

SANTA FE NEW MEXICAN

Familiarity breeds introspection: Photographer Natalie Christensen

Michael Abatemarco | The New Mexican | Sep 21, 2018



Natalie Christensen: Deep Blue Pool, 2018, archival pigment print on Italian cotton rag mounted on Dibond, satin UV lamin:

For residents, Santa Fe is recognizable in photographs even from small details, such as a pink or earth-toned adobe wall. Natalie Christensen's perspective aims at shifting focus away from place to a concentration on objects within a compositional framework. How do you avoid the iconic look or character of a place overshadowing a photograph in favor of retaining the integrity of a moment?

The environments Christensen shoots emphasize the mesmerizing beauty and allure of the mundane: the ladder of a crystal-clear swimming pool, the shadow of a street sign, the dark blue shadow on a light blue wall, and a forgotten chair upon the desert sands, its metal back framing a distant rock formation. Her work is all about perspective. A collection of her works is on view at Turner Carroll Gallery in two exhibits: *Altering Perspective* and *alterstates/alterescapes*.

Natalie Christensen's photographs are stark, almost minimalist in appearance, enhancing the sculptural presence of ordinary objects such as a bike rack or a deck chair and the shadows they cast.

"I started taking pictures after I moved to Santa Fe in 2014," Christensen said. She is a licensed social worker who worked as a psychotherapist for more than two decades before turning to photography. Christensen was raised in Owensboro, Kentucky, where she spent most of her life before coming to the Southwest. "When people move to Santa Fe, I think there's a period of time when they feel like a tourist," she said. "Making images was a way for me to try and understand this place, but I wasn't really thinking about trying to be a photographer. I was just trying to interpret this place."

Christensen dabbled in painting and other mediums, but not with the intention of pursuing a career as an artist. Around 2016, she started posting her photographs on social media and became more invested in photography after receiving positive feedback. She wanted to get away from the landscape emphasis in much of the photography of the Southwest. "I'm not saying that there aren't other people who might be taking a similar approach in contemporary photography, but I wasn't seeing that."

The nature of Christensen's photographic style lends itself to altering perspectives. *Altering Perspective* speaks to not only Christensen's approach to her subject matter, but also to how the viewer might approach her work. Often mistaken for paintings, her photographs are rich in detail.

The works are mounted without glass on aluminum Dibond. “I want people to wonder. That’s why I chose that presentation for the work. When people come into my home, if they see one, they say, ‘Oh, I really like that painting.’ I guess abstraction in painting does influence me quite a bit. I think when people see an image under glass, they’re pretty sure it’s a photograph, and because I’m trying to walk that line a bit and make people wonder what they’re looking at, I think the aluminum Dibond works well for that.”

Her photographs are marked by a compelling exchange between physical objects and their shadows or reflections, as well as intriguing contrasts between rigid and ephemeral forms. In *Deep Blue Pool*, for instance, a photo Christensen took in June back in Owensboro, there’s a subtle contrast between the strong presence of the ladder rising from the pool and its nebulous reflection on the surface of the water. In *A Good Day*, the geometry of the multicolored pastel walls of a building outline, like a window, a patch of clear blue sky in which there floats a single puff of cloud. And in *Speed Hump*, the rectangular shadow cast on a wall by a traffic sign mirrors a nearby doorway, also in shadow.

She brings to this subtle imagery a sense of visceral presence. The works come primarily from two bodies of Christensen’s work: *The Deconstructed Self* and *New Mexico Deconstructed*. The photographs are stark, almost minimalist in appearance, enhancing the sculptural presence of ordinary objects such as a bike rack or a deck chair and the shadows they cast. A portfolio of all the images in *The Deconstructed Self* is also available for viewing.

Christensen’s other exhibit, *alterstates/alterescapes*, features somewhat surreal confluences that subtly combine organic elements such as flora with urban street scenes, creating a dreamlike sense of reality. The showing at the University of New Mexico’s School of Architecture and Planning’s George Pearl Hall is a collaborative show with London-based photographer Jim Eyre. “They’re composite photographs and there are two elements of Jim’s work and two elements of my work in each piece,” she said. “It was a totally different experience to collaborate on something like this. It’s been over a year since we’ve been working on it.”

The project developed out of social media. “Most of our communication about it was done through Instagram. Once we realized it was going to be more than just posting these pictures, we could show this as a real exhibition. It is about the psychological impact on artistic creativity, to be on a social media platform that’s algorithm-driven — how many ‘likes’ something gets and how it’s driving people’s direction, in a way. Like, ‘This image works really well, so I’m going to make more of those because that’s what people want,’ which has been happening in art since way before social media, but

it seems to be at warp speed now. Social media is how I have come up in this world of photography. It's where I first got noticed, and my gallery representation came through seeing my work on Instagram." The collaborative exhibition had its premiere in London in February 2018.

Christensen intentionally chooses subjects that are familiar, seeking out the extraordinary in the ordinary. She calls our attention to an aesthetic quality that is inherent in a scene as it exists in itself, without staging of any kind. "They're not things we see in life that normally make us go 'Wow,'" she said. "I tend to go to the most mundane, suburban places I can find. That's often where I find these moments that really grab me and, hopefully, grab the viewer." ◀

details

▼ Altering Perspective; through Oct. 1

Turner Carroll Gallery, 725 Canyon Road, 505-986-9800

▼ alterstates/alterscapes; through Oct. 11

University of New Mexico School of Architecture and Planning,

2401 Central Ave. N.E., Albuquerque, 505-277-2903