

Gail Thacker: *Midnight Call*

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When I was in high school, I made a customized T-shirt with a quote by Hector Berlioz that read “Time is a great teacher, but unfortunately it kills all its pupils.” I must’ve been about fifteen years old, and desperate for adults—whom I found endlessly more interesting than people my own age—to know that I understood the cruelty of time; that despite my young age, I too had been scarred by its lessons. Gail Thacker’s photographs have been soaking up the scars of time for several decades, as the current solo exhibition *Midnight Call* at Candice Madey Gallery reveals. A member of the self-proclaimed Boston School, a group of artists who all studied in the Boston area during the early 1970s and late ’80s before relocating to New York, Thacker is hardly as well-known as some of her peers, including Nan Goldin, Jack Pierson, Tabboo!, and Mark Morrisroe. The latter was one of Thacker’s closest friends, and her 1989 portrait of Morrisroe in bed is likely her most circulated photograph.

It was Morrisroe who suggested that Thacker try Polaroid 665 positive-negative film, already knowing that Thacker had been interested in intervening in the chemical process of photography. Having just received a grant from Polaroid, Morrisroe thus found himself with some film to spare, and share. Initially trained as a painter, Thacker was quickly attracted to the Polaroid process as it exposed the material nature of photography. As she was less concerned with the lens apparatus than the surface of the image, Polaroid proved ideal in allowing the artist to witness the medium’s alchemy as it occurred in the



Gail Thacker, *Good Night, Sleep Tight, Don't Let the Bed Bugs Bite*, 1995/2017. Analog color print of a B&W Polaroid 665 negative with watercolor and acrylic, 24 3/4 x 20 3/4 inches (framed size), 20 x 16 inches (print size). Courtesy the artist and CANDICE MADEY.

moment. One day, Thacker left a bag of Polaroids in her closet, and after returning to them several months later, she discovered that time had taken its inevitable toll. The oxidation of the photographic surface resulted in blurry smudges, iridescent blotches, and an overall metallic appearance. Intrigued by these aesthetic qualities, Thacker began purposefully decaying her negatives by wrapping them in plastic and waiting for moisture, air, and shifting temperatures to leave their traces.

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As with much else in life, she had to give up control over the outcome.

Featuring Polaroids taken between 1994 and 2022, Thacker's show marks the first exhibition in Candice Madey's new gallery space in Freeman Alley. While some works are analog color prints of a black and white Polaroid 665 negative, the exhibition also includes a few of the original Polaroid 665s. A collection of portraits and landscapes, the photographs partake of a pictorialist aesthetic, fuzzy and dreamlike—on par with Julia Margaret Cameron and Duane Michals. In cityscapes such as *Radio City Hall* (2003) and *Manhattan Bridge Dumbo* (2008), New York City appears ghostly, parts of it washed out and vanished. While these photos were taken a century after pictorialism's heyday, the aged aesthetic allows my mind to wander to Edward Steichen's famous photograph of the Flatiron Building, a notable example of photography that strove to resemble painting, and an exemplar of the time before Alfred Stieglitz turned away from pictorialism in favor of straight photography.

Like many of her peers, Thacker used the camera to create intimate portraits of her queer community, in a time when many of her friends were dying of AIDS-related complications and the effects of government neglect. Much of the artist's social scene converged around the Gene Frankel Theatre on Bond Street, where Thacker has served as the artistic director and producer for the last two decades (after being Frankel's assistant until his death in 2005). Not only were many of the photographs taken inside the theater, but the theatrical manifested itself beyond its walls in the aura of the people portrayed.

In *Scooter as André Kertész's Satiric Dancer in Kevin Aviance's Dress* (2018), Thacker's longtime friend Scooter LaForge appears reclined on a chesterfield loveseat, wearing high heels, a cocktail



Gail Thacker, *Radio City Hall*, 2003. Analog color print of a B&W Polaroid 665 negative, 28 3/4 x 22 1/2 inches (framed size), 24 x 17 1/4 inches (print size).

dress designed by the queer icon Kevin Aviance, and what appears to be a marching band hat. In the room with him are a Roman bust and a painting, connoting an engagement with the arts. The oxidation in the upper right part of the photograph appears like a shower of light descending on his body. In another photograph, *Scooter in Kevin Aviance's Dress* (2018), Scooter sits on a leopard-printed chair with lush plants in the background. His gaze is directed at the photographer this time, while around his body the photographic surface seemingly melts into itself as if recently set on fire, the chemicals leaving a blue-hued frame. Elsewhere, we see the theater filled by the presence of the beautiful Agosto Machado in drag, and Walter Hurley dancing in a ballet tutu. Another

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of Thacker's longtime friends, Rafael Sanchez, emerges from a lake in *Thigh High Boot Head* (1997), with a high-heeled boot the length of his torso attached to his head. His reflection on the water is distinctly phallic, while his actual genitals are blurred. Black bubbles with white outlines appear across the water surface and in the trees, while the larger composition remains relatively intact. In two photographs, Thacker has taken a literal approach to the scars of time; *Love and Energy Claire Barnler* (1999) and *Jimmy in PC 3* (1994/2007) feature actual stitching, done with thread and needle, in the lower back and chest, respectively, of her two friends.

There is one self-portrait in the exhibition, *Good Night, Sleep Tight, Don't Let the Bed Bugs Bite* (1995/2017). Here, Thacker is captured seemingly asleep, using her hand as a pillow while leaning against the side of a couch, as she is ostensibly sitting on the floor. In addition to leaving oxidation along the frame, Thacker has painted on the photograph with watercolor and acrylic in yellow, blue, pink, and black. The word "SLEEP" is scratched into the lower left edge. This photograph exemplifies the fact that Thacker considers herself less a photographer than an artist who uses—and interrogates—the medium of photography in her artistic practice. Thacker's interest in experimenting with the photographic surface outside of the darkroom places her in dialogue with other queer artists working in and with photography, such as Liz Deschenes, Carrie Yamaoka, and Joy Episalla—all of whom notably turn to abstraction. With Yamaoka in particular Thacker shares the pursuit of chance errors and distortions, albeit with different conceptual underpinnings.

What better way to describe these photographs, perhaps, than *vanitas*? Having been literally eaten away at by time, Thacker's work reminds us of the transient nature of being. Of course, mortality looms large, yet it is not the main takeaway. Rather,



Gail Thacker, *Scooter as André Kertész's Satiric Dancer in Kevin Aviance's Dress*, 2018. Polaroid 665, 12 3/4 x 11 3/4 inches (framed size), 3 1/4 x 4 1/4 inches (print size). Courtesy the artist and CANDICE MADEY.

it is that time is unruly and you might as well lean into it. This, to me, is at the core of Thacker's process: acknowledging that she has no control over time is in itself a way of taking control.

Today, I no longer have to wear a T-shirt I printed to show that time has had its way with me. Rather, it is my changed understanding of time itself that reveals my lived experience. While Thacker's commitment to the Polaroid might be interpreted as a way of holding on to pictorialist aesthetics, summoning a certain romanticism and nostalgia for the past, it also forms an inherently queer foundation that undergirds her practice. The unfixed nature of Thacker's Polaroid process reflects the unfixed nature of identity, which Thacker and her friends embodied long before "queer" became a widely used term. Aesthetic metaphors aside, Thacker is a New York treasure who has long been overlooked, and it's about time her work reaches larger audiences.

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