

Art Now LA
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Chris Engman
Refraction
Creating an Immersive Environment

Luis de Jesus
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by Jody Zellen



A photographic image represents the transformation of the three-dimensional world onto a flattened picture plane. In our mind's eye, we recreate the scene to understand the image. Many photographers are interested in the relationship between illusion and reality and the camera's ability to collapse or expand space. In the 1970s and 1980s, photographers like **Zeke Berman** and **John Pfahl** fabricated interventions in the natural and man-made landscape that only cohered when seen from a specific vantage point— the exact spot where they placed their cameras. In *Containment* (2018), **Chris Engman's** site specific work (initially made for **FotoFocus** in **Cincinnati**) and reconfigured for the space at **Luis De Jesus Los Angeles**, he reveals his process by creating a room-sized photographic illusion.

Viewed from the stoop just outside the gallery, Engman's *Containment* perfectly lines up, becoming an image of a cascading stream surrounded by trees that recedes into the distance. To create *Containment*, Engman shot the landscape, enlarged it so it was approximately life-size, then mapped that image, breaking it into numerous fragments and aligning it according to a fixed perspective onto the walls of a faux room constructed within the gallery for that exact purpose.

The image coheres from a single vantage point, but is otherwise disjointed, depending upon where the viewer is positioned. Engman follows this elaborate process to create many of his photographic works, yet usually only exhibits a photograph of the constructed elements rather than allow viewers to experience the illusion.

Seeing how Engman puts his works together is fascinating and while *Containment* elucidates how his other photographs are fabricated, it in no way belittles the work. It is a treat to see the shape and form of the architectural support with photographic fragments adhered to its front and sides and to then reverse engineer its construction. After passing through *Containment*, understanding how photographs like *Landscape for Quentin* or *Equivalence* (both 2017) are created becomes easier and deeper imaginatively.

Equivalence is an image of a cloud filled sky. Engman broke apart and enlarged the original photograph adhering it section by section to the walls, floor and ceiling of a small room with numerous windows, a desk and chair in the far corner and framed pictures on the wall. The place where the image coheres from the camera's vantage point is from just outside the space, looking toward the far corner. A similar illusion occurs in *Landscape for Quentin*, an image of textured desert sand dunes that has been mapped onto a receding hallway.

Bookshelves (2019) is a less complicated construction, yet just as enigmatic. Here, actual shelves with books and objects extend from a photograph of that same shelf installed on a white wall. Looking at the piece forces one to do a double take, comparing and contrasting the real objects and their photographic doppelgangers.

Engman acknowledges that his photographs are often sculptural interventions and allows the taping and tacking of the fragments onto the existing architecture to show. In many ways, he follows in the footsteps of conceptual artists who created their work without an audience and presented it as photographic documentation. While Engman reveals his process in *Containment*, he also creates an immersive environment for the viewer to experience. Seen together, the works in *Refraction*, present tromp l'oeil and perspectival illusions that speak to the complexities of photographic representation.

<https://artnowla.com/2019/03/10/chris-engman-refraction>