

WHATS ON LOS ANGELES

Pick of the Week

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By Jody Zellen

Stephen Berens: *From There to Here*

July 21 through August 25, 2018

Edward Cella Art+Architecture, Los Angeles



In his installation, *From There to Here*, Stephen Berens draws viewers to the center of the gallery. In the middle of the space, on a large two-foot high white rectangular plinth sit four round cast bronze cannonballs and three cast bronze frisbees. Entitled *Projectiles* (2018) they reference relics from the 1860s and 1960s. To think of frisbees as projectiles is a bit unusual, yet when viewed in the context of Stephen Berens' exhibition, it makes perfect sense. A frisbee is a flying disk that became an iconic symbol of fun and freedom for the American Counter Culture movement of the late 1960s. When the frisbees are juxtaposed with Civil War era cannon balls, they become the yin and yang of relics. One is a symbol of peace and frivolity, the other a symbol of the fight for civil rights and fraternal war.

Using the cannonball and frisbee as triggers (or points of departure) when viewing the photographs that line the walls, it is evident that two similar, yet divergent landscape images are placed in a dialectical relationship. Berens is an artist known for his historical projects and conceptual attitude towards photography and in this body of work, he investigates the dichotomies between places representing war / death and the joys of life. His images couple photographs of Civil War battlegrounds with sites where the Counter Culture gathered. Berens traveled throughout the United States to document places of historical significance where today no physical trace of what happened remains. The images depict expansive grassy fields or tree lined vistas in differing seasons and are titled after contemporaneous weather conditions culled from first-hand accounts of the events. Even while looking at the landscapes with the cannonballs and frisbees in mind it is difficult to be transported back in time and to see the locations as battlegrounds and gathering spots.

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Berens' works brings to mind two other different "re-photography" projects, *On this Site* by Joel Sternfeld who visited 50 infamous crime scenes making color photographs of these disconcerting everyday locations where tragedies occurred and *Second View: The Rephotographic Survey Project* in which photographers including Mark Klett re-visited sites of the government surveys of the late 19th century to make new photographs that replicated the vantage points and time of day of the earlier images. These images were presented side by side inviting comparison. Like these other projects, in Berens' work the viewer is asked to imagine a before and compare it to the now. What is visible and invisible, remembered and erased from history are central to all these endeavors.

It's now 5:45 am and the sky in the east is just sneaking up orange & the weather is variable-clear, cloudy and rainy, (2016) is a 62 inch wide x 23.5 inch high diptych in which a photograph from the Wadena Rock Festival, July 31-August 2, 1970, in Fayette County, Iowa intersects with a photograph from the Battle of Chancellorsville, April 30-May 6, 1863, in Spotsylvania County, Virginia. Most of the photographs are similarly described diptychs where a photograph of a civil war battle is juxtaposed with an image of a concert, festival, or farm. Without consulting the checklist is it impossible to know which image is from what event, but perhaps that is Berens' point. In the mind's eye, the two disparate places merge in a seamless yet uneasy continuum. *In Trudged through a rainy Middle Tennessee & When winter came it was barely noticeable to us*, (2018) a lush grove joins a photograph with two trees in the foreground surrounded by snow.

Berens' landscapes are beautifully shot scenes, usually devoid of human presence. Where the two photographs overlap on the paper is what gives these images their uniqueness. Berens runs the photographic paper through the printer twice never quite sure where the overlap will occur— suggesting that with careful observation, there are such overlaps in the depicted moments in U.S. history. On a purely visual level, the landscapes are evocative. However, it is the titles and descriptions that give the images resonance. *In From There to Here* Berens asks viewers to delve into history and to think about the parallels between the 1860s and 1960s— the struggles for civil rights, for example, as well as the political and social concerns of the times. It is impossible not to leap forward to the here and now and the current political climate. While Here is depicted as pastoral, the natural landscape is also vulnerable in these transitional times.