

Weekend

Arts&Performance

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Painter looks at life through a lens

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Michael David is an easy artist to label: He paints lovely, monochromatic, realist scenes, expertly and seductively. But as his show at Pepper Gallery attests, David doesn't simply bring technical skill and a lush aesthetic to his paintings. His work has long been an inquiry into how we see the world, and what mediates the way we see — and so what shapes our world.

In recent years, David has portrayed fields of grass glimpsed through window screens and urban landscapes glowing through curtains of fog and rain. Most of the new work, painted in Provincetown, examines life through a lens. The artist has developed a fascination for antique photographs, and here creates in paint versions of pinhole photos, stereographs, and cyanotypes.

The blue of the cyanotypes dazzles, and in two larger still lifes, of a bouquet and a china cabinet, the complexity of composition and form matches the high-voltage tone. We view "China Cabinet" through its pane-glassed front — like the blue itself, and the suggestion of a camera lens, another scrim between the viewer and the exquisite, reflective objects in the painting.

The stereographs are delicate, black-and-white or sepia-toned diptychs. Fuzzy and fading, they depict old-time Provincetown, as if we're gazing through the veil of memory. Anyone who has been there knows these are present-day scenes, as well: the tower in the middle of town, a gate opening to a garden.

In addition to the photo-based works, David offers some straightforward landscapes in black and white, as viewed from his studio window: unscreened, unmediated, and unabashed. It's as if he loves the place so much he's



Artist Roger Ackling creates works such as *Voewood (RA1204)* by focusing sunlight on wood using a magnifying glass.

dropped his guard.

Right beside them hangs the delightful "Picket Fence II," which harks back to his green field paintings. Here, the crisp greenery flowers behind straight columns of white. These turn out to constitute a picket fence, but they are so pristine, flat, and unimpeachable that they bring us out of the illusion David has painted, right to the surface of his canvas.

It's a clever conceit for a realist, a bald-faced appropriation of Modernism, which he ultimately defies at the bottom of the painting, where blossoms crowd between the pickets. The fence, like the camera lens, and Modernism's fascination with surface, are all merely ways to shape and understand what we see — something, David's work insists, that is palpable and flowering just beyond our grasp.

Seductive fictions

Anne Connell's work at Miller Block plays out the same tension between illusionistic depth and a painting's surface that David toys with in "Picket Fence II." A rapid-fire volley between deep space and flatness characterizes Connell's rich and complex paintings. She

Michael David: Works From Provincetown

At: Pepper Gallery, 38 Newbury St., through Nov. 13. 617-236-4497. www.peppergalleryboston.com

Anne Connell: Recent Paintings; Sandi Haber Fifield: Recent Photographs

At: Miller Block Gallery, 14 Newbury St., through Nov. 16. 617-536-4650. www.millerblockgallery.com

Roger Ackling: Focused Sunlight on Found Wood

At: Victoria Munroe Fine Art, 59 Beacon St., through Nov. 20. 617-523-0661. www.victoriemunroefineart.com

references the early Renaissance, when the understanding and portrayal of deep perspective was perfected. Connell excerpts the work of Renaissance painters to draw you in and to bounce you back out. Look at "The Clear Hyaline." A hyaline is anything transparent or glassy, and here it shows up as the sea's smooth surface, viewed through an ornate porthole. That window floats over a block pattern, which references the marble pavement in the Basilica di Sant'Antonio in Italy.

The blocks suggest the essence of three-dimensionality, but Connell scrapes over them, defying their volume by bringing us back to the worked-over surface. A pink portal from a 1317 fresco by Simone Martini rises beside the blocks, beckoning us into its dark doorway. A palm tree, cadged from a 1433-34 work by Beato Angelico, appears to float right off the surface of the picture plane. It's a wild ride. Connell seduces us into her space until we trip over something that rudely reminds us this is all a fiction. It's satisfyingly discombobulating.

Also at Miller Block, Sandi Haber Fifield's dreamy color photographs make a great counterpoint

to Connell's paintings. Fifield shoots flowers so out of focus it's almost hard to identify them as flowers. They look like brilliant, ungraspable baubles, yet of course, we see a bauble and want to grab it, hold it, possess it. Fifield keeps these just beyond our reach, and that's their appeal. In that way, her work is like Connell's: an offer made, then taken away. They both keep us dangling.

Etched by the sun

Roger Ackling lives in Norfolk, England, about 100 miles north of London. He ought to live in the Caribbean, because his medium is sunlight. Ackling finds pieces of driftwood along the shore, or interesting wooden clothespins, finials, and honey-dippers in an antique market. Then he takes them out in his backyard and spends hours focusing the sunlight on them with a magnifying glass. You can see the resulting sculptures of this drawn-out and meditative process at Victoria Munroe Fine Art.

They're a pleasing combination of minimalist and obsessive. Ackling uses the sun to draw on wood; he scorches horizontal lines across a flat board, or he blackens an entire piece except where he has covered it, perhaps with a rubber band. Then he adorns them with sphere-headed mapping pins and narrow, white elastics.

I prefer the simple boards to the finials and clothespins, which never quite lose their solid, functional identities, although Ackling has elevated them to something more mysterious than useful. The boards, however, become a canvas for this odd way of drawing; they submit to the sun. Ackling burns across them, with the wood grain beneath creating a kind of grid. They're small, earthy works that suggest something deep and old, almost pagan, yet the pins and elastics snap them right back to the 21st century.