

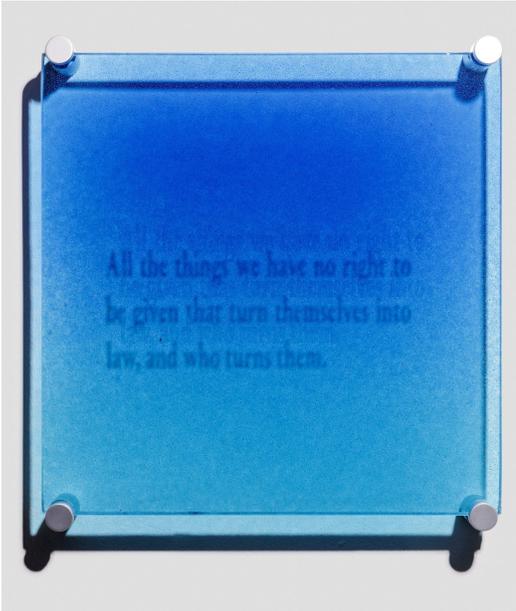
HYPERALLERGIC

Chloë Bass Disarms With Beauty

The multiform artist quietly coaxes us to see the world as a means to look inward.

By Nereya Otieno

January 10, 2023



Installation view of Chloë Bass | *#sky #nofilter: Hindsight for a Future America*, California African American Museum at Art + Practice (photo by Joshua White)

LOS ANGELES — On the sly, Chloë Bass turns her viewers into poets. The multiform artist quietly coaxes us to see the world as a means to look inward. It's as if her work is both a mirror and a magnifying glass, a foreign object that suddenly reveals part of yourself. At present, Bass has two concurrent shows in LA — at the Skirball Center and Art + Practice, the latter of which will evolve into a permanent installation, commissioned by the California African American Museum, later this year.

The Skirball show, titled *Wayfinding*, features five themed sections of 30-plus different styles of signage throughout the Skirball's outdoor campus. Each sign poses a text that quietly pokes at the truths you've hidden from yourself or features an image of bodies touching that stirs up a sense of tenderness. For this show, its final stop after a multi-year national tour, Bass added the fifth site-specific section as well as an accompanying audio work.

Originally shared on Instagram, *#sky #nofilter: Hindsight for a Future America*, at A+P, is a multimedia exploration of selected texts alongside shots of clear blue skies leading up to the 2016 presidential election. Bass explains the project as "the translation from photos/texts/lecture/performance script/chapbook to physical artworks, including a permanent sculpture." These selections will eventually become CAAM's permanent public installation of 16 arranged glass panels representing the photos, with nearly undetectable hairline engravings, only evidenced by the shadow of text they cast on the ground.

I spoke with Bass about her work, how I experience it, and how she feels others experience it. The conversation was enjoyable, funny, and wide-ranging. I mention that I think she makes people upset a lot with the surprise intensity of her work. For instance, a casual walk through a pleasant garden can unexpectedly mention of a truth you've been actively avoiding. It can make one feel blindsided. “

Oh my god, all the time,” she responds. She’s petite, with large eyes and endearingly curly hair. Her voice is gentle, soft, and a bit higher in register — the children’s librarian who teaches you to read, not the one who shushes you. This is a secret weapon in *Wayfinding*’s audio work. “People hear me and think [I have] this sweet little voice. So I can say the most horrible things — not mean things, but deeply, deeply challenging things and people legitimately do not notice until later.”



Installation view of Chloë Bass | #sky #nofilter: *Hindsight for a Future America*, California African American Museum at Art + Practice (photo by Charles White)

By asking questions in her work, Bass tasks viewers to acknowledge and then articulate an emotional response. That’s what I mean by turning viewers into poets — she prompts a search for language. She wants to create environments that allow people to “feel that sense of needing to put language to something that is painful,” she explains. “I am trying to make work that meets people quite literally in the moment or in the place where they are. I want it to emotionally reach people where they’re at.”

Well, it reaches me disoriented and slightly disheveled. Shaken up by the unanticipated therapy session she thrust me into. Like most folks, I look for reference points when I am disoriented and my anchors lean linguistic. Three words repeatedly came to mind when viewing Bass’s work and during our conversation: nature, echo, and pretty.

NATURE

... from Latin *natura* “birth, nature, quality,” from *nat-* “born,” from the verb *nasci*. Post the mid-1600s, “nature” became associated with the world outside of human civilization. (etymonline.com)

Both *Wayfinding* and #sky #nofilter involve nature. The former is located entirely outside; the latter is composed of recontextualized images of the sky. Bass questions what constitutes nature; it feels simultaneously intrinsic to and challenged by her work. “I don’t know if it’s *nature* nature when the trees at a museum are cultivated,” she says. Then, describing the view from her 28th-floor New York City studio, “I’m looking out at this massive wall of windows. There’s a lot of sky, there’s a river, there are skyscrapers, there’s this built in environment all around me and the sky is part of that, or a context to that. So, I think a lot of things that are in the natural world are not being presented to us or experienced in the context of nature.”

But if the natural world has long been omitted within the context of nature, how do we know what it is, both in terms of physical environment and human behavior? Is it natural to entertain the weight of Bass’ statement: “I want to believe that bodies can be different without being threatening”? It’s a mind exercise she seems skilled in offering. If a beaver’s dam is natural, what about a log cabin?

ECHO

The word echo derives from the Greek ἠχώ (ēchō), itself from ἦχος (ēchos), “sound.” Echo in the Greek folk story is a mountain nymph whose ability to speak was cursed, leaving her able only to repeat the last words spoken to her. (Wikipedia)

Bass plays with information loss as a biological and social hack. In *#sky #nofilter*, a text reads “Forgetting is essential to survival.” *Wayfinding* features a billboard asking, “How much of hope is forgetting?” specifically made for the Skirball, a cultural center that defines itself as “a place of meeting guided by the Jewish tradition of welcoming the stranger.” Bass is both Black and Jewish — identities that have cause to be wary of strangers. “I think, to a certain extent, it is essential to remember what has happened to you,” she says. “But I think for persecuted identity groups and people who have been through historic or contemporary suffering in really particular ways, you need to have a little bit of hope in the world in order to do something like have a baby or buy a house, or do anything that signifies there will be a future for you and people like you.”

An echo is a way the past persists into the present. I see these works dealing with a reconciliation of past and present, from experiencing to understanding. The discomfort Bass stirs is the resonance of a past occurrence or thought, a way to acknowledge an echo as it fades.

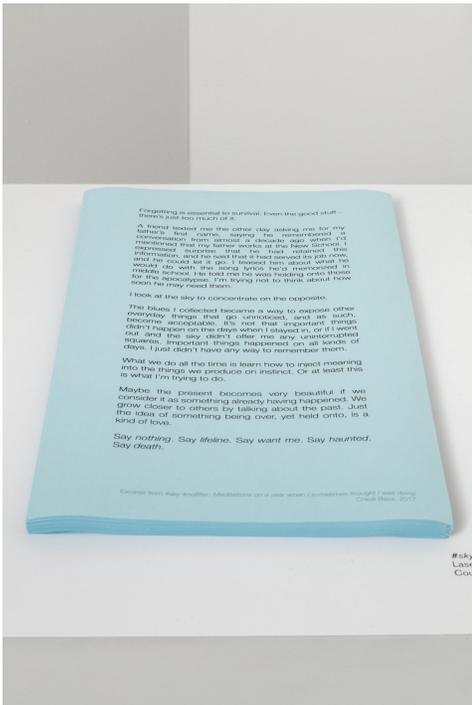
PRETTY

First appeared in Old English as “praetig,” meaning “cunning or crafty,” based on “praett,” meaning “trick.” In the 1400s, acquired the somewhat less shifty meanings of “clever, skillful and able,” which led to its use meaning “elegantly made or done; ingenious and artful.” (word-detective.com)

“Pretty” has drifted far from its original connotation of intentional deception. I don’t think of Bass’s work as pretty. I think it is aesthetically pleasing, weighted with character, and built upon astutely contextualized observations. It is intimidating in its depth — the way truly beautiful things are. But she employs beauty as a tool to disarm. “I don’t think we get very far by asking people to approach something that could be quite painful. Even the approach is threatening,” she explains. “Right now I’m making these things that are kind of beautiful or precise in a certain type of way that I hope is visually satisfying or allows people to be willing to come physically and mentally closer to very complex sets of feelings.”

Bass’s work also explores the concepts of prettiness and nature as kinds of performances. *#sky #nofilter* presents nearly 200 images of the sky. Or does it? “If you’re like, ‘These are 192 real blues of the sky.’ No, they’re not. They’re 192 digital translations of a kind of idea,” she explains. “Those blue photos are a selection of colors that an iPhone 5C translates as sky in the absence of other context within the image.” A picture is a camera’s interpretation of how to reproduce what your eye sees on a screen. In this case, it’s what Apple’s coders deem pretty. As Bass says to me, “They’re not lies, but we never really question how much of this is fiction.”

At one point, Bass tells me, “I’m definitely interested in kindness as a human experience. I don’t know that I’m always that interested in kindness as part of my art experience.” At my core, despite my emotional disquiet, I feel buoyed by her efforts. Closer to parts of myself, ready to carry rather than drag them along. The goal may not be making people feel better, but making people be better. Or simply more honest. *#nofilter*.



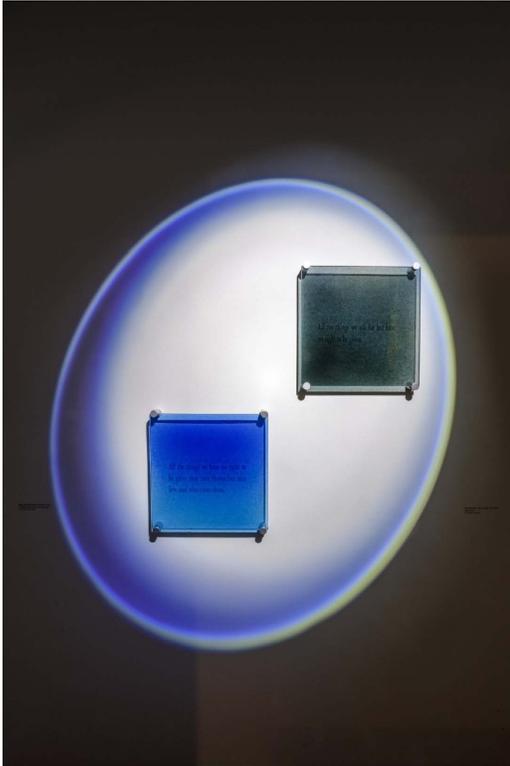
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Hindsight for a Future America, California African
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Installation view of *Chloë Bass*: *Wayfinding* at the Skirball Cultural Center
 (photo by Hal Banfield, courtesy the Skirball Cultural Center)



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Installation view of *Chloë Bass: Wayfinding* at the Skirball Cultural Center (photo by Hal Banfield, courtesy the Skirball Cultural Center)

Chloë Bass: Wayfinding continues at the Skirball Cultural Center (2701 North Sepulveda Boulevard, Bel Air, Los Angeles, California) through March 12. The exhibition was curated by Cate Thurston.

#sky #nofilter: Hindsight for a Future America continues at Art + Practice (3401 Degnan Blvd, Leimert Park, Los Angeles, California) through January 17. The final installation with the California African American Museum will be installed in Los Angeles later in 2023. The exhibition was curated by Taylor Renee Aldridge.

The artist will be in conversation with both curators, Thurston and Aldridge, on January 18 at the Skirball Cultural Center. Tickets are available [here](#).

Editor's Note, 1/11/2023, 3:41 pm EDT: An earlier version of this article incorrectly stated that the artist's talk will take place at the CAAM. It is at the Skirball Cultural Center.