

## Drawing the Essay

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Louis Bury September 29, 2018



Colter Jacobsen, "memory w/o words (after Dorsky)" (2018), graphite and watercolor on paper, 15 3/4 x 18 3/4 inches (all images courtesy Callicoon Fine Arts)

Bay Area artist Colter Jacobsen's second New York City gallery exhibition, [Essays](#), at [Callicoon Fine Arts](#), is a beguiling onion of a show, with layer upon layer of intricacy lurking beneath its scratchy surfaces. The exhibition is comprised of a medley of modest photographs, drawings, and paintings, all incorporating found or repurposed materials. The varied media and contents can suggest that, as in a collection of literary essays, each individual artwork has its own discrete concerns. But, as with any single-authored essay collection, the more time you spend with the

work, the more you understand the often subconscious set of concerns shared by even the most disparate-seeming pieces.

*Essays* is animated by a poetic sensibility. It is critical commonplace to speak of artist's artists, writer's writers, painter's painters, poet's poets, and the like, as a way to describe figures whose work has unique appeal for members of their own creative tribe. While there's no comparable expressions for creative work that has unique appeal for practitioners of other art forms, Jacobsen is a poet's artist if ever one existed. It's not just that his work occasionally alludes to poets such as Joe Brainard and Bill Berkson, or that he's an avid reader of poetry and friendly with Bay Area poets, but that his artistic methods, thought processes, aesthetic, and values accord with those of many poets and their work.

One way that Jacobsen's poetic sensibility manifests is through visual and conceptual association, both within individual artworks and across works in the show. "Calendar (X)" (2018) and "threes (calendar)" (2018) do not visually read as calendars but are all the more poetically delightful for it. In "lemon window" (2018), scattered ovals of warm yellow echo the two smudgy yellow price tags hung below the painting, while in "Penumbra (Wild Pacific Iris)" (2018), a beige crescent of negative space echoes three pieces of crescent jewelry hung below the drawing. Correspondences abound across works as well: "Penumbra"'s maze-like nest of ink has visual analogues in the intricate pencil-work throughout the show; and the many unpainted sections of "lemon window" recall the gaps, holes, and other visual reminders of loss, decay, and absence that permeate the show.



Colter Jacobsen, "Trevi Fountain 1 (hippocampus)" (2018), graphite on paper, 5 3/4 x 16 inches

These visual echoes achieve their most pointed expression in several doubled images. "Trevi Fountain 1 (hippocampus)" (2018) and "Trevi Fountain 2 (hippocampus)" (2018) each consist of two near-identical graphite drawings placed side-by-side. One is drawn as a copy of a found image; the other as a reversed image, from memory of the first drawing. For both *Portrait "Repair (Walgreens)"* (2008) and *"Sunset Repair (Walgreens)"* (2008), Jacobsen subjected a tattered and faded found photograph to Walgreens' one-hour photo restoration service and then placed the original alongside its tidied-up reproduction. The comparison calls attention to the polished elisions that result from the restoration process; looking at the two photographs side by side feels like looking at before-and-after images of a gentrified city street.



Colter Jacobsen, "kiss" (2018), graphite on paper, 14 1/2 x 17 3/4 inches

Jacobsen achieves such effects in part through his use of self-imposed artistic procedures and constraints. For instance, he composed several drawings within a one-hour time limit. Another drawing — "kiss" (2018), inspired by biologist David George Haskell — attempts to render a square foot of ground in Ukiah, California as closely and carefully as possible. All of the works in the exhibition consist almost entirely of found or reused materials, including the smudged and faded papers (some of which are over half a century old) on which the artist draws and paints. Jacobsen's methods and procedures draw on the repertoire and mood not only of artistic forebears, such as the Situationist International, but also of poetic forebears, such as the French Oulipo group.

The Oulipo, which has functioned for over 50 years as a sort of literary research and development department, constitutes a notable influence here. Much of Jacobsen's work, such as his doubled images, has the feel of a psychological experiment whose rules are designed to test for specific perceptual phenomena. As with Oulipo's lab-like literary experiments, Jacobsen tends to emphasize process for its own exploratory sake. The resultant works — small and subtle — feel almost incidental, byproducts of the artist's investigations in being and doing rather than burnished masterpieces. If this emphasis can sometimes make the completed works feel slight, it also lends them a fragile beauty, similar to the beauty of a dandelion seed head in the moment before a gust of wind or a child's breath disperses its seeds.

This sense of fragility achieves ravishing articulation in the sound recording, “Nature Boy (L’s of Hollywood Sign),” which gallery-goers can listen to on portable headphones. For the piece, Jacobsen instructed Callicoon’s director and flute player, Photi Giovanis, to play “Nature Boy” — written by Eden Ahbez and popularized by Nat King Cole — for the tree outside the gallery’s front window. Jacobsen then took Giovanis’s flute recording, slowed it down “to a speed that the tree might perceive,” and layered in sounds of hikers walking past the L’s of the “Hollywood” sign in Los Angeles, where Ahbez was discovered living in a tent when Cole’s version of the song became popular in 1948. The experiment’s conceit is of a piece with recent anthropological and artistic attempts to understand how trees and other flora communicate, from Eduardo Kohn’s 2013 book *How Forests Think* to Mileece’s music made with plants, Katie Holten’s 2009 installation *Tree Museum*, and E.J. McAdams’ 2015 installation *Trees Are Alphabets*.

For all its conceptual and methodological complexity, “Nature Boy (L’s of Hollywood Sign)” is simply gorgeous to experience: languorous, meditative, and enveloping, the perfect soundtrack to accompany *Essays*. Its elongated flute notes make apparent that time’s passage is not just the subject matter of much of Jacobsen’s visual work but also its material substance. From the crushed and flattened cigarette boxes of *Fags for Joe & Bill* (2018) to the faint graphite timelines — for example, “10:13/ 10:19/ 6/ 10:23/ 10:26/ 3” — of the one-hour drawings, his procedural experiments, and their resultant artworks, render the passage of time more tangible.

Perhaps because it is so attuned to the contours of the here and now, Jacobsen’s work remains refreshingly unconcerned with making claims for its own art historical importance. The artist’s attention to process and materials, along with his poetic commitment to the diminutive and the subtle, make questions of cultural positioning feel almost beside the point. Intimate without being overtly personal, ambitious without being striving, Jacobsen’s work makes small but convincing claims for the outsized power of modesty.

*Colter Jacobsen’s [Essays](#) is on view at [Callicoon Fine Arts](#) through October 14.*