

THE NEW YORK TIMES, SUNDAY, OCTOBER 30, 2005

The New York Times

ARTS & ENTERTAINMENT



A video still by Jane Martin at boltax.gallery

ART REVIEW/ HELEN A. HARRISON

‘Closer Far Away’

*boltax.gallery, 21 North Ferry Road, Shelter Island, NY
(631) 749-4062. Through Nov. 27.*

In the spirit of Anne Brigman, whose early 20th-century Pictorialist photographs celebrate the female nude in romantic outdoor settings, Jane Martin uses soft focus, atmospheric lighting effects and technical sleight of hand to create figure studies with implicit but deliberately vague narrative content.

But unlike Brigman, who had to lug cumbersome equipment around the countryside, Ms. Martin works with a handheld digital video camcorder. Like her predecessor, Ms. Martin collects raw visual material in the field, then selects and manipulates individual images in unorthodox ways to suit her aesthetic purposes. Describing her darkroom technique, Brigman wrote to Alfred Stieglitz, “I’ve done some hokus-pokus that would make the shadow of Daguerre haunt me for a heretic.” Judging by Ms. Martin’s

description of the process by which she transforms video frames into still photographs, Daguerre’s reproachful shadow is probably lurking in her editing suite.

Culled from hours of footage shot in the woods near her studio in Springs, the 13 photographs in this series of video stills have been enlarged and mounted on wood panels, then coated with acrylic resin. The glossy finish helps clarify the images, many of which are so diffused that they almost seem to dissolve. It also introduces just a trace of the viewer’s reflection, adding to the voyeuristic appeal of following an anonymous woman’s communion with nature.

The series begins with “Silent Exchange,” in which the woman’s velvety skin and hair contrast with the rough tree bark she caresses, and ends with “Intimate Conversation,” where she seems to have been absorbed by the landscape. In between, she moves in and out of focus amid the enveloping mist and shadowy foliage that both beckon and threaten her.

The ambiguities of the journey, ranging from seductive sensuality to menacing danger and possible disaster, are expressed in the show’s title. It suggests that proximity to elemental forces distance one from the familiar and the predictable – that the closer one gets, the farther one is from safety.