

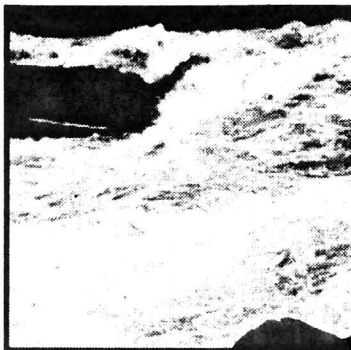
BRIAN COLLIER: EARTH AND WATER at Artemisia, through March 29

By Fred Camper

TIME IN A BOTTLE

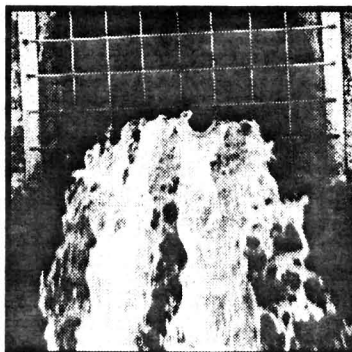
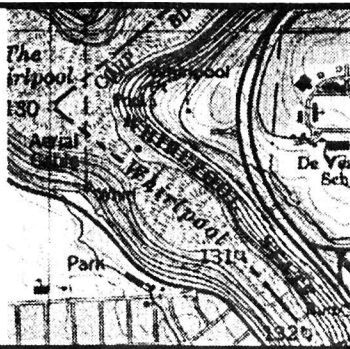
After seeing Brian Collier's two installations at Artemisia, I wasn't surprised to hear him call Robert Smithson "a huge influence." Both bring natural materials into the gallery in sculptural installations, though Smithson's works create modernist paradoxes: the formal and conceptual ambiguity of, say, rocks in a cage straining to hold them is a major part of his message. Collier's work may lack Smithson's multiple layers, but he reconnects the viewer with the physical world more directly than Smithson does in his gallery work.

Collier's *Some Properties of Water: Phase Two, Evaporation* (2003) lyrically celebrates water. The installation is made up of 81 framed digital prints of the locales from which he sampled water; the 81 tubes he used to hold the samples, arrayed in three cases on the floor; and a grid of 81 glass-bottomed trays into which he poured the water. With evaporation, each sample has left different patterns in the tray—some wispy, others composed of solid sediment. These physical residues not only document the nature of each sample but record time's passing.



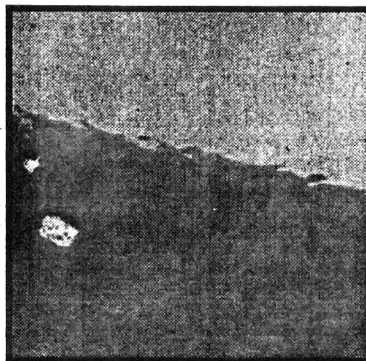
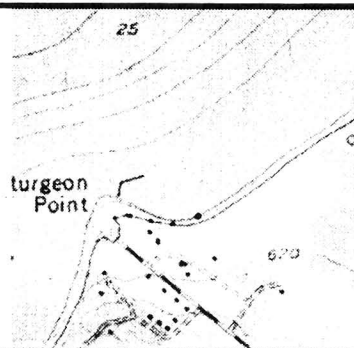
No. 51

Niagara Falls, NY
Whirlpool State Park
Niagara River
56 degrees Fahrenheit when collected
Collected by dipping
Cloudy, slight odor of clay



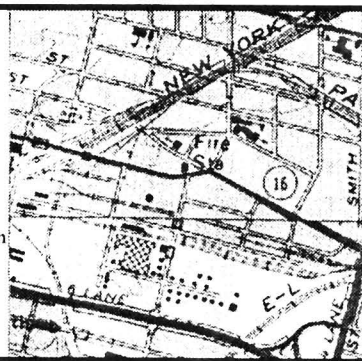
No. 39

Sturgeon Point, NY
Drainage pipe at Lake Erie shore
70 degrees Fahrenheit when collected
Collected by dipping
Clear, no large particles, slight odor of chlorine



No. 3

Buffalo, NY
Seneca Industrial Center parking lot
Large puddle
41 degrees Fahrenheit when collected
Collected by dipping
Light brown, opaque, small particles floating on the surface, no strong odors



"SOME PROPERTIES OF WATER: PHASE TWO, EVAPORATION" (DETAILS)

ART

Each digital print is a triptych. At the left is a photo Collier took of the site; these vary from puddles to swamps to patches of snow to a drainage pipe to indoor sink taps. In the middle is a text that names the place, describes the collection method, and includes the water's temperature, appearance, and smell ("slight odor of chlorine"). At the right is a topographic map marking the sampling point. While Collier's photos are visually interesting, what's most compelling is how each element of the installation expands one's awareness of the others. The patterns in the trays give resonance to the empty tubes that

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marked, and Shanahan's moves become more athletic. But the video is still relatively subdued: at the rear a projection of empty performance space gives way to a blizzard of abstract images while at stage left the el goes by occasionally—sometimes in fact and sometimes on film. Then Shanahan's moves draw the audience's eyes to something projected against the pictured el, which turns out to be her own real-time image from a different angle than the audience would have. The projection is ghostly, like one of those hologram messages in *Star Wars*, but defined enough to make her point: what dance audiences see from their seats is only a sliver of what there is to see. Her work suggests that some of dance's limitations as a means of communication are limitations of perception rather than execution: a movement appears awkward or inconclusive simply because we're not seeing it all. (Busby Berkeley had a similar insight—that's the point of showing all those routines from impossible angles—but could deliver it only at the top of his lungs.) Some of Shanahan's movements, however, are deliberately incomplete, like the repeated gathering of herself to do a leap that never comes. I wish she'd let herself be airborne, but her work is so grounded that the absence of flight must be deliberate.

Midway through the piece

Shanahan leaves the stage (presumably to catch her breath), and the video comes into its own. The split-screen projection of five dancers doing solos works better when Palmer keeps the action at its real-life pace instead of speeding it up, but this unconventional chorus line ably consoles the audience for Shanahan's absence—and when it winks out one dancer at a time, we're delivered smoothly back to the world of the solo.

When Shanahan returns she's wearing elegant black evening attire. Though the earlier dancing couldn't be described as tentative, she seems to move now with a new confidence and fluidity. The choreography becomes bolder and takes up more space, as though determined to reveal itself from all angles without the help of video projection or mirroring by a second dancer (at the opening performance, videographer Palmer). In the evening's final figure, Shanahan's arms reach to their full span, then she pumps them in a gesture of momentum as she moves forward: choo-choo! Though it embodies the rhythm brilliantly, it's the only move whose timing is misjudged: Shanahan circled the stage perhaps five times doing it, and midway through the fourth, the audience began to shift in their seats. Perhaps she didn't know exactly how to conclude—that's the

problem with doing a piece about repetition—or perhaps the point was to show that reiteration can exhaust the watcher as well as the doer. Overall, though, there's a lot more exhilaration than exhaustion in *So-Called Repetition*. ■

art

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once contained "clear" water, as many prints describe it. The maps and texts provide a context not easy to convey in photographs.

The effect of the installation as a whole is to forge connections. Maps remind us that the water found at any one point comes from a whole landscape—runoff from the hills shown in the maps. As a boy Collier (who was born in 1970 in Bay Shore, Long Island, and now lives in Bloomington, Illinois) was a collector of "insects and rocks—whatever I could get my hands on," and originally he planned to major in marine biology. The size and systematic organization of *Some Properties of Water* reflects a collector's impulse, but the work is less about water, which in any case has evaporated, than it is about a way of seeing.

Most of the images around us, in high art and pop culture alike, are stripped from their context. Indeed, a modernist image is organized ac-

ording to its own internal logic rather than as an illusion of what it represents, loosening its ties to the depicted world. But even photographs only rarely suggest what lies beyond their borders; part of the art is to delimit reality through framing. Where Smithson's hermeticism creates a kind of whirlpool or labyrinth around meaning, denying the viewer stability, Collier's expanded relationships—provided by the maps, photos, texts, and water residues—remind the viewer of the simple pleasures to be found in contemplating the variety and complexity of the physical world.

For his other installation, *81 Cubic Inches* (2001), Collier removed 81 cubic inches of earth, each cubic inch from a different locale, and placed them in Plexiglas boxes arranged in a nine-by-nine grid on a table. In his statement he writes, "Nature" has been subdivided and compartmentalized to such a degree that our experience of it rarely extends beyond managed parks, natural history museums, and television shows. To comment on this situation, I separated samples from their original environment and placed them in containers." While his statement suggests disapproval of the "situation," the installation is free of condemnatory rhetoric. Indeed, these chunks of earth are beautiful and varied, some seeming little more than lichen, others mostly

soil, others filled with plant matter. Mounting them in tiny square containers occasions a more intense gaze than most people would bring to a random patch of earth.

Part of *81 Cubic Inches* is a grid of 81 paintings hung on the wall, each a copy Collier made from one of the soil samples. Since then the samples have started to look more alike because of natural decay, so the paintings show their greater original variety. Four books describing the project, including one that contains pictures of each area of ground before and after the sampling, are set out on stands Collier made, and the copper tool he devised to remove soil is displayed in a box. But the paintings are key. They're done on linen paper soaked in paraffin, which softens the image—giving it, as Collier says, "a fleshy texture." Mounted across from the soil-sample grid, the paintings seem to offer a different version of it. Collier not only encourages a comparison between his art and the physical model for it, he acknowledges decay and hence time; his paintings also show how attentive he was to the soil samples and thus intensify the viewer's attention to them. Like many nature-based artists, Collier doesn't impose his own sense of form on the world; instead he wants to reconnect with the soil from which we've all sprung. ■

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