

Weathering Time

Leah Beeferman's Artistic Vision on Landscape and Change

by Yutong Shi

While writing this piece, I was staying on the mountain to escape the sweltering summer heat. Each day, I sat in a small courtyard, captivated by the clouds drifting lazily across the sky and the bamboo swaying gently in the breeze. I found myself eagerly awaiting the afternoon rain that never failed to come, only to be followed by twilight's soft, fading light as the evening unfurled its painted sky. There was something indescribably enchanting about these ever-changing weather patterns that I couldn't quite articulate. This ineffable allure mirrored the mysterious resonance I found when I first encountered the work of artist Leah Beeferman.

Leah Beeferman is an image maker who is deeply engaged with the phenomena and ideas surrounding weather and landscape. At first glance, her works may seem photographic, but a closer examination reveals that they transcend the traditional boundaries of photography as mere reflection or documentation of realities. Instead, Beeferman's approach is more akin to drawing, where images serve not simply as visual materials but as tools that open up new dimensions of experiences, offering glimpses of what our world could potentially be.

Her dye sublimation print series, "Weather of the Weather" (2023), illustrates this approach. The deep black backgrounds evoke the sensation of gazing into the depths of the sea, unsure of what lies beneath; yet, within this darkness, we may uncover a wealth of information, hidden and waiting to be discovered. Beeferman constructs three-dimensional scenes within such ambiguities, leaving us uncertain of the space we inhabit.

Weather maps and satellite images float like clouds drifting through a meticulously crafted landscape, casting shadows that feel both familiar and strange at the same time. These images, sourced from NOAA and EUMETSAT, are transformed by Beeferman into flattened surfaces, distilling scientific data into abstract forms that recall childhood memories of watching weather forecasts on TV. The organic shapes hovering around seem to possess lives of their own, growing and evolving as if Beeferman merely sketches their outlines, allowing them to develop autonomously. While they do not offer any explicit narrative, they evoke a sense of mystery, as though suspended in a timeless space, revealing the depth and density of the unknown beyond.

Beeferman pulls individual images from larger systems that are essential in providing the context for their meaning. Despite their origins as objective scientific information, these images go beyond their initial purpose, inviting viewers to explore a world where flatness becomes dimensional and the familiar becomes enigmatic. More importantly, Beeferman does not attempt to assert any knowledge through such intervention; she simply draws our attention to the system—the vast stretch of information that makes the system work—and then sets it free.

Unsurprisingly, this philosophy leads Beeferman to navigate the interplay of art and science, using scientific elements to explore broader artistic questions. Her small laser-etching series “Certainties (Hyytiälä)” (2023-24) exemplifies this thinking, where she combines scientific graphs recorded by scientists at the Hyytiälä Forestry Field Station (where she was an artist in residence) with abstract shapes on graphite-covered aluminum. This juxtaposition is not simply a reinterpretation of weather and landscape; it further raises questions about the relationship between seeing, abstraction, and knowledge, and the role images play in bridging these concepts. When scientific data is taken out of context and mingles with artistic observation and abstraction, what do we see? What do we understand? Does knowledge still come through?

To further explore these questions, Beeferman develops a sophisticated formalism that intricately layers elements from diverse locations and temporal moments. This multilayered approach renders her visual style both visually seductive and intellectually challenging. In her digital inkjet print series “Deserts & Forests” (2023-24), she brings together disparate image fragments to destabilize conventional representations of landscape, thereby exposing the inherent limitations of direct depiction prevalent across various disciplines. Beeferman deliberately engages with the notion of a lost translation, where landscapes persist in their identity yet simultaneously elude conventional visual recognition.

Beeferman’s video work adheres to the same conceptual framework, further incorporating voiceover and sound to deepen the complexity of her narratives. In “Rain Forest” (2019-22), for example, she manipulates sound to create a sense of estrangement, making the familiar unfamiliar. The video features an objective-sounding voiceover reminiscent of a science reporter, interspersed with natural sound recordings, while also deliberately dissociating sound from image—sometimes they do not appear simultaneously, and at times, the background voice is muted. This approach further blurs the boundaries between scientific observation and artistic interpretation, challenging the viewer’s perception and inviting a deeper engagement with the work.

Her exploration of time is equally compelling, challenging the notion of time as a fixed entity. Beeferman's work probes how knowledge emerges from uncertainty, compressing time in a manner that allows for the simultaneous existence of multiple temporalities. As she explains, "I'm interested in the idea of using this 'compression' of time to stand in for the fact that individual moments—including a landscape at a particular moment—are impossible to represent." By manipulating space, density, color, and perspective, Beeferman delves into the liminal spaces where landscapes exist not merely as visual subjects but as tangible manifestations of unseen forces—forces that, while imperceptible and elusive, profoundly shape our understanding of the world.

The raw materials Beeferman employs often stem from observations of weather events with specific dates and times marked down to the minute and second. While time often appears as a mechanical construct, seemingly detached from human experience, Beeferman's work subtly contradicts this notion. Although she skillfully blurs and abstracts elements within these temporal fragments, she deliberately preserves the clarity of these time markers, as seen in the series "Weather of the Weather" (2023-24), "Certainties" (2023-24), and "Three Weathers" (2023-24). These timestamps serve as quiet yet profound indicators of her own presence and intervention. In her art, time—which, in my opinion, is the ultimate measure of our human existence—becomes a canvas on which she inscribes her role as a keen observer of the world.

Ultimately, Beeferman's work transcends the mere creation of images; it serves as a portal to another realm, akin to science fiction, where reality is continuously reimagined and evolves. In her world of artistic creation, each form is a living entity—not merely a piece of information or a visualized human experience, but an individual with its own life, expression, and even secrets. Even in their stillness, they convey a quiet, underlying vitality, a fluidity that suggests something is always happening beyond our grasp. As she reflects, "I want to think about the relationship between one moment and a continuum of moments, allowing subjects to become part of a larger span and to not be defined exclusively by just one. In a way, then, it's about allowing for and being excited about process and change."

As I sat in that mountain courtyard, watching the clouds shift and the light softly wane, I realized that Beeferman's work is much like the very sky above—an ongoing process of transformation that resists easy definition. Her art, like the shifting weather, invites us to pause, reflect, and embrace the fluidity of experience, acknowledging the inevitable changes that shape our world. This reckoning with impermanence brings a profound

sense of uncertainty, yet it also opens a space for wonder, much like the feeling of uncertainty we experience in the constant flux of life. Just as the afternoon rain gives way to twilight's painted sky, her work reminds us that the beauty of the world lies not in its permanence, but in its constant state of becoming. And within that, there is a quiet, profound sense of wonder—a resonance that lingers, like the last light of day embracing the dusk.

Yutong Shi is a curator and writer of contemporary art based in Boston. Her specialty lies in theories and representations of time, memory, and urban/landscape, with particular interests in time-based and lens-based media. Shi has served in curatorial roles at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, the Institute of Contemporary Art/Boston, and Praise Shadows Art Gallery. Her writing has appeared in ArtReview Chinese Edition, ArtAsiaPacific, Bomb Magazine, and other publications.