The Art Gym
No 74

Donald **Morgan**

Virginia **Poundstone**

Covers, Adaptations, and the Scarcity of Blue

With an essay by **John Motley**

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The Art Gym presents *Covers, Adaptations, and the Scarcity of Blue*, featuring new work from Donald Morgan and Virginia Poundstone. As part of PNW Context programming, this exhibition is one of an ongoing series that connects artists of the Pacific Northwest with artists and curators outside of the region. These programs broaden and deepen connections for regional artists, providing a context for their art that ranges from the national to the international. Local viewers experience work from artists outside the region, and regional artists are brought to the attention of art audiences beyond the Pacific Northwest. PNW Context creates a dialogue around ideas, methods, materials, and processes.

Donald Morgan received his MFA from Art Center College of Design in Pasadena, California, in 2001. He has had solo shows at Soo Visual Arts Center in Minneapolis, Minnesota, and at Fourteen30 Contemporary in Portland, Oregon, where he is represented. He has received many awards and honors and was recently a co-recipient of a grant from the Precipice Fund. Morgan is a director and founder of Coast Time Artist Residency in Lincoln City, Oregon, and is a member of Ditch Projects, an artist-run space in Springfield, Oregon. He is an assistant professor in the Department of Art at the University of Oregon.

Virginia Poundstone lives in Brooklyn and travels the world for her work. Since 2009, her sculptures, photographs, and films have focused exclusively on the subject of flowers from various perspectives: economic, art historical, symbolic. She was the subject of a solo exhibition at the Aldrich Contemporary Art Museum in Ridgefield, Connecticut, in 2015 and was recently awarded a grant from the Pollock-Krasner Foundation.

John Motley is a writer who lives in Portland, Oregon. His writing on art has been published in *Art in America*, *Art Papers*, *frieze*, the *Oregonian*, the *Portland Mercury*, and on Artforum.com. In 2009, he was the recipient of a Creative Capital | Warhol Foundation grant for short-form arts writing. He is currently an adjunct instructor in the Contemporary Art Practice MFA program at Portland State University.

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Virginia Poundstone
Image for **Alpine Blue Poppy #2**
2009–16
Inkjet print on Mylar
Size variable; printed at 12 × 16 feet for installation at The Art Gym

Donald **Morgan** Virginia **Poundstone**

Covers, Adaptations, and the Scarcity of Blue

Curated by Blake Shell

March 29 – May 13, 2016

The Art Gym | *Marylhurst University*

Curator's Notes

Blake Shell
The Robert & Mercedes Eichholz Director & Curator
The Art Gym and Belluschi Pavilion

DONALD MORGAN AND VIRGINIA POUNDSTONE often combine imagery with sculpture and space: Poundstone's bent metal sculptures with photographs of flowers printed on their surfaces, Morgan's flattening of dimensional objects into hard-edged abstractions. Also, both artists delve into source materials for their practices. Most recently, Morgan has looked to literary works and films to ponder the nature of adaptation, while Poundstone draws on nonfictional accounts of the flower industry in her exploration of humanity's commodification of beauty.

In the past, iconic images from the natural world of the Pacific Northwest have been one of Morgan's main sources. His work in *Covers, Adaptations, and the Scarcity of Blue* turns to fiction instead. The series *Complete Works*, inspired by an imaginary author's life's work, comprises the covers of fictitious novels reissued at the end of a fruitful literary career. Morgan displays his modernist sensibilities in the pairing of these striking cover designs with the counting dots of a children's book. His titles appear on the upper left side of each diptych, some made up completely and some loosely adapted from books he admires. The piece *Source Material (Absalom, Absalom by William Faulkner, Count and See by Tana Hoban)* further emphasizes the notion of adaptation by laying out his sources in a vitrine whose color matches the black surface of the diptychs.

Poundstone's larger-than-life images of the rare blue poppy in its Himalayan habitat, reproduced on Mylar, envelop the movable walls of The Art Gym. The slick, shiny Mylar highlights the imperfections in the walls and the material, drawing attention to the fact behind the fiction: an image of something we haven't seen in real life, adhered to a wall, is not the rare thing itself. This truth is emphasized by a pair of images, one on the "back" of each wrapped wall, that show a joltingly artificial blue rose held by an outstretched hand, absent the natural world.

The nuances of playing with flattened images and dimensional space, as well as the intertwining of fiction and fact, evoke interesting parallels between two artists who are currently working in different subjects and mediums. As Morgan designs book covers, Poundstone's works wrap the room like a book jacket gone askew. Her blue roses peek between the walls as viewers read the title of Morgan's piece *The Daffodil and the Vortex*. Both artists explore how presentation alters the nature of a source, whether a plant or an original work of art. That alteration becomes the subject as much as the source itself in these artists' adaptations.

D T O S R L
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R E E T A H E
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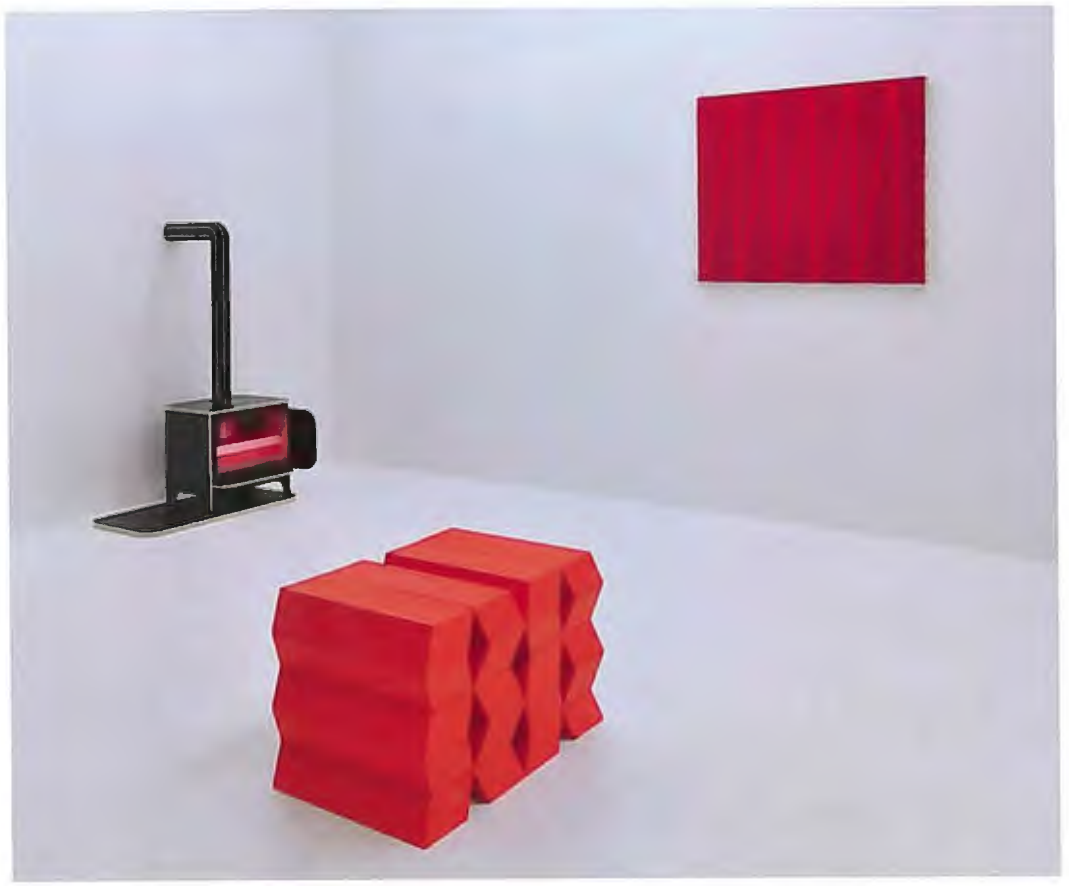
A Y R
R P T
C D F E
O C F
L O E
M T O E T E A
A E F G I S C
S R N A V P E

Virginia Poundstone
Rainbow Rose
2015
Adhesive-backed vinyl scaled to the size of the architecture with rose's stem in the corner. Shown installed at the Aldrich Museum of Contemporary Art, Ridgefield, Connecticut.
Size variable; shown at 20 × 22 feet

Photograph by Jean Vong



Donald Morgan
Stove
2015
Acrylic laminate, enamel, rubber, maple plywood
55 × 37 × 26 inches

British Thermal Units
2012
Acrylic on board
17 × 30 × 17 inches

Heater
2012
Enamel on acrylic laminate
34 × 40 inches

Photograph by Evan La Londe

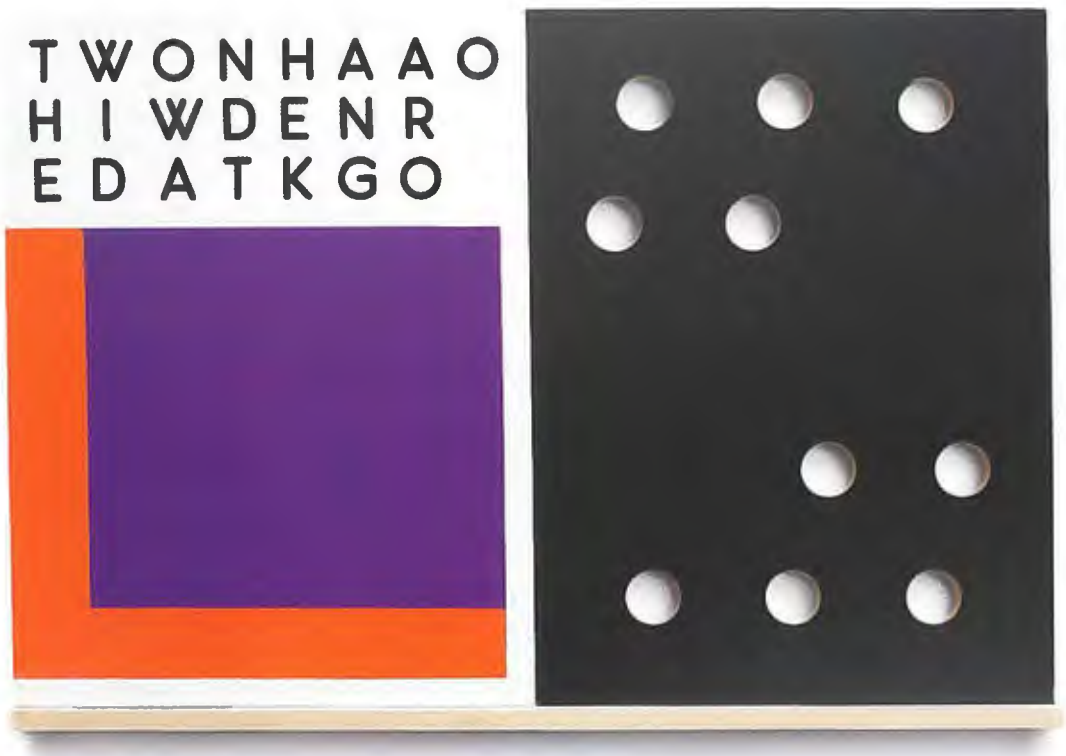
Donald Morgan and Virginia Poundstone

John Motley

IN THE WORK of Donald Morgan and Virginia Poundstone, the natural world is an inviting, if strange, asylum, where we are consoled by solitude and beauty, revived by that world's sheer difference from our "civilized" experience of the everyday. But that distinction defines our relationship to nature, drawing a line between our sense of inclusion and the fact of our exile. Morgan lives and works in Eugene, Oregon, and the landscape of the Pacific Northwest has inspired much of his work—from aluminum-cast cow pies sprouting hallucinogenic liberty caps to sculptural works that abstract stacks of firewood and spider webs into cool formalism. Similarly, Poundstone, who resides in Brooklyn, New York, has developed a body of work dominated by an obsession with flowers, including bronze and poured-glass casts of petals; flower presses that double as pedestals; and digital photographs of flowers, often twisted and shaped into sculptural forms. In *Covers, Adaptations, and the Scarcity of Blue*, which pairs new work by these two artists, Morgan and Poundstone's shared interest in the natural world engages the age-old problem of representation—how the most faithful treatments of source material are necessarily translations that can only ever aspire to approximate and describe, rather than index. In other words, even the most exacting facsimiles risk fakery: what we think we see is always warped by projection and misinterpretation.

IN THE *Complete Works* series, Morgan's focus on nature seems to have retreated indoors, turning to a cozy domesticity and the pastime of reading, perhaps in reaction to Oregon's wet and gloomy winter months. The series consists of fifteen wall-mounted diptychs, made with enamel and acrylic laminate on wooden panels, that riff on the reductive forms of modernism and the stylized tidiness of book design. The left side of each diptych contains the title of an imagined novel, which reads from top to bottom and then left to right, forcing the viewer's eyes to ping-pong up and down and across to decode the phrase. Beneath these titles, a smaller square is anchored in the corner of a larger square, juxtaposing vibrant colors—turquoise with flamingo pink, peach with fuchsia, and so on—in a manner that conjures the optical play in Josef Albers's seminal *Homage to the Square* series, begun in 1949. The right side of each diptych, on the other hand, is uniformly black, with punched-out holes that number the works from one to fifteen, like an esoteric scorecard.

The visual vocabulary of these works is rooted in a pair of references: the children's counting book *Count and See* by Tana Hoban, published in 1972; and the cover design of the Modern Library College Editions series, which repackaged canonical American fiction in the 1950s. From Hoban, Morgan applies the instructional design of punched-out dots, which express numeric values, as a visual motif in his diptychs. From the Modern Library jackets, each of which features a weighty ▸16



The Widow and the Kangaroo
2015–16
Enamel on acrylic laminate, wood
27¾ × 40 inches

Photograph by Donald Morgan

Absalom, Absalom!
by William Faulkner
Modern Library College Editions, 1951

Donald Morgan
The Complete Works

The work I am exhibiting, a series of wall pieces called *The Complete Works*, incorporates hard-edged abstraction and book cover design. There are fifteen stand-alone yet interrelated pieces, a number I arrived at based on R. K. Narayan's lifetime output of novels, which seems like an ideal number of books to have written. Each piece is a diptych composed of one panel that suggests the cover of a book and a second black panel with holes in it. The series is self-referential in that the black panels with holes simply count the cover panels, serving as an index and suggesting a sort of aesthetic scorecard or checklist. The panels with holes are informed by a children's counting book by Tana Hoban, *Count and See*, published in 1972. The cover panels are informed primarily by the cover design of the Modern Library College Editions popular in the 1950s, all of which featured a single monochromatic block of color on the cover.

The titles are all invented; I think of them as the titles of books I would like to write, were I a writer. (Though a couple are adaptations of titles of books that I admire: *Fool's Guide to the Afternoon* is a take on *An Amateur's Guide to the Night*, by Mary Robison. A couple of them refer to actual works of literary fiction: *Sugar and Sweet* refers to characters in Lewis Nordan's *Music of the Swamp*.) The titles are read from top to bottom and then from left to right, which creates a sort of lexical dissonance and also emphasizes the aesthetic of the letters themselves.

Overall, my work deals with the process of adapting source material, very often literary fiction, into sculptures and paintings. There is always a grab bag of influences, concerns, and impulses that goes into one's work, but the books I read have come to figure more and more prominently in my process. I am increasingly interested in the vagaries of connection and disconnection between literary source material and artistic output. The bodies of work I make, which function as idiosyncratic, partial, or loose adaptations of books, are the result of a methodology I have crafted, based in part on the process of translating books into film. I am influenced by films, specifically loose adaptations that depart radically from the books upon which they are based—such as *Beau Travail*, directed by Claire Denis. Her film echoes the basic framework of Herman Melville's *Billy Budd*, but thoroughly departs from it in surprising and inventive ways.

Similarly, I am interested in how the physicalized confabulations I create based on literary source material function to trigger unexpected yet specific associative readings and sensory responses. It is my intent to refashion aspects of what I read and see into unique sculptural and pictorial configurations that not only point crookedly back to their source material but also stake out new territory, creating novel, complex experiences for the viewer.

The Daffodil and the Vortex
Party Party
Master of Negative Space

The Widow and the Kangaroo
Cold Coffee
2015–16
Enamel on acrylic laminate, wood
Each 18⅝ × 40 inches

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H A O L D E R X
E F D A T V T

T W O N H A A O
H I W D E N R
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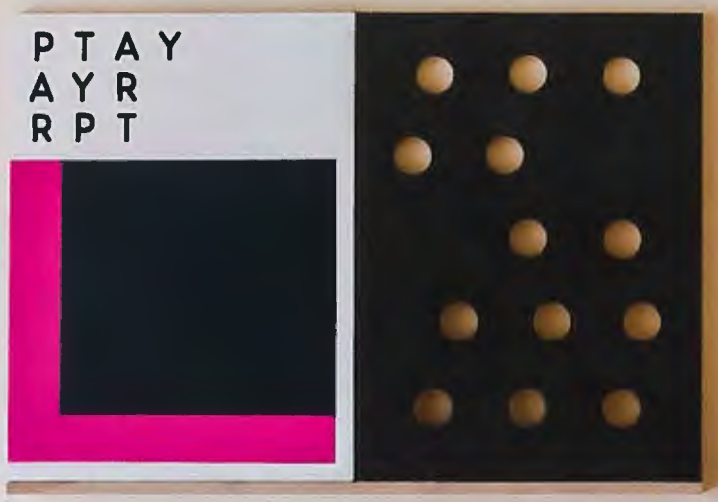
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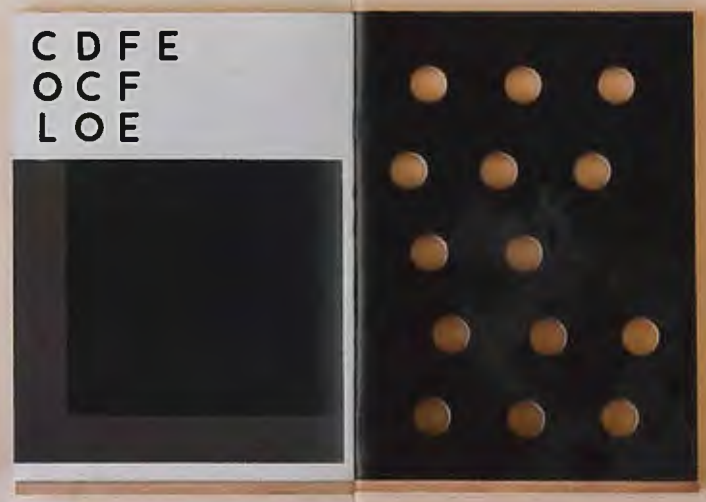
C D F E
O C F
L O E

M T O E T E A
A E F G I S C
S R N A V P E

Dogs Breakfast
Tiny Sunlit Girl
African Wizard

Sugar and Sweet
Train Crossing Landscape
2015–16
Enamel on acrylic laminate, wood
Each 27¾ × 40 inches

monochromatic square that sits, plinth-like, beneath the author's name and the novel's title, he zeroes in on the dissonance between the evocative, imagination-stoking titles and the dense, void-like swatches of color.

These basic ingredients, appropriated from seemingly disparate sources, distill the phenomena of the natural world into categories of visual perception: shapes and colors, quantities and signs. Morgan's conceptual approach to representing the nature of perception is systematic and orderly, but porous enough to accommodate a little chaos, too. As such, the visual information that populates each diptych neither explains nor instructs, as in Hoban's recto-verso layouts, but nonetheless conjures a descriptive atmosphere. Most obviously, Morgan's invented titles, which are alternately sweet, funny, or entirely plausible names of literary works, imply a loose narrative, while aiming the viewer's attention at various compositional elements. *Sugar and Sweet*, the second work in the series, seems to map logically with the two holes on the right panel as well as the saccharine light and dark pinks that make up the left panel's squares. *Revenge of the Alphabet* nods to the scrambled letters in the title, while *Master of Negative Space* alludes to the fifteen holes punched out of its right side. The black and gray squares of *Cold Coffee* effectively approximate the disappointment of a hot cup turned cool. Throughout all of the titles, figures of childish fascination—dogs, daffodils, kangaroos, and trampolines—commingle with adult concepts such as vortices, widows, death, and that existential cup of cold coffee. Within the familiar look and orderly arrangement of book design, we are prompted to ignore these incongruities and accept them as natural. In fact, they present two distinct vantages and then overlay them: the child's perspective of the world as new and full of wonder is superimposed on the adult's long view, informed by experience and adversity.

It seems critically important that the forms anchoring Morgan's *Complete Works* connect a child's primer for counting to difficult, "grown-up" literature. Words, numbers, shapes, and colors are the building blocks not only of sensory perception, but also of artistic expression. They are simultaneously simple and complex concepts, which remain so riddled with abstraction and contradiction that the notion of mastery, at any age, is laughable. Instead, they constitute the DNA of imaginative play, which encompasses the childlike delight of naming and counting and extends to the adult artist's awareness that numbers diminish and expire, that names are forgotten.

VIRGINIA POUNDSTONE'S WORK has long posited flowers as a kind of analog for contemporary art: through their arresting beauty, they have cultivated a rabid throng of global collectors and a flourishing economy. Flowers, while playing an essential biological role in pollination, are nonetheless like art in that their function often disappears in the face of their formal allure. That is, we are so seduced by their range of colors, shapes, and fragrances that they have come to symbolize our own desire. Though this idea is central to Poundstone's work, she is no more successful at guarding herself against their temptations than anyone else. In 2009, her passion for flowers led her to travel to India's Valley of Flowers National Park, where she ▸ 21

Virginia Poundstone
Blue Rose #1 (Diptych)
2016
Inkjet print on steel
Each 3 × 2 feet

Virginia Poundstone

Blue is the most elusive and coveted color in botany. The molecular structure that creates a true blue hue is an extremely complicated mix of pigments and minerals. The scarcity of this perfect mix is precisely why these blooms are so desirable. As with any luxury product, knockoffs abound.

In 2009, in pursuit of the wildest blooms, I traveled to India's Valley of Flowers National Park in the Western Himalaya. There, I found the exceptionally rare Himalayan blue poppy. This poppy grows above the tree line in rocky, slippery terrain and was thought by Westerners to be mythical until Eric Bailey, a British explorer, found and documented one in 1913. During monsoon season, I happened upon a seventeen-thousand-foot peak carpeted with the singular *Meconopsis baileyi* (named after Bailey).

Unlike the unimpressive dyed blue roses created to fulfill consumers' desire for blue flowers, Himalayan blue poppies are magnificent. Tucked into rocky crevices, their hue weightless amid solid mountains and looming clouds, they are momentous. Equally significant is the fact that the dyed blue rose thrives in the marketplace, evidence of the extent of our divorce from the natural world. Injected with false color, like Botox, these engineered white roses become artificial stand-ins for the meaningful scarcity Mother Earth provides.

Image for **Alpine Blue Poppy #1**
2009–16
Inkjet print on Mylar
Size variable; printed at 16 × 12 feet for installation at The Art Gym

Alpine Blue Poppy #1
2009–16
Inkjet print on Mylar
Size variable; printed at 16 × 12 feet for installation at The Art Gym

encountered and photographed the Himalayan blue poppy, a specimen so rare that it remains practically mythical.

For *Covers, Adaptations, and the Scarcity of Blue*, a pair of close-up images of the poppy have been blown up to monumental scale, printed on Mylar, and draped at oblique angles over a pair of movable walls within the gallery. These prints of the flowers are nothing short of sumptuous: we see their fuzzy stalks tucked into a craggy nook, beads of dew clinging to their leaves, and the otherworldly violet-blue of their crêpe-paper petals. While enlarging the photographs—and the flowers—to such enormous proportions would seem to emphatically insist on the fact of their existence, they remain strange and exotic, as if growing in an alien landscape. The shift in scale seems designed to replicate, for viewers, the moment when Poundstone first spotted them—but this discovery and the subsequent awe is manufactured, a representation that is a distant echo of the artist's firsthand experience. Divorced from the hunt for the poppies and removed from the majestic mountain setting where Poundstone encountered them, the wonder that we, as viewers, register is undermined. We approach the images' cinematic scale with the same mix of easy acceptance and bottom-line incredulity we reserve for television and film. The artist understands and anticipates this response, as signaled by her use of Mylar, which draws a jarring juxtaposition between the incredibly precious poppy and the cheapness of a shiny drugstore balloon.

As a foil to these monumental prints, Poundstone presents two smaller images, also printed on Mylar and surrounded by that material's reflective silver, which portray identical though inverted images of an African American child's hand holding a single blue rose. Unlike the icy blue poppy, the rose is a fake—a white rose injected with blue dye—that's been created to satisfy the demand for this unusual hue. Here, the child's skin tone reminds us of the unsettling truth that botany is not the only realm in which humans privilege certain colors over others. And as our own faces are reflected in the Mylar, Poundstone makes it exactingly clear that we are complicit in interpreting color as somehow related to value, whether it be the inflated price of an exotic bloom or the socioeconomic marginalization of a group of people.

IN BOTH OF these bodies of work, the artists' attempts to accurately represent the natural only emphasize the artifice inherent in that endeavor. As Poundstone depicts an ultra-rare botanical specimen in larger-than-life detail, we experience some degree of knee-jerk skepticism, comparing the blue poppy to the blue rose and parsing fact from fiction. Likewise, Morgan's orderly layouts attempt to schematize visual perception while consolidating perspectives from two distinct stages of life—child and adult—into a single conjoined work (the duality of the diptych acknowledges the futility of this undertaking). But in both cases, examining nature—whether through flora or human perception—reveals our fundamental separation from it. We insist that meaning is embedded in the phenomena of the world, patiently waiting to be discovered, like the Himalayan poppy. But what we actually uncover is planted by the fact of our looking, and disfigured by our failure to see that a flower is just a flower.

◂

Alpine Blue Poppy #2
2009–16
Inkjet print on Mylar
Size variable; printed at 12 × 16 feet for installation at The Art Gym

Alpine Blue Poppy #1
2009–16
Inkjet print on Mylar
Size variable; printed at 16 × 12 feet for installation at The Art Gym

Acknowledgments

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The Art Gym and Marylhurst University also deeply thank the artists Donald Morgan, of Fourteen30 Contemporary, and Virginia Poundstone for their remarkable work in this exhibition and publication.

Since 1980, **The Art Gym** has been recognized as a venue that exhibits some of the most significant and timely art of this region. The mission of the gallery is to increase public understanding of the contemporary art of the Pacific Northwest through exhibitions, artists' projects, publications, and public engagement.

The Art Gym is a noncollecting, noncommercial gallery that supports artists in creating ambitious, risk-taking projects at various stages in their careers. As an art space working within an academic venue, we are committed to providing artistic and intellectual freedom. The Art Gym's catalogs continue to be among the greatest records of the contemporary art history of the Pacific Northwest, contributing to the discourse on contemporary art and representing the region. We are dedicated to making knowledge accessible and connecting artists and community.

Blake Shell is the Robert and Mercedes Eichholz Director and Curator of The Art Gym and Belluschi Pavilion at Marylhurst University, providing the artistic direction and leadership of the organization.

Covers, Adaptations, and the Scarcity of Blue
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