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Galleries: Painter shows work in a new medium: Photography

By Edith Newhall
For The Inquirer

Seeing the photographic images that Diane Burko, a well-known realist painter, has exhibited since she took up photography as a second medium a few years ago, I've wondered why she didn't pursue photography seriously earlier in her career, as did the realist painters Chuck Close and Eric Fischl, among others.

I'll speculate that Burko was so used to thinking of her photographs of landscapes as studies for her paintings that she didn't consider them a separate entity, or that she didn't want to draw attention away from her painting, or that the prospect of doing two things at once and doing both well was daunting.

In any case, her embrace of the new has had a salutary effect - in one of those curious twists, Burko's paintings have become increasingly expressionistic and painterly as she has been simultaneously articulating her eye through the clarifying lens of photography.

Her latest photographs, on the ground floor of Locks Gallery, take on some of the subjects she has painted - the lakes, glaciers, and mountains of Montana and Wyoming - but Burko's aerial perspective (she's looking down more than forward, as she does in her paintings) and the cropping of her images make it difficult for viewers to gauge distances, much less determine what their physical relationship might be to the landscape in question. Other than the series' title, the pictures making up "Over Montana Glacier National Park" offer no clues as to where Burko might have been to shoot these discombobulating aerial images. (From a helicopter with its door removed, it turns out.)

There are also parallels between Burko's photographic images and other forms of contemporary art and photography that I have never seen in her paintings. For instance, photographs from her "Mid Flight" series, which seem to offer a more straight-ahead perspective than the rest, faintly resemble the female silhouettes and body prints made by Ana Mendieta in sand, mud, and grass, as well as Mendieta's photographs documenting them. Burko's close-up photographs, taken in Bucks County, of the surface of water (which are something of an anomaly in this show, but representative of Burko's more intimate photographs of her everyday surroundings), are slightly reminiscent of the paintings of the British artist Kate Bright, who exhibits with Locks.



Water Below 2, 2011, archival inkjet print on Canson Edition Etching Rag, 20 x 20 inches

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Burko is not averse to the occasional stroke of humor in her photographs, either, a quality that would never have made sense in her paintings. I challenge anyone to look at the shape of the deep turquoise lake in *Water Below 2* as Burko has shot and cropped it and not see Dumbo's head in profile.

The gallery has mounted a mini-survey of Burko's paintings - new works and canvases from the 1970s - on the third floor, and it's interesting to see how long a time the mountainous landscape has preoccupied her and how her painting has shifted from a seamless, thinly painted photorealist style to her current, expressionistically handled one.

