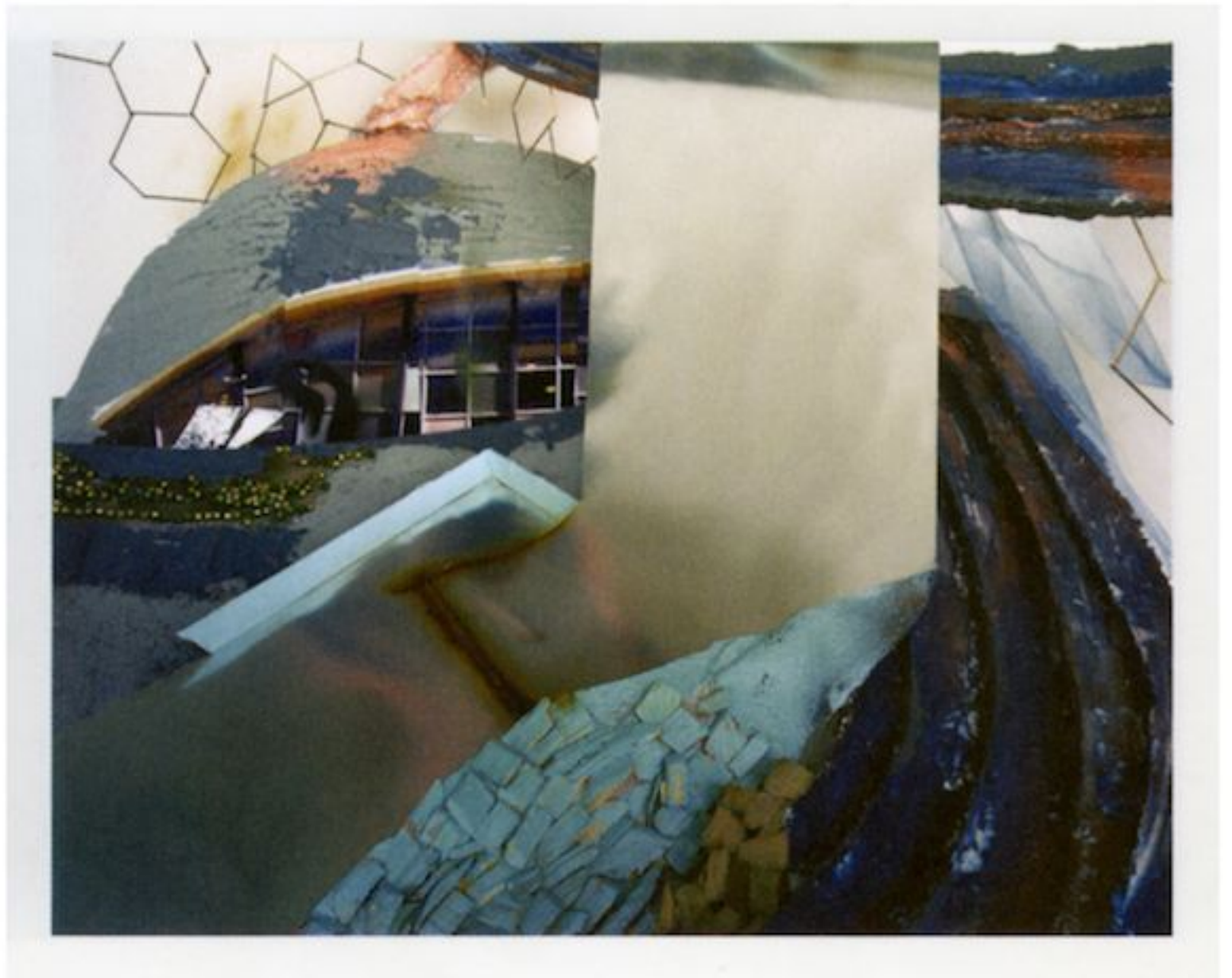


ART PAPERS

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Striking Ideas + Moving Images + Smart Texts



YAMINI NAYAR NEW YORK

At first glance, Yamini Nayar's *Headspace* is a tidy unassuming exhibition [Thomas Erben Gallery; October 27—December 3, 2011]. Her tasteful series of large c-prints depicts small handmade dioramas constructed from studio debris. Complex spatial arrangements are foreshortened, manipulated, and exaggerated. Nayar is best known for her vandalized room-like settings assembled from miniature, busted-up office models and reconstructed but trashed planetariums, dioramas ranging from the elegiac to the comic. In *Cleo*, 2009, not on view here, dark stained matchwood and cardboard are arranged into a ramshackle floorboard surface that abuts a wall of whitewashed plaster in what looks like a tumbledown Victorian house held together by generations of rustic, ad hoc repairmen. By contrast, *Headspace* offers a clear departure from any literal preoccupation with recognizable interior spaces. As its title promises, the exhibition is in fact a plunge into the murky depths of the subconscious, where a sublime cycle of destruction churns up the romantic landscape and fizzes up to reabsorb fugitive ruins in destabilizing pictorial subduction zones.

Cascading Attica, 2011, emblemizes the show, jumbling references to prison insurrection, picturesque waterfall getaways, and the geography of archaic Greece and channeling them into pools of sheer terror and blissful harmony. Sheltering assorted rubble—either camping trash or riot wreckage, take your pick—a Buckminster Fuller-esque geodesic dome teeters precariously atop a gushing stream of pyroclastic flows. The scene is both volcanic and hydraulic, suggesting an architectural form washed away in a super-heated libidinal stream of magma and water. In a sequence typical of Nayar's conundrums, solid is converted into liquid then back again as shallow depths-of-field leave the viewer reeling.

By contrast *Memorious*, 2011, is settled and stable. The concave gray-green dry mud pit, dotted with ribbons overlaid with collage elements, resembles an archeological dig. Time simply stands still as every cubic

inch of the surface awaits exhaustive, methodical inspection followed by cataloging. The title winks at Borges' short story "Funes el memorioso." It also references the wider postmodern discourse concerned with the excavation and recycling of memory in novel combinations. Funes, a savant cursed with photographic memory, is incapable of abstract thought. Even as he conquers Latin in forty-eight hours, then masters biology in a day, he contends that language is too general because it does not take time into account. Things change subtly and one must specify a time in order to refer to anything unambiguously. In Funes' world, individual rocks have names. Borges suggests that Funes' knowledge system, unable to generalize, is unmanageable. Like most photographs, Nayar's pictures distinguish and identify an array of physical objects at a precise moment: an abandoned flat car tire in *How Many Men*, 2011, and crinkly tin foil wallpaper in *Pillar*, 2011. However, all these pictures, along with *Memorious*, facilitate the management of sense impressions through a compulsive drift toward abstraction—that is, the suppression of detail.

Here, space is radically compressed. Collage jarringly reverses figure and ground relationships. A paradoxical sense of order emerges from the otherwise unintelligible bric-à-brac. Functioning as an addendum to the suite of larger prints, the exquisite *Untitled, Housing Studies*, 2011, an eight-by-ten-inch grid of monochromatic red squares, shifts in optical focus from razor sharp in the picture's center to "Vaseline smeared lens'-soft focus" at the edge—as if the rim of the image folded back, eventually melting back into the core of the picture. Is the subject spherical? Was a fisheye lens used to create this paper-thin depth of field? It's hard to tell. Nevertheless, we get considerable pleasure from the works because they make tangible the tectonic shifts going on in the artist's mind as she wrestles with the ontological problems of photography.

—Daniel McGrath