

CRISTIN TIERNEY
IMAGE WORLD

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“My Poor Men Who Died So Patiently”

Posted by N. Brokaw at 9:37 AM
<http://nbrokaw.blogspot.com/>

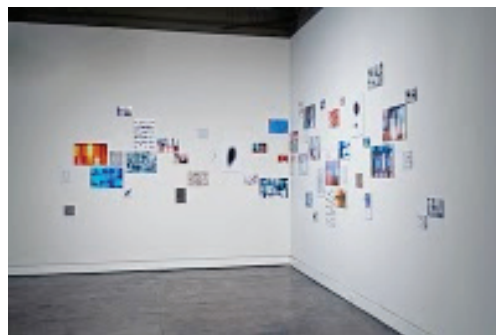


In a current exhibition at Locks Gallery in Philadelphia, video artist Peter Campus dips his curatorial toe into the brave new world of digital media. In the show he's put together – called alterations – Campus riffs on different ways that artists are using digital media to reflect on its impact on the culture.

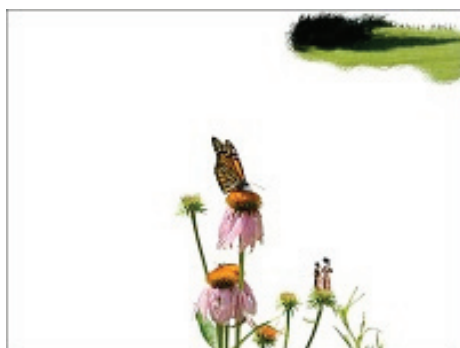
variety with assorted animals seemingly dropping from the skies.

Jason Varone, whose dystopic Not with a Whimper, but a Bang (a kind of mural-cum-video-projection) combines a news feed of the End Times

Nayda Collazo-Llorens, in her multi-media, two-wall, non-linear piece called Aposiopesis, meditates on the complex systems of thought and communication. Aposiopesis, literally “a full silence,” is a sudden breaking off of a sentence, mid-thought, as though the speaker is unwilling or unable to continue – leaving the conclusion to the listener's imagination. It's a great title for an enigmatic piece.



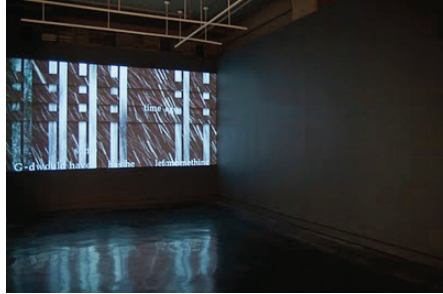
Also enigmatic are Kathleen Graves's Longing for Certain Things digital prints. With a little internet research, I find the series described as a digital study of “technology and human development” as they played out in the Middle Ages and the present day.



Campus's own contribution – Inflections: changes in light and colour around Ponquogue Bay – is lovely. His two high-definition multi-screen videos (above) depict modest landscapes from near the artist's home in upstate New York. The original footage has been processed, though – Campus won't say how – to yield a final product that suggests a Cezanne landscape unfolding in time.

IMAGINE

But the piece that spoke most powerfully to me was Beryl Korot's Florence. In this somber homage to the Victorian reformer and nurse Florence Nightingale, words – selected from Nightingale's letters – fall slowly down the video screen against a background woven from footage of waterfalls, boiling water, and



snowstorms.

To read what Nightingale has to say, you have to sit through the entire unfolding of the video. The text falls slowly, silently – like snow – to form an illegible mound, with words overlapping words. Korot has carefully paced the release of each word and as you read/watch them drift down the screen, you slow your expectations. You read differently, absorbing the words rather than scanning them.

The underlying power of Florence comes from Nightingale's words, transcribed here (punctuation added):

G-d must have something for me to do for him or he would have let me die some time ago.

WOMEN DREAM dreams which are their life without which they could not live. Those dreams go at last.

Did not G-d speak to you during this retreat?
Did he not ask you anything?
He asked me to surrender my will.
And to whom?
To all that is upon the earth.

But, oh, you GENTLEMEN. We are steeped to our necks in blood. The wounded left lying up to our very door. Occasionally the roof is torn off, the windows blown in, and we are flooded under water for the night.
IMAGINE. All December in the trenches lying down without food, only raw salt pork sprinkled with rum, sugar, and biscuits.
When we came, there was not a sponge nor a rag of linen. Everything is gone to make slings, stump pillows, and shirts.
Oh, my poor men who died so patiently.

As for me, I have no plans.
If I live, I should like to go to some foreign hospital where my name has not been heard, free myself of all responsibility, anxiety, writing, administration, and work as a nurse for a year.
If not for the story I have to tell, I would never enter the world again.

Reading these words, you can readily understand how Korot wanted to see beyond the Ministering Angel cliché that Nightingale's name all too often evokes. In her cross-centuries collaboration, Korot reshapes Nightingale's words: selecting and distilling passages from her letters and then incorporating them into this compassionate and sorrowful work of art.

Korot organizes the text in stanzas. Most of the words pile up at the bottom of the screen, but at certain junctures, an all-caps explosion of words punctuates the flow and then disappears. At others, Nightingale's questions cross the screen on the diagonal. In the last section, the scrolling text appears twice with each word accompanied by its own soft echo. And at the end, that last word – again – fades away altogether and we return to the beginning in an endless loop of grief.

Likewise, Korot uses the audio to signify a shift in tone. In the introspective opening passage, you hear the sound of a distant, rushing waterfall. But to mark the major transition of the piece – the break to Nightingale's direct address to those anonymous "Gentlemen" – Korot cuts to the sound of falling rain. The rain continues, like the sound of someone weeping, through the description of the conditions under which Nightingale's patients died and the *cri de coeur* that concludes the piece.