

Colored By Science

Minimalist rivers at the DIVA

Walk into the large room at the Downtown Initiative for the Visual Arts, and look to your left. Sixty-five small wood panels line up on the wall, each a variation of brown, green or blue. What is this — some new kind of Minimalist color wheel? Paint chips gone a bit wild (if symmetrical)?

No: This is California artist Leah Wilson's vision of a river over time. Specifically, it's *A Year of Average Colors of the South Yuba River: a mathematical determination of an esthetic value*. One part fury at a process that excluded emotional, spiritual or artistic considerations, one part Photoshop, the piece provides a compellingly metacognitive, oddly calming look at the intersection of art, science and nature.

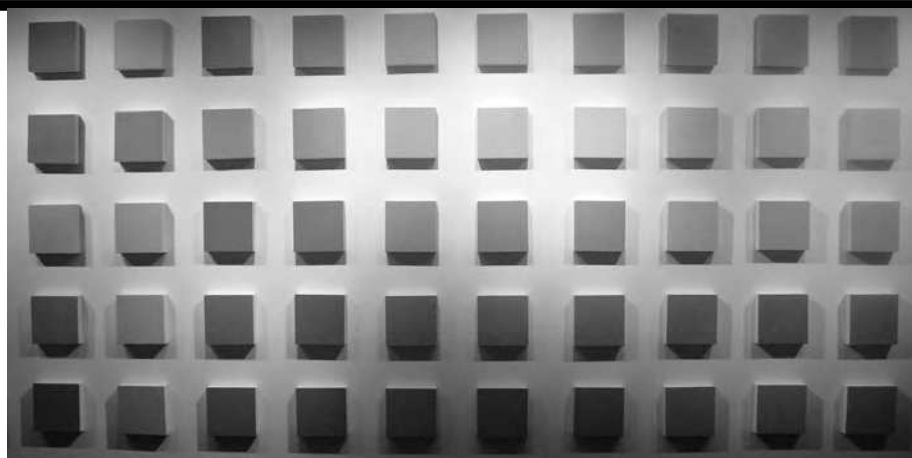
Wilson writes in the accompanying artist material that she lives near the confluence of the Yuba and the Bear in the Northern Sierra Nevada, where the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission is taking a look at something called the Colgate Project. That's a hydro-electric project (read: series of dams) that supplies power and irrigation water to various southern California locales. Right now, the power companies have to undergo a relicensing procedure, and a fair number of people living in the watershed want some input

into the dam projects. The South Yuba Citizens League (www.yubariver.net) explains the importance of the process:

For the first time in 50 years, four hydropower operators must apply for a new license for their scores of dams and hundreds of miles of diversion canals that segment and divert every major fork of the Yuba, the Bear River, and dozens of important tributary streams.

Wilson says that, as an artist in the middle of a lot of talk about resources and water flow and agriculture, she felt excluded from the process. So she set up underwater cameras at four different spots in the river, took photos and, using Photoshop, averaged the colors of each location, each month.

The year for the South Yuba River art begins in February, when almost each spot averages a nice blue-green. As melt-off begins, Wilson's color panels move through more turbulent dirty browns and yellows, in most cases returning to a greenish tone — or at least that's what one might see with the naked eye. Along with the 48 separate monthly panels, however, Wilson set up two separate grid averages: an average for each site for the full year (the 13th panel in each row) and an average for each month (the 5th panel in each column). The final



panel, on the bottom right of the 65-panel grid, shows the average color of all of the spots over all of the months of the year.

Long explanation, I know, but as with many Minimalist artworks, the backstory provides more complex meaning. Part of the intellectual and emotional enjoyment of this work emerges when viewers satisfy their curiosity by looking through Wilson's notes, including legal pads covered in gridded numbers that, in Photoshop, equal colors. Grids, squares, charts and maps provide ways of translating phenomena into human-controlled understanding, but the poignance of this piece comes from the disconnect between Wilson's passion for the river and her community's ability to make decisions about their own environment. (On the opposite wall, the show "Tropes" less successfully gives visual form to some of Wilson's other interactions with rivers.)

In another room at DIVA, photographer Lewis Forquer translates a different way,

moving from the small scale to the large, also with digital photography tools. Forquer builds tiny stage sets — *Main Street*, say, or *Front Porch* — and shoots with 4x5 film that he hand-develops. The negatives, scanned into a computer and printed onto 40x50 sheets of paper, turn into eerie representations of human loss and loneliness. One of the most powerful of these black and white prints is *Hangars*, with its grainy closet, hangars empty and askew, a mix of nostalgia, loss and bitterness — and, just possibly, new beginnings. Forquer's work begs for narrative to fill its haunting halls. Luckily, he's giving an artist's talk at noon Thursday, July 17 (the day this paper comes out). Wilson gives an art talk at noon Friday, July 24. Both talks are at DIVA.

EW

Together with artist Kate Harnedy, Forquer's and Wilson's work remains up at DIVA, 110 W. Broadway, through Aug. 29. The DIVA members' gallery hosts Sandi Whetzel through the end of July and Geoff McCormack in August.



Thank You!

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