

ART NEW ENGLAND

CONTEMPORARY ART AND CULTURE

PREVIEW: *Maine*

TAD BECK: EYES OF

Grant Wahlquist Gallery • Portland, ME • grantwahlquist.com • March 12–May 1

Known early on for his photographs of figures, frequently male nudes, in the late aughts Portland-based artist Tad Beck began exploring more abstract concepts via “re-photography.” In his third solo show at Wahlquist, Beck offers selections from a new series of nonfigurative portraits of artists whose vision has shaped or inspired his own.

The process by which Beck makes the “Eyes Of” images entails several stages, beginning with borrowing a pair of eyeglasses from an artist friend. He takes a still life photo of the glasses against a black-and-white checkerboard, “a nod,” he writes, “to the scientific importance of optical illusions.” He then rephotographs a print of the still life, shooting it through the lens of the loaned eyewear. Beck repeats this procedure until the spectacles are blurred beyond recognition, with only a hint of the checkerboard background serving as a kind of visual leitmotif.

In *Eyes Of—Alison Hildreth*, distorted light produces vague semi-transparent shapes that

float above the checkerboard, with pale colors playing off the black-and-white pattern. In other pieces, like *Eyes Of—Nyeema Morgan*, the light forms shadowy figures. The experience is somewhat Rorschachian: your mind finds what it wants in the uncertain contours. Other artists lending, as it were, their eyesight are Andrea Zittel, Charles Atlas, Dean Sameshima, John O’Reilly, Michael Stipe, Sharon Lockhart, and Wayne Koestenbaum.

The images have an air-brushed quality; they are meticulously indistinct. If here and there you can make out part of a lens, frame, or the temples of the eyeglasses, that seems less important than the shape-shifting that has occurred in the



Tad Beck, *Eyes Of—Nyeema Morgan*, 2020, archival pigment print, 32 x 42.625”.

course of modification.

These “Eyes Of” photographs are portraits several times removed; they are also, in Beck’s view, an “investigation into perception.” Indeed, a range of associations arise from these images, such as the Biblical “to see through a glass, darkly,” to have an obscure vision of reality. In Beck’s case, that imperfect vision is embraced.

In his pursuit of abstraction, Beck thumbs his nose at such photographic no-nos as excessive reflection, lens flare, and light leaks. In testing the very definition of “fine art” photography, the artist has developed a compelling and visually engaging concept where vision is in the eye of the beholder.

—Carl Little