside, the walls are finished, and painted with three distinct tonal stripes, running darkest to lightest from floor to ceiling. Thirteen framed photographs hang throughout. The air in the room is dense, weighted by some subtle scent.¹ Initially, I thought I'd landed in an experiment conducted by someone unversed in objectivity or in isolating variables. Pushing against the standards of vision, a grey card—photography's barometer for color—is washed with shades, intensities, and combinations of the photographic standard set, C, M, and Y, masking the grey. Simply put, the show requests another approach, a realignment with what we might see through eye, brain, and body. Shrewd, but also awkward, the conspicuous multi-sensory chamber downplays the preeminence of the visual and opens up a delicate contingent space where consideration of bodied imaging and imagining might take place.

A large circular light fixture, fitted with colored gels, squeals a belabored mechanical whir as it spins. What from outside the doorway seem like cyan, magenta, and yellow glints of light are in fact swaths that pour steadily onto the walls and photographs. The striped wall painting and lighting fixture derive from Albee's research on artist and color theorist Hilaire Hiler's *Prismatarium*, a WPA project in San Francisco.² Hiler painted his *Prismatarium* in a room in the Aquatic Park Bathhouse; breaking a greyscale down the walls and suspending a massive color wheel from the ceiling—decor based on his work in color theory. Distinct from more prominent color theories at the time, a psychology of color and human perception were central to Hiler's approach. As built, the space was the ladies' lounge. Albee researched numerous other color systems and therapies.³ Yet what appears in the show comes off as idiosyncratic, intuitive, and personal. A photograph of a book cover, *Radical Feminist Therapy*, BB (all works 2015), is striking. Nearby two pairs of photographs face off: *Prismatarium Warm*, HH and *Draping Warm*, CMB opposite *Prismatarium Cool*, HH and *Draping Cool*, CMB. These four photos look abstract—blocks and slivers of color that transform, recede, emerge, and reach unwieldy vividness under the spinning light—at times even seeming to vibrate. Willingness to engage in these phenomena is fundamental to the work.⁴

The titles operate partially in code. To understand what is being compared or

collapsed is the reward of decoding, but the titles also act as another layer highlighting the contingency and mutability between viewer and viewed. A classic text and image dialectic, well trodden in the discourse of photography, is just one example of the many latent issues of the image Albee provokes anew and sets alight in this show. Draping, a fad in the eighties, used large swatches of fabric as a guide to determine a woman's "season" and then suggested their "best colors" based on mimicking nature. Popularized by the *Color Me Beautiful* books and videos, the idea promotes both blending in and becoming a spectacle. (I think, like me, Albee is an autumn.)

More women arrive via three portraits that are in fact photographs of condition reports of Man Ray's photos of three women: *Romaine, MR*; *Eyre, MR*; and *Gertrude, MR*. All Man Ray photographs made in the 1920s, in Albee's versions each sits on a split color background, but shows the small scribbles and color-coded numbers indicating where the photographs were damaged or aged. Each tint of light cast by the rotating lamp revealed or concealed these notations, playfully making invisible what was already separated from its original meaning and pushing it towards ornament.

All the scrutiny on the conditions of looking recalls Christopher Williams's recent MoMA exhibition *The Production Line of Happiness*. Its installation drew the viewer's attention to the museum's frameworks via gaps between the temporary and permanent walls where they would usually be attached, providing a vantage point from which to watch other museum visitors move their faces towards

the art. Works hung uncustomarily low; previous exhibitions' walls were shipped in to join the ones made for MoMA. The images themselves, of course, offered a heady synthetic product on a crisp and sophisticated photographic platter. Albee's *Grey Card* and *Aura Soma Equilibrium* remind me of Williams in their employment of the conventions of commercial photography. Albee, however, employs more humor in her approach. In *Grey Card*, a hand gently holds a grey card, but it is draped with a small dark cloth, a lens cleaning cloth perhaps, as if the subject were having their color analyzed a la draping. Where Williams veers toward deconstruction, Albee's photographs *in situ* operate as transformative. The friction between the static and the durational highlights that meaning is constantly in production. Exiting the lighted chamber, my skin registers the afterglow of the salt lamps' pink light.

Notes:

- 1 *Albee worked with the Institute for Art and Olfaction in Los Angeles to generate a scent for the show which was regularly replenished through the run of the exhibition and emanated from a one corner of the room.*
- 2 *The chandelier in the Prismatarium is a static light, the version Albee made came from plans for a three-color light that it seems was never completed. See Becca Albee in conversation with Matt Wolf, <http://356mission.tumblr.com/post/110928284875/becca-albee-in-conversation-with-matt-wolf>.*
- 3 *This list appeared in barely legible text on the show invitation: color counseling aura soma psychromatism radical feminist therapy color analysis chromotherapy aura photography color me beautiful chakra color therapy healing light therapy color matching crystal healing personal color seasonal color analysis self help groups color psychology.*
- 4 *Particularly because of the name and location, I often thought of San Francisco's science museum, the Exploratorium while working on this piece. I visited many times as a kid and first experienced the wonder and analytical counterpoints of all kinds of visual phenomena. The monochromatic vision under sodium vapor lights, the three-color light and shadow wall, and opportunity to dissect a cow's eye remain vivid memories.*

