Anika Steppe
View from
Sometimes it is difficult to know what you are looking at in Anika Steppe’s installation at the Courtyard Gallery. *View from* is the culmination of Steppe’s meditation on her experience in a place relative to her perception of a place through photographs.

Along the windowsills are small keychain viewers pointed toward the courtyard garden in the AT&T Hotel and Conference Center. Inside the viewers are a combination of photographs Steppe created on-site and in her studio (figs. 1, 2). In some viewers, one finds photographs of the arcade of arches and shrubbery outside the gallery, and in others photographs of reflections and other courtyards appear suspended on the windows of her studio or on the gallery windows. For Steppe, the act of photographing the Courtyard Gallery and then photographing those prints in her studio leaves the question of how we make sense of new places, relative to the familiar and the strange, open. Reserved for a private, isolated experience of an expansive, projected scene, Steppe’s immersive viewers compress time and space into a piece of fiction.

While preparing for this exhibition in Maine, Steppe visited the Courtyard Gallery through Google Maps where she found aerial pictures of another woman photographing the building with a 360-degree camera. Within the photosphere of Google Street View, the guide holds her arm up to the camera lens as she commands the shutter button (fig. 3). As both narrator and protagonist, Steppe inverts her use of Google Maps as a telescope and into a curiosity in a screenshot-illustrated book: *View from // of a photographer* (2019–20) recounts her virtual tour of an ersatz shadow world where people act as tripods and tripods are substitutes for people. Through Steppe’s study of drone photography, she conjures historic parallels between the chemical properties of photography with the mystical forces that govern existence—grasping the camera, as a sorcerer would wave a wand, the Street View photographer builds gateways to another time and space.

Treating computer screens, windows, and prints as instruments for our imaginations, Steppe plays with the descriptive qualities of cameras. For her most recent Leica “instant” photographs, Steppe was inspired by Claude glass—a convex black obsidian mirror that was a popular pocket drawing aid among sightseers in the eighteenth-century. In operation, users turn away from their subject to peer at the shrunken, muted image reflected in the glass. Like the small, black mirrors, Steppe’s “instants” reproduce images with a soft grain and the hazy patina of time.

One block north of the AT&T Hotel, the Harry Ransom Center holds the 1827 pewter-based heliograph that inventor Joseph Nicéphore Niépce made in an upstairs window overlooking the courtyard and surrounding buildings of his estate. Prompted by Niépce, Steppe made “instants” of the hotel’s courtyard and Niépce’s home found in Street View (figs. 4, 5). In effect, the high contrast and saturated color of the “instants” reproduced both courtyards as dreamlike versions of themselves.

Something like a photographic labyrinth, Steppe creates a circuit of gazes between photographer, camera, courtyard, and photograph. With keychain viewers, “instant” photographs, an accordion book, and a wallpaper mural of the Gallery’s carpet pattern as framing devices, Steppe’s roundabout documents channel the expansiveness of her practice into echoes of her lived experience.

— Taylor Bradley

Taylor Bradley (b. 1986, Los Angeles, CA) specializes in modern and contemporary art. Bradley’s research and curatorial work touch on information technology, early histories of photography, and conceptual art. She received her BA in Art History with distinction from Boston University (2008) and earned her MA (2012) and PhD (2019) from The University of Texas at Austin.
FIG. 1 / COVER
View from / of Courtyard Gallery, 2019
Transparent positive
0.95 × 1.42 in. (2.4 × 3.6 cm)
Keychain viewer
1 × 2 in. (2.54 × 5.08 cm)
Courtesy of the artist

FIG. 2
View from / of Obsidian, 2019
Inkjet print folded and glued
0.95 × 1.42 in. (2.4 × 3.6 cm)
Keychain viewer
1 × 2 in. (2.54 × 5.08 cm)
Courtesy of the artist

FIG. 3
View from / of a photographer, 2019–20
Inkjet print folded and glued
0.95 × 1.42 in. (2.4 × 3.6 cm)
Keychain viewer
1 × 2 in. (2.54 × 5.08 cm)
Courtesy of the artist

FIG. 4 / TOP
View from / of Courtyard Gallery, 2019
Color instant film
2.13 × 3.39 in. (5.41 × 8.61 cm)
Keychain viewer
1 × 2 in. (2.54 × 5.08 cm)
Courtesy of the artist

FIG. 5 / BOTTOM
View from / of Niépce’s Home, 2019
Color instant film
2.13 × 3.39 in. (5.41 × 8.61 cm)
Keychain viewer
1 × 2 in. (2.54 × 5.08 cm)
Courtesy of the artist
Anika Steppe earned a BS in Cinema and Photography at Ithaca College (2013), and an MFA in Studio Art at The University of Texas at Austin (2018). Her work has been exhibited most recently at The Front, New Orleans, LA (2020); Houston Center for Photography (2019); Trestle Gallery, Brooklyn, NY (2019); and Paradice Palase in partnership with ChaShaMa, Long Island City, NY (2019); amongst others. She was artist-in-residence at Malo Residency, San Miguel de Allende, Mexico (2019), Monson Arts, Monson, ME (2019), and the Vermont Studio Center, Johnson, VT (2018). She is currently the Richardson-Spica Artist-in-Residence Fellow at Interlochen Arts Academy in Interlochen, MI.

Anika Steppe: View from is organized by Taylor Bradley, the 2018–19 Visual Arts Center Curatorial Fellow.

The Courtyard Gallery is located in the AT&T Hotel and Conference Center at The University of Texas at Austin and features artwork from alumni of the Department of Art and Art History in the College of Fine Arts. Exhibitions at the Courtyard Gallery are organized by the Visual Arts Center.

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