

alter meaning by being surrounded with patterns of use; dozens of questions teach us what a question is, and likewise, studying recipes for cakes then experiencing the cakes themselves tell us (if we needed to know) that we have to crack the eggs before we add them to the batter. By dissolving the rules and grammar that make us think, we know what names and objects mean, how they combine, what's good for us and bad. Telford-Keogh's dissociative game tests how far we're willing to go. Incorporated into each other by the medium that binds them together, exposed like specimens under glass, cleansed by lavender soap and digitally corroded, the images and objects calibrated to fulfill our needs and Hal's needs become subject to breakdown and decay.

But who is this Hal? *The democratic model of upward mobility saturated his fantasies of the good life, where Hal could languish in bed for years at the Holiday Inn watching National Geographic on piles of damp laundry and money* is a fantasy that traffics in the decay of soft and liquid foods already starting to shrivel and crack, as an entry point into ideas made meaningless by their endless proliferation. Telford-Keogh's work is a response to our construction of ourselves, endlessly languishing, like Hal, supported by the churning, world-building consumption of everything in easy reach. The descriptive titles of the works are the final clue to their world-making outcomes. *Add two tins of Tropicana, half a gallon of black berry ice cream, blend thoroughly, and it's ready to serve from the bowl* is (maybe) a recipe for a very sweet smoothie or a vitamin-injected frozen treat as well the name of a greenish-yellow sculpture that sits on the ground, clouds of mayonnaise billowing through its layers. The juxtaposition of title and object, of words and things, creates scenes, characters and whole complicated worlds without exposing the rules that govern them. Specimens of an unknown world borne from the words and names that populate ours, they show us our own insides.

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Steven Beckly: *Meirenyu*
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by Jessica Thalmann

"I have heard the mermaids singing, each to each.
I do not think that they will sing to me.
I have seen them riding seaward on the waves
Combing the white hair of the waves blown back
When the wind blows the water white and black.
We have lingered in the chambers of the sea
By sea-girls wreathed with seaweed red and brown
Till human voices wake us, and we drown."
— "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock"
by T.S. Eliot

I often wonder how to make a photograph invisible. How to clear a path – to see past the photograph as an object and to reach deeply into the image, extend a hand and touch what is inside the frame. While Roland Barthes claims that a deep love for a photograph's subject matter enables him to erase the weight of the image, to see only "the referent, the desired object, the beloved body,"¹ I wonder if it isn't photography's flatness, rigidity and lack of haptic sensibility that epitomizes its failings and prohibits me from seeing, touching and possessing what I desire.

As if answering these thoughts like a siren's call, Steven Beckly's solo exhibition *Meirenyu* on view at Daniel Faria Gallery addresses questions of desire, touch and photography's materiality through the lens of mythology, fantasies of modern mermaids and the sublime nature of the sea. In the exhibition, images interweaving fragmented hands and fingers in various forms abound. For example, a white plaster hand extends from one gallery wall with a glimmering, flat object covered in fish scales. A blue finger pierced by a long thin pin points downwards. The shadow of a hand tenderly grasps a young man's stomach. These photographic and sculptural hands are groping for intimacy and are hungering to touch

something just out of reach. The materiality of each piece exhibits the same kind of longing depicted in the images, as photographs desire to be transformed, into something outside of their stillness and flatness.

For Beckly, photographs are rarely flat. Some are hung high with a delicate silver chain from the ceiling in the middle of the space, and sway gently in large curls, while others twist and squirm underneath their pins against the walls. The photographic materials used (transparency, tissue paper and iridescent pearlized paper) make the images more multifarious than traditional darkroom or digital papers by providing an entryway *through* their materials. In many ways, Beckly has literally and metaphorically rendered the photograph invisible. While light passes through the transparency, offering a kind of access that differs from traditional photos, reflection and glare obscure the image at the same time, acting as barriers or veils. Here, in *Meirenyu*, is the dual nature of photography: a medium that conceals as much as it reveals.

Conceptually, this idea of duality in photography is reflected again in the mythos of the mermaid that occurs throughout the exhibition, an oft-represented beautiful creature who also inspires terror and intimidation. After all, *meirenyu* is a transliteration of the Mandarin word for “mermaid.” One of the first works in the space, *Under Six Feet Under*, is a small colour transparency pierced with a pearlized pin that depicts a deeply saturated blue image of a fragmented finger. Here, Beckly imagines mermaids, primarily acting as an image of transformation and transition, by drawing on various cultural creation myths involving water – in particular, the Inuit mythology of Sedna, goddess of the sea and underworld. While variations on her story exist, one element remains consistent and holds resonance for Beckly. Sedna, taken out to sea by her father, is thrown over the side of his kayak. As she clings to the sides, her father chops off her fingers and she sinks to the underworld. Her huge fingers become walruses, whales and sea creatures while she ultimately grows a fish-tail. These types of narratives exemplify the simultaneous beauty and terror of nature: two co-existing aspects that Beckly explores in his recent body of work. Hence the highly embellished pins that both

hold up and violently pierce his prints. In *Meirenyu*, photographs – much like Sedna – become fish: caught in delicate chainmail nets, pinned and held against the wall or hung from the ceiling like a prized catch.

The magic of Beckly’s work resides not in the dead or flat photograph but in the coloured glow of his images, the rays of light that they exude from the transparent or iridescent paper. In Beckly’s photographs, colour dances, seeps, spills and soaks the gallery walls, only amplifying the confusion about where the images begin and end. Perpetuating Beckly’s interest in duality, two works in the back room depict two diametrically different kinds of light. *Untitled (O)* is a slim colour transparency curved gently away from the white wall illustrating the blinding reflection of the sun in a small pool of water amongst grey and blue rocks. Small lens flares glimmer and encircle the pool of water like a necklace of pearls against the rough texture of the rocks, but a trick of light creates a shadow of the original image against the wall, forcing the viewer to move back and forth, left and right to understand this trompe l’oeil that adds space and depth. A larger image on the left, *Pool of Andromeda*, is caught behind a big silver-chained net. At first glance, it suggests a vast galaxy of stars, gas giants and asteroid belts with its colour field and reference to the Andromeda constellation. But we are tricked again by the optics of light and water. Andromeda is transfigured from an elliptical galaxy of swirling dust and gas to a naked and chained mermaid, and finally to a small soap bubble sitting in a freshly washed sink.

As images (and by extension, image-making) become increasingly more ephemeral, accessible and universal, *Meirenyu* complicates our relationship to them by re-prioritizing the photograph as a many-sided object for contemplation. And by re-examining our interpretive and perceptive relationships to them, Beckly offers a pensive and sensual experience to render the photograph invisible, to bring us closer to what we desire.

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Left: Steven Beckly, *Sea Elegy*, 2017-18, folded photograph and plaster leg, dimensions variable
IMAGE COURTESY OF DANIEL FARIA GALLERY, TORONTO



Right: Steven Beckly, *Mood Ring*, 2017, burned transparency and pearlized pin, approx. 10.5" x 8" x 3.5"
IMAGE COURTESY OF DANIEL FARIA GALLERY, TORONTO