

Portland Press Herald

Enjoy Kate Greene's photos at surface value, or dive deeper

'So Much Water So Close To Home' is up at Grant Wahlquist Gallery in Portland through Oct. 31.

BY JORGE S. ARANGO

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"Comins Pond no. 1," Kate Greene, 2020, archival inkjet print, 32 x 40 inches *Courtesy of the artist and Grant Wahlquist Gallery, Portland*

:: GRANT WAHLQUIST GALLERY

The first thing that must be said about “So Much Water So Close to Home,” Kate Greene’s photography exhibition at Grant Wahlquist Gallery (through Oct. 31), is that it draws from three conceptually distinct bodies of work. It’s also the last thing you actually need to know.

IF YOU GO

WHAT: “Kate Greene: So Much Water So Close to Home”

WHERE: Grant Wahlquist Gallery, 30 City Center, 2nd Floor, Portland

WHEN: Through Oct. 31

HOURS: 11 a.m. to 6 p.m. Wednesday through Saturday, and by appointment

ADMISSION: Free

INFO: 207.245.5732, grantwahlquist.com

The title is lifted from a Raymond Carver story in which the narrator, Claire, learns that her husband, Stuart, while on a fishing trip with a huddle of his buddies, came across the corpse of a woman caught in some branches, face down in the water. Reluctant to short-circuit their long-anticipated trip, they tied their grisly find to a branch so she wouldn’t float away, then headed to do some “Iron John” bonding before calling the authorities two days later. This callousness appalls Claire, but Stuart is nonplussed: She was already dead. What were two more days? Claire eventually comes to distrust her husband – his intent, his touch – leaving their marriage suspicious and barren.

Some photos are from “Sight Unseen,” Greene’s Comins Pond series, which features images of this popular swimming hole in Worcester County, Massachusetts. The artist, who grew up in the state, was a preadolescent when Molly Bish, a 16-year-old lifeguard at Comins Pond, was murdered. Though her bones were found not far from Comins three years later, the case remains unsolved. It’s impossible to separate the show’s title from this group of photos, in which Greene used infrared digital capture to make “visible spectra of light ordinarily imperceptible to the human eye,” according to the exhibition press release. That spectra appear as hot spots in images of the lake, such as “Comins Pond no. 1,” evincing the sense of a ghostly presence moving among the trees or over the water. They can also remind us of snapshots taken at the scene of a crime, the spectra appearing like the camera’s flash.

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"Dead fish no. 8," Kate Greene, 2020, archival inkjet print, 20 x 16 inches *Courtesy of the artist and Grant Wahlquist Gallery, Portland*

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A second body of work is about men and fish – specifically, the proliferation of photos Greene found on dating apps featuring men, often bare-chested, holding aloft dead fish they reeled in. Greene submerges them in water or moistens them and assembles the photos into collage, then photographs them. Why any woman would find this attractive



"Studio study no. 11 (screen)," Kate Greene, 2020, archival inkjet print, 32 x 25.5 inches Courtesy of the artist and Grant Wahlquist Gallery, Portland

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is an obvious feminist question these images pose. Phrases like “hooking up,” “landing a big one” and “she’s a good catch” suddenly sound eerie. Likely for legal reasons, Greene also presents these men either headless, obscured in shadow or, in one case, appearing to be hooded, making them seem predatory. Can we negate any connection to Carver’s story? Depending what you think, the images exude creepiness – or something else.

Most of the rest of the photos are studio shots that, taken on their own, are formally quite beautiful. “Studio Study no. 11 (screen),” for instance, is reminiscent of Claudio Bravo’s exquisite paintings of meticulously folded and draped fabrics and the play of light and shadow their sheeny surfaces create. Crumpled paper in “Seen/Unseen no. 2” operates similarly, except that pairing it within the frame with a found photo of an eye displaying a strange condition that deforms its pupil injects surreal unease. Again, in the context of the title and Bish’s disappearance, images like this, or “Studio study no. 9 (rope, water)” featuring a splash of water on a dark wall with a rope suspended in front of it, can send a shiver up your spine.

The point isn’t whether these connections were intentional or not. There is plenty of visual stimulation, appreciation and enjoyment in taking the images – their formal composition, their shifting light and shadow, their experimentation and their apparent content – at face value. But grouping them under the title of Carver’s unsettling short story and juxtaposing them with the subject matter of Bish’s disappearance alludes to deeper readings of the particular images themselves and of the way they may relate to one another. Again, quoting the press release: “Rope catches, binds, and rescues; fish are caught, baited, feed, and are fed; water flows, drowns, and sustains.” It’s up to us what we want to see.

Jorge S. Arango has written about art, design and architecture for over 35 years. He lives in Portland.