

**ArtSeen**

# Petra Cortright: *borderline aurora borealis*

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Installation view: Petra Cortright: *borderline aurora borealis*, Team Gallery, New York, 2020. Courtesy Team Gallery

Petra Cortright has staked her claim on the art media of today: the mediated modes of digital art. In the past, viewers saw paintings in terms of brushstrokes, canvas, frame, and the wall. But today we are challenged to rely on machines as well. Perhaps now we can finally admit that perception is not immediate, that our eyes are mechanical devices sending stimuli to our brain that we must analyze by means of experience and memory. In relying on digital modes of production and circulation, Cortright's current exhibition at Team Gallery puts phenomenological cards on the table, and we have to play our hand as best we can.

Cortright captures fragmented images—many sourced from the internet—and prints them onto sheets of industrial vinyl or other translucent materials which are then hung from the gallery’s ceiling. This combination of digital and physical collage creates effects similar to those of classical Chinese landscape renderings, an aesthetic related to calligraphy, itself a two-dimensional mode.

There is a wonderful material analogy between the virtual and the actual in Cortright’s translation of traditional Chinese scroll paintings on silk into the contemporary medium of vinyl. The layering of images on the translucent sheets conveys a sense of the volume, texture, and depth of the forms as they’d be depicted in pigment. In these draped images, we can reach toward meditative experiences and stages of awareness as we negotiate the soft gray forms of Cortright’s mountains from different eye levels.



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These peaceful scenes play in counterpoint to other hanging passages in which we can frolic among vigorous Pollock-like gestures; Helen Frankenthaler's pastel lyricism and elegance; Monet's warm and succulent waterlilies; and Cy Twombly's frenzied scratches. Then, looking back to 19th-century romanticism, we can detect dark, moody associations reminiscent of Constable that draw us into the woods of Cortright's mind. At the other end of the spectrum are slices of the decorative, from the palette of lifestyle guru Martha Stewart to the nostalgic, floral designs of Britain's Liberty of London. All are part of Cortright's DNA.

In spite of the coolness of Cortright's medium, her work reads as warm, personal, even sentimental, as its digital layers conjure memories and the emotional experience of time. Moreover, she works quickly and spontaneously, favoring found images that are roughly produced. As she told *Cultured* magazine in 2018:

The abstraction in my work comes from using really bad quality images. I don't feel bad about ripping shitty things apart. If it is really high definition with beautiful details it feels more precious. Why abstract that? I want to cut up things that aren't working on their own.

Although she is a digital painter Cortright also embraces tradition, and while her medium is new, she does not shy away from redeploying something old. A painter who doesn't use paint, she teaches us to look using her tools as we follow her lead through represented landscapes and between hanging sheets of abstract images. Hers are landscapes of the mind, complete with peaks, valleys, and vegetation rendered richly enough that we can almost smell the rot and roses.

While we may be unsure of how to evaluate an exhibition that we are not viewing in person—we're looking at a gallery website and judging a two-dimensional presentation as if it were three-dimensional—we must mentally fill in the dimensions and build a possible alternative space for imaginings and responses.

Cortright's post-internet practice is never far from physical experience. That's where we step in.