



Artists Gone Wild!

by [Benjamin Sutton](#)
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Trite or clichéd as it may sound, mankind's relationship to the environment has never been more contradictory than it is today. We're able to monitor nature and measure our effects upon it more accurately and thoroughly than ever before, yet our behavior towards it steadily worsens (see: BP oil leak). Three artists with solo shows in Williamsburg this fall seek out very personal communion with nature in more or less idiosyncratic ways. Whether documenting the landscape or transforming it, each is on an enigmatic quest for escape and understanding. In Ran Ortner's case, this means portraying waves in evocatively realistic detail; Stephen Mallon documents an odd seasonal marine migration; and William Lamson performs a kind of eccentric collaborative ritual with the sun. Each is successful to varying degrees, but all three produce images of arresting force.

[Ran Ortner](#)'s monumental paintings of waves in his exhibition *Deep Water* at Causey Contemporary (through October 11) take up three canvases, with each detailed, swelling triptych spanning 24 feet. There are no falling or crashing waves in this series, as there have been in others, but the effect is no less bracing. In "Deep Water no.1" (2010, detail above) fragments of two waves, frothy and a light yellow-ish-green in places, smooth and a deep, dark-turquoise elsewhere, churn and tumble along their way. Because Ortner never includes views of shore, floating objects or animals, the scale of his images remains something of a mystery. These new works are composed in such a way that the direction in which the waves are flowing becomes uncertain. Though specifics of size and movement evade us, Ortner maximizes the works' tactility, building up oil paints in small layers to give the white froth on the crests of waves extra relief, catching light in unexpected twists of water as though the ocean's depths are glowing. In addition to contemporaries like the photographer [Clifford Ross](#), these epic waves evoke the grand [landscape paintings](#) of the Romantics. The cinematic canvases portray the ocean as a wily giant, its movements vast, barely traceable and certainly not intelligible, no matter the scale. Ortner's immensely mysterious waves evade the facile prettiness of most seascape painting by portraying the ocean in intimate detail as an evasive and ugly threat, all shades of brackish jade and dirty blue. These could be the last sights of a surfer swept out to sea by cruel tides.



Ortner's angry waters could also be point-of-view snapshots from the decommissioned MTA subway cars in [Stephen Mallon's](#) surreal photo series *Next Stop Atlantic* (at The Front Room, through October 3) as they're being plunged into the ocean. The industrial photographer followed the MTA's involvement in a project to build artificial reefs along the East Coast, committing stripped subway cars to the sea floor to provide shelter for marine life. That process, documented in the exhibition's 15 medium- to large-format color photographs, opens with the decontaminated cars stacked on a dock like shipping containers, gathering snow in bleak winter sunlight. Lifted onto barges, the iconic cars are a puzzling sight, suddenly slowed from their clanging subterranean velocity to a few swaying naughts per hour. In Mallon's crisply focused photographs, the awkward barges piled high with the tinny shells look downright biblical, the last surviving members of some extinct species of slithering underground monster crowded aboard a madman's ark.

There's an incredibly gentle rhythm to Mallon's series, too, with stage in the journey following at a plodding, measured speed befitting the huge forms in play. The pace only quickens at the end, when a massive forklift tips and knocks cars into the ocean. In "Virginia Placement" (2008), an 18-ton car flies off the barge; shot suspended in mid-air, the clunky hull has all the grace of a Hummer limousine rattling along Meatpacking District cobblestones. Nonetheless, the momentary impression of weightlessness, the anticipation of impact evoke Henri Cartier-Bresson's famous "[Behind the Gare Saint-Lazare, Paris](#)" (1932), the inevitable splash tantalizingly withheld. A few feet away, Mallon unleashes the full force of impact in "Bellagio" (2010), with a nearly symmetrical wall of water sent shooting up as a car belly-flops into the ocean. As the reefs-to-be slip beneath the surface, shots of cars half-filled with water are the series' strangest. In "Settling" (2008, above) a car sits oddly upright at the top of the frame, with water like sluggish Bedford stop commuters pouring into its wide open doorways. En route to their very last stops, these elaborately (and expensively) manufactured objects double as time capsules, tokens from a culture trying fitfully to repair environmental damage it's done in even the most bizarre and oddly poetic ways.



[William Lamson](#)'s epic video journey at The Boiler, *A Line Describing the Sun* (through October 10), is similarly elemental and at first incomprehensible. By contrast, though, Lamson's trek over a parched lake bed in the Mojave Desert tugging an odd DIY contraption in shimmering sunlight has a much more ambiguous purpose. On re-watching, the act depicted in the 13-minute two-channel video (still above), projected on massive screens set at an obtuse angle, retains the quizzical, slightly absurd ritual air of Atlas eternally carrying his globe. Lamson walks onto the crunchy dry mesa pulling a trailer made of bicycle parts whose only features, aside from a water bottle-holder, are a mirror and a giant lens. He stops at an apparently arbitrary spot with infinite pure blue sky above and expansive, arid yellow dirt underfoot, sets the lens in line with the sun and the mirror at such an angle that the beam of focused light is pointed directly at the ground. The 1,600 degree light begins to burn the soil into a black, glassy substance, and Lamson sets off on his two-day journey, burning an arching 366-foot line into the sand.

The video, with impressive craning and tracking shots and an incredible textural soundtrack of crunching, sizzling, crackling and powerful winds, simultaneously emphasizes the grandeur of the land art performance, and its ultimate smallness against the imposing desert backdrop. Nearby, a small light box resembling the cracked lake bed, and a 23-foot version of the epic semi-circle delicately excavated from the earth in tiny, glittering fragments add to the quixotic journey's tactility. Lamson's singular journey, transcribing the arc of the sun in the sky onto the ground below, has a very appealing, quasi-mystical beauty to it. As with many of his previous pieces, like 2009's *Automatic* series, in which pens rigged to kites, buoys, trees and more produced abstract sketches, *A Line Describing the Sun* isn't so much a work in a landscape, but a collaboration with its natural setting, the medium and materials being provided and manipulated in equal measure by the site and the artist.

Though Lamson reaches the most profound exchange with his surroundings, all three artists strive for meaningful interactions with nature, whether it's Mallon's documentation of an odd environmental initiative or Ortner's intimate portraits of Melvillian seas. The ocean, not incidentally, is often likened to femininity in psychoanalytic theory, with all its attendant womb, cradle and fertility metaphors, but also primal anxieties over mysterious and threatening depths. It's worth pointing out, then, that all three artists here are men participating in that typically masculine cultural ritual of the solitary figure venturing out into nature to achieve pseudo-spiritual communion with the environment, à la Thoreau, *Grizzly Man*, etc. Hardly some macho trip to conquer the wilderness, all three exhibitions convey an air of humble self-awareness. Each artist acknowledges the limits of human vision, framing his subject as just one small fragment of an elusive global whole.

(photo credit: the artists, Causey Contemporary, The Front Room and Pierogi)