

## Erin Jane Nelson

### *Undersight*

June 7 – August 3, 2024

Opening reception: Friday, June 7, 5–8pm

Erin Jane Nelson's new body of work centers around a series of ceramic pinhole cameras and their resulting photographs. Painted in moody glazes and fashioned into abstractions of mythical creatures and animals, the sculptural cameras employ a centuries-old form of proto-photography as Nelson takes them into the landscape to make images. The show's title, *Undersight*, is a colloquial term for the condition of sousveillance, which refers to the art and technology of fostering a more personal, civic form of image production from the lens of "underneath" and an intimate human hand, rather than the "eye in the sky" imaging that monitors everything. By using elements of the material earth and cosmos (clay, light, air particles) to produce photographic impressions of the land, relationships to it, and to each other, Nelson's cameras do not shoot or capture, but gather and refract. In turn, the exhibition entertains the disobedient belief "that the earth makes itself" and dictates the terms of its own picturing.

For over a decade, Nelson's practice has incorporated many uses and abuses of photography: ultrasounds, nanny cams, flatbed scans, polaroids, magazine clippings, and stickers. These images are then printed on fabric, or embedded in inscrutable ceramic objects resembling memorial placards, teen bedroom collages, and vernacular Southern craft where she grew up and currently resides. Her ceramic sculptures, often wall-based, have previously served as supports, or a context for her images, which document sites of ecological devastation through the lens of personal anecdotes, local lore, and femme signifiers like flowers and hearts.

In a nuanced departure, the images that animate this show are not only affixed to surfaces but emerge from within the object itself: sun rays focused into loving recordings of ethereal swamplands and poppy fields and friends on picnic blankets, hazy and evanescent. Printed sepia-tones or black and white with the patina of early Instagram filters and emo high school dark room photography—and embedded in mottled ceramic frames like slabs of sediment flattened over ages or stone tablets bearing religious inscription—these works recall the recent-past of Nelson's environs and more obliquely register far-reaching scales of time.

In the Middle Ages, the dark interior of the camera obscura (a predecessor to early photography), was said to be a place of dark magic and illusion as sin, evidencing the devil and validation of doctrines of belief held at the time. Digging into deeper history, the cameras' emphatic circular openings resurrect a longstanding archetype for birth, a site of origins, and the sublime. Some of the earliest proto-pinhole cameras were trees, casting fuzzy circular spots of sun on the ground through openings between leaves. A related apparatus became solar clocks, where the shadow produced by a vertical stick or rod in the sun, topped with a round metal disk for focusing light, could be used to measure the

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position of the earth's most visible star in the sky. As such, you might say that time is actually an image or projection, and that images want to be "irrational," like aura or spirit photography, recording and receiving whatever inexplicable information comes its way rather than circumscribing it.

Imbued with the poetic notion of "reversal" inherent in the pinhole camera is the tool's technical operation of transforming object and light into image. Both photographs and sculptures delight in metaphorically reversing the role of the centuries-old apparatus, used in the Renaissance as technique for "capturing" the sun moving over a long period of time, studying wavelengths of light, and translating "reality" into one-point perspective. For Nelson, this instrument—the camera—historically used for such forms of "factual" documentation and perceptual control of the landscape becomes, instead, an earnest device for picking up on the universe's unknowable rhythms with play and inquisitiveness and longing for an unconstrained kind of seeing.

People love to hate nostalgia. Beyond pretension, paramount to this aversion is resistance to the fear to admit that we can't ever return to the beginnings of things. We're effectively stuck, buried in debt to the land and an onslaught of images and ideologies of control. But even Theory, which hates nostalgia most, recognizes that only at the point of failure and disillusionment—of "advancing" technologies, or social movements, or just living—can give you a glimpse at the utopia anticipated at their outset. In this way, maybe the end is always really the start.

– Margaret Kross

Erin Jane Nelson (b. 1989, Neenah, Wisconsin) lives and works in Atlanta, Georgia. In 2011 she received her BFA from The Cooper Union. She has had solo exhibitions at the Museum of Contemporary Art of Georgia, Atlanta (2021); Chapter NY, New York, NY (2023); DOCUMENT, Chicago, IL (2020, 2017, 2015); and the Atlanta Contemporary Art Center, Atlanta, GA (2019); among others. Her work was included in the 2021 New Museum Triennial and has been included in group exhibitions at the Moss Art Center, Virginia Tech; the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; the Aspen Art Museum, Aspen; the Fries Museum in Leeuwarden, NLD; La Galerie, centre d'art contemporain, Noisy-le-Sec; Deli Gallery, New York; Van Doren Waxter, New York; Capital Gallery, San Francisco; and the Pinakothek der Moderne, Munich. Nelson is a recipient of the 2023 Guggenheim Fellowship in the Creative Arts. Her work is included in the group exhibition, *Widening the Lens: Photography, Ecology, and the Contemporary Landscape*, currently on view at the Carnegie Museum of Art, Pittsburgh, through January 12, 2025.

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