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Petra Cortright  
*Predator Swamping*  
Digital Paintings Based in Appropriated Photographs

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by Jody Zellen



Petra Cortright is a master at manipulating digital files and incorporating stock digital effects. She seamlessly moves back and forth between creating animated and printed images and is as adept with programs like Photoshop as she is with compositing video footage. Cortright first came to prominence in the mid 2000s for webpages filled with low-brow animated GIFs appropriated from a wide range of online sources. She was also celebrated for short video performances captured by her computers webcam and posted to YouTube where they were available to stream, as well as purchase for a price based on their number of views. In many of these purposely manipulated, kitschy and campy performances, she posed for the camera to act out 'girly' fantasies. The poster for her current exhibition, *Predator Swamping*, is a fragmented image of her looking suggestively out at the viewer and alludes to those more performance-based works. Instead, Cortright presents digital paintings based on appropriated photographs of the landscape, many of which are incorporated into wall-sized tableaux.

Cortright's "digital paintings," are created in Photoshop where she uses the program's tools to subtract from and add to existing photographs. Her images reference actual places while simultaneously fragmenting and abstracting the appropriated originals beyond recognition. The source imagery for this particular body of work — landscape photographs culled from the internet featuring the high desert, Bolivia and Patagonia — are montaged together into geometric abstractions filled with textured digital "brushstrokes" juxtaposed with snippets of repeated imagery of actual, as well as drawn flowers, mountains and earth.

In *Oasis nude\_order flowers +ovid+metamorphoses*, 2020, Cortright combines photographs of snow-capped mountains, cracked and dried earth with gestural marks inspired by their forms and colors. The finished digital "painting" is printed on linen (to simulate a 'real' painting), stretched and framed. Several of these works hang on the walls alongside translucent cloth and transparent Mylar banners (some suspended from the ceiling, others attached to the wall with large magnets) speckled with fragmented digital renderings that extend the work off the wall and back into three-dimensional space.

Her loose and seemingly spontaneous painting style draws from both Fauvism and Abstract Expressionism, but differs from these ways of painting as she begins with a representation. Although the black and white "*La Ley pictures*" *LAST DAYS OF POMPEII "later aligator" mp3*,

2020 has been desaturated, the colors from the original appear in aspects of the tableau that surround it on the wall. Within the linen piece, Cortright adds gestural markings and blobs of gray that partially cover the photograph, yet she never completely obscures the source imagery. It is centered on the wall on top of a slightly larger deep blue, vinyl rectangle. Pieces of digitally printed mylar cover parts of the long wall both above and below the framed work, echoing its mountainous topography. The banners contain enlarged gestures, rough sketches of weed-like plants, as well as colored, fragmented representations from other related landscape photographs. These additions and extensions transform the “painting” into an installation and make it more substantial and engaging.

Artists including Jessica Stockholder, Cady Noland and Rachel Harrison have played with extending two-dimensional imagery into three-dimensional space and Cortright’s use of installation follows suit. While the framed “digital paintings” on linen are the completed works, they are more active and interesting as tableaux. In some ways, Cortright’s work is more successful when it is confrontational and directly engages with transformations — like her projected GIFS and video portraits — than when it appropriates aspects of landscape painting to investigate the principals of abstraction. The works in *Predator Swamping* are purposely “messy” and fragmented. While their titles hint at hidden content and source materials, without more information they do not transcend being manipulated landscapes. When placed within these tableaux, they begin to be more like what we have come to expect from Cortright.

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