

# Portland Press Herald

Arts & Entertainment

Review

November 1, 2024

## A Maine photographer uses a marble from childhood to look into his past

Tad Beck gets personal with exhibition 'Scrying' at Grant Wahlquist Gallery.

Posted  
4:00 AM

Jorge S. Arango



Installation of Tad Beck's "Scrying" at Grant Wahlquist Gallery; from left, "Panda," Rabbit" and "Teddy." Photos Courtesy of the artist and Grant Wahlquist Gallery

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“Scrying,” the one-word title of a show of conceptual photography, video and sculpture by Tad Beck at Grant Wahlquist Gallery in Portland (through Nov. 16), means to divine the future by looking into a crystal ball or other reflective object or surface. So, naturally, the first thing Beck does here is reverse his gaze to, instead, divine the past – specifically, various influences and objects that instilled in him a love of viewing the world through a lens.

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**IF YOU GO**

**WHAT:** “Scrying,” Tad Beck

**WHERE:** Grant Wahlquist Gallery,  
30 City Center, 2nd Floor, Portland

**WHEN:** Through Nov. 16

**HOURS:** 11 a.m. to 6 p.m.  
Wednesday through Saturday (by  
appointment other days)

**ADMISSION:** Free

**INFO:** 207-245-5732,  
[grantwahlquist.com](http://grantwahlquist.com)

The exhibition embodies several of Beck’s usual tropes, not least of which is the concept of re-photography – that is, photographing something, then photographing it again (and often again and again). There is also Beck’s conceptual framework, which encompasses a larger vision about the nature of photography that is informed by his various readings (Roland Barthes’ “Camera Lucida,” Susan Sontag’s “On Photography,” Walter Benjamin’s “Little History of Photography”).

But this show also turns out to be one of the most accessible – and personal – bodies of work Beck has created, displaying psychological probing as per usual, but also embracing playfulness and a kind of wistful introspection. Beck (whose longtime partner is gallery owner Wahlquist) is at a turning point in his life, readying to leave a house on Vinalhaven he has occupied for over 40 years. As he rummaged through things that have long been stowed out of sight, he turned up his childhood marbles and wondered what he might do with them.

That was the genesis of “Scrying,” which led to the use of marbles as crystal balls. Beck also dredged up old toys and photographed them. Then he photographed them again, but through the marbles, so they appear distorted in a fish-eye sort of way or turned upside-down. The photographs in the show are close-up encounters with these through-the-looking-glass views, their frames playfully color-matched to a dominant hue in the individual marbles – lilac, spring green, cherry red, canary yellow, teal and so on.

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Purely on the surface, these are sumptuous images, delicious in their candy colors and, because of the toys he is photographing – Teddy bears, Tigger from Winnie-the-Pooh, a stuffed rabbit, a plush elephant – instantly appealing in a happy, whimsical way. We could accept them solely at this level and derive tremendous enjoyment in occupying the same space with them as they evoke memories of our own favorite playthings.

Yet if we consider the photographer taking these images as we look at them, we begin to understand that they are less about innocent memory (which is still, of course, present) than they are about exploring how Beck became Beck the artist. The fully formed adult behind the camera lens is looking into the past for early nascent and emergent signs of who he would become, how he learned to see and interpret what he was seeing, and what filters and possibilities exist in any kind of seeing.

The video portion of the show juxtaposes two vintage screens before what look like old schoolhouse chairs. On the left screen we watch a hand puppet of a wizard against a backdrop of occult objects as he instructs his charge – a yellow hand puppet against bookshelves crammed with art tomes that have informed Beck’s practice – on the finer points of using a crystal ball.

Says the wizard, “... you’re not looking at the crystal ball. You’re more looking in the middle of the crystal ball.” The yellow puppet’s answer, points out Nancy Kathryn Burns of the Worcester Art Museum in her essay for the catalog, is quoting from Benjamin’s 1931 essay “Little History of Photography.” Benjamin points out in this essay, she writes, “photography’s ability to open new ‘image-worlds’ that benefit from an interpretive model better associated with the psychoanalytic approach to dreams as opposed to an empirical methodology.”



Tad Beck, “Teddy,” 2024, archival inkjet print mounted to Dibond in custom painted frame, 44.5 x 33 inches

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Beck's "Tigger," left, and, right, his two-channel video installation with sound at Grant Wahlquist Gallery.

As the video zooms in close to the surface of the crystal ball (actually the marble in one of the photographs), the image abstracts to reveal the inner “image-world” within it. We know we see something that was not apparent to us when we simply looked at the photograph. But now, as we look “in the middle of the crystal ball,” we become suddenly conscious of a seemingly infinite panoply of imagery: the surface chips of the marble, its interior fractures and air bubbles, the perpetually evolving refractions of light, the color of the toy behind the marble, and so on. There is always something new to be revealed the deeper we are willing to look.

We also start to question our assumptions about the nature of photography. What, exactly, is being captured? A static moment in time? A memory of something? Several layers of meaning hidden to all but those willing to probe further? These are existential questions about a medium but, in a larger sense, also universal questions about what we choose to see or not see, what we accept at face value without analysis and why, what notions of our own we try to validate in what we see and, ultimately, what sort of mirroring of our own self-images we hope the world around us can corroborate or justify.

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The idea of mirroring brings us to the final element of the show: a wall of souvenir plates from places Beck has lived, which he transformed into scrying instruments by coating them in reflective chrome. These bounce our own image back to us as well as the colors emanating from the surrounding photographs, echoing the idea of Benjamin's "image-worlds." But their arrangement is most deliberate, having been sourced from a photograph of a dining room in the house of Marcel Proust's Aunt Léonie.

Here the reference is to Barthes, who wrote in "Camera Lucida": "The Photograph does not call up the past (nothing Proustian in a photograph). The effect it produces upon me is not to restore what has been abolished (by time, by distance) but to attest that what I see has indeed existed." More ideas about corroboration and validation to be challenged, as well as the realization that the past is always ultimately out of reach, to be triggered only occasionally by memory – as when Proust's life came rushing back to him upon biting into a madeleine. Yet it will always be recalled less than accurately or precisely because it comes, inevitably, through the scrim of the whole life that followed. This is beyond the power of the camera (or the photographer) to summon, or even to fix in place with a photograph. So there is longing in these works, too, and a sense of the ungraspable.

Taken as a whole, the exhibit feels more affecting and lyrical than Beck's other bodies of work. Yet is absolutely connected to them as well. It's an interesting new chapter for this talented artist.

*Jorge S. Arango has written about art, design and architecture for over 35 years. He lives in Portland. He can be reached at: [jorge@jsarango.com](mailto:jorge@jsarango.com)*