

Editor's Picks

Contemporary
Art Review

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Star Montana at Shulamit Nazarian

Erin F. O'Leary | June 30, 2021



Star Montana: By the rivers, I stood and stared into Sun, installation view, Shulamit Nazarian, Los Angeles, May 15 – June 26, 2021. Courtesy of the artist and Shulamit Nazarian.

In Star Montana's just-closed show, the artist contended with how to photograph that which cannot be seen—the past, the distant, the invisible and interior. A series of images (both those made by Montana and reprints, enlarged from her family archive) were arranged not by time but by place, beginning in the desert of El Paso and moving to the East Los Angeles neighborhood of Boyle Heights where she was born and raised. Throughout, Montana seems to make a case for archival images as necessary to a rigorous depiction of a place—in this case especially so, as she contends with violent familial loss and the larger impact of the Latinx diaspora. Taken by her late mother and grandmother, the pictures are relics of the people and places that cannot be returned to. Montana exclaims: *they were here*.

Still, Montana's photographs are undoubtedly the most successful and poignant images in the show—particularly a portrait of her brother (*Frankie*, 2015) and an almost-magic-hour still life entitled *Paula's Desk* (2014), which feels, somehow, like it reveals much more of Montana's family than the appropriated private snapshots and photobooth strips.

Though the exhibition was visually coherent, the archival images at times feel supplemental—like metadata or research—if only for the particular strength of vision of Montana's own photographs. Two tiny, contextless family photos (the only original, non-reproduced archival images on view and the only works not for sale) that bookended the exhibition were an exception, however. Both offered to and withheld from the viewer, the completely unaltered, fragile originals were shared only temporarily in the gallery setting—belonging, ultimately, only to Montana and to no one, like all images, in the end.



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