

BLOG, MUSEUMS/GALLERIES

At Hamiltonian Gallery, An Impressive Display of Two Artists Whose Work Contains Multitudes

Paolo Morales' and Nara Park's seemingly simple works contains multitudes of meaning and information.



by
AUGUST 24TH, 2017



"Hiding Couple" by Paolo Morales (2016)

Alec Soth hovers over *Between You and Me*, a show of photographs by **Paolo Morales** on view at Hamiltonian Gallery. Soth is known for peering behind the curtain in places like Niagara Falls, the subject of his searing 2006 photographic essay about the quiet desires of a community whose survival depends on natural majesty and cheap romance. Morales' black-and-white photos also convey economic anxiety. Not in the sense of abominable political sympathies, but rather he captures the disaffecting doldrums in which the middle class is mired. Morales' survey is depressed.

It is also familiar. "Two gates locked with a chain" (2017) is a dead-end scene from Anytown, U.S.A., just like the title describes. "Two couples by a tree" (2015) summons a vision of bored teens who might belong to any suburb in the country. Morales may be striving for a sweeping statement here, a purposely indistinct look at the dislocation that defines contemporary life in America. A milieu. Again, it's a familiar one—distressingly so.

There are strong highlights among Morales' staged photos and snapshots. "Hiding couple" (2016) is one of them: an ambiguous photo, maybe staged, maybe not, of a pair standing to the side of a dusty southwestern road, partially obscured by a tree. (A gigantic succulent growing along a fence is a hint about place.) The transaction is uncertain: A romantic interlude? A chat? A man and a woman, a woman and a woman, a man and a man? It is full of narrative possibility.

Morales' prints are outstanding, packed with information. Damning with faint praise, maybe, but the quality is notable for D.C., a town where photographers do not always put the highest priority on the physical product. Then again, other photos by Morales might have benefited from different decisions. "Self-portrait in light" (2016), which finds the artist snoozing on the couch, light pouring onto his face through some blinds, is a photograph that begs for color to capture so many textures: the fuzz of his fleece, the wood-grain paneling that frames his figure, the diverse textiles of pillows and linens. It's a **Nan Goldin** technicolor dream trapped in black and white.

Elsewhere the show strays entirely: "Self-portrait looking at dirt" (2016) is an incongruous shot of Morales staring down at a conspicuous patch of freshly tilled soil in an otherwise nondescript yard. The trappings of the suburbs are all accounted for—chain-link fence, check; basketball hoop, check—but the artist looks as if he's engaged in a **Bruce Nauman**—esque performance.

In place of a taut examination of some specific tenant of the suburban romance (already well-worn territory), Morales has aimed for universality and fallen a bit short. There are hints here and there of a better show, for example, with "Aaron and his son" (2016), a shot of a dad-lookin' dude holding an enormous baby. The clipped arm of another figure, unseen offscreen, falls on the baby's head. What wins here is the lighting: Aaron and his son are overlit, the landscape behind them dark, which contributes to a sense of exposure and alarm. It could be the start of a **John Cheever** short story. Maybe all that's called for here is editing.

“What Remains” by Nara Park (2017)

“Disillusioned I” (2017), a sculpture by **Nara Park** that is also on view at Hamiltonian, could be hundreds of years old. That’s the impression the artist wants to give viewers, anyway: It’s a column or stela made from pieces of plastic laminate that are carefully suspended by invisible monofilament wire. The pieces are made to look like a crumbling composite that is leaning against the wall. Of course, Park’s sculpture is resolutely modern. It’s not an archaeological find or even a suggestion of one but instead a minimalist-ish piece that resembles one of **John McCracken**’s leaning sculptures.

That duality is plain—obvious, really—across all five works in Park’s “Disillusioned” series. Her selection of laminates that look like Formica, a chintzy surface coating, plays up a contrast between fake and real. The materials are cheapo, superficial applications that contractors might sub in for granite or marble for a tabletop. But she has purchased these materials, rescued them, elevated them, by using them to make art. Which drives still another tension: classical materials swapped out for their postmodern counterparts.

Park's overly academic exercise doesn't need but one iteration to drive the point home. And suspending the materials with string doesn't enhance the juxtaposition. It blurs it. Where the artist might have acknowledged and even tested the tenets of minimalism by challenging its cubes and prisms directly—by embracing McCracken's lean-to form exactly, but with a new skin, perhaps—in “Disillusioned I–V,” Park is spinning her wheels.

The name of Park's show, *What Remains*, suggests she is working through the conflict between permanence and impermanence thoughtfully. Its titular piece—a sandcastle emerging from a miniature beach—hits that bullseye. It's also a reworking of some other core modern concepts about installation. Do viewers tread on the sand to get a closer look at the castle—to tease out whether it's the real deal or a fabricated thing? Does Park tidy up after them? Footprints in the sand during the opening suggest that viewers dove right in.

Then there's the camping lamp situated near the sandcastle, just the right off-kilter addition to decenter the precious beach scene. It's a ready-made gesture, a lighthouse in this kitschy composition, as much a plea for illumination as a demonstration of it. By easing up and letting chance work, Park finds firmer ground.

At Hamiltonian Gallery to Sept. 16. 1353 U St. NW. Free. (202) 332-1116. hamiltoniangallery.com.