

Winn Rea: Keene Valley Artist Shows In New York Essay by Joel Avery

Imperceptible tectonic forces lifted the Adirondacks millennia ago. Since then, rain and glaciers have relentlessly met growth with erosion. This untraceable shift from rise to fall marks the earth, drawing lines we love and get lost in.

Winn Rea's unsentimental love for changing, challenging terrain is evident in her current show, recently opened at Phoenix Gallery in Chelsea. "Topo-Shift 2" features meticulously cut topographical reliefs which reproduce the peaks and crags Rea has hiked in the Adirondacks. Projected on these bird's-eye views of the forest's undulations are shadows of the trees and vistas only visible from the within the contours of the topo map, images which complicate the viewer's shifting relationship to the landscape.

Twenty years ago, I found myself contending with the Adirondacks and their topo-shifts. We left our truck on Moose Road and hiked four flat miles east before the terrain got gnarly and the blazes disappeared. Crushed under the weight of the previous winter's brutal ice, the trees, which guarded the trail, lay strewn among freshly fallen leaves. Boy scouts or other well-intentioned hikers had made attempts at marking the trail with plastic tape tied to the tangled trees, but these signs gradually fell away as the incline increased, topography overcoming best intentions.

Using a scroll saw, router, and other tools common to Adirondack sheds, Rea produced these works amongst the thousand camps folded into the landscape. Her work is partly a reflection on place, spatiality and perspective, partly an exploration of process and materials, but she ignites when talking about tools. Attending to the lines of her work, you can hear the buzz and whine of small motors, the song of metal blades. You can catch the small smell of burning as wood gives way to steel, the spark in Rea's eye as she captures the forest's light.

Twenty years back and trail abandoned, we stumbled onto an old logging road which led to a general store where we scarfed candy bars. I asked the clerk if someone might give us a lift back to our truck. "That's like asking for a ride to Mars!" she laughed. We learned we were a twisty twenty miles away by road. Yet her son proved intrepid and raced us westward in record time, crammed in the cab of his Ford.

That Adirondack grit and boldness comes through Rea's pieces. The intricate surface interactions she presents rest on a tacit reclamation of multiple male-colonized territories: the rugged cartographer, the master craftsperson, the patient naturalist. Rea is all of these. Like the artist, her work resists expectation--topo maps that refuse to be folded neatly into the back of a guide book until needed. Representations of natural beauty that don't hide the allure of the people, camps, trucks and tools that define the Adirondacks just as much as October's colors, February's snows, and July's black flies--but shift between familiar terrain and the strangeness of Mars.

Joel Avery is a writer, occasional theologian, and physics teacher who enjoys walks in woods and galleries equally. He lives in Brooklyn, NY.

Winn Rea is an environmental artist who has been hiking in the Adirondacks for over 20 years. She works from studios in Keene Valley and Long Island, New York and is Associate Professor of Art at Long Island University Post. www.winnrea.com