

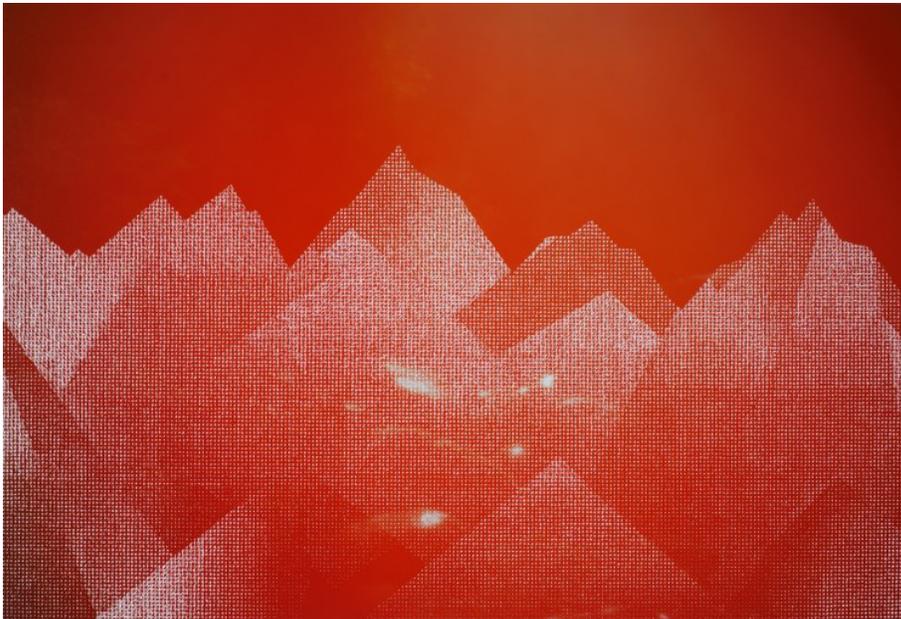
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In Review |

The Finite Realities of Christopher Russell's 'Ersatz Infinities'

When man meets nature, no stone is left unturned.

by Alicia Eler Jun 15th, 2016



Christopher Russell, "The Falls XXX" (2016).

Christopher Russell manipulates natural landscapes, messing with the viewer's ideas of reality. In his solo exhibition *Ersatz Infinities* at [Mark Moore Gallery](#), the Portland-based artist wanders through a series of landscape photographs, heavily manipulating to the point of near-abstraction. He creates pigment prints which he scratches into with a razor. Such is typical of Russell's work, which takes nature and the landscape as the starting point for visual explorations.

This series of [new work](#) is tightly woven and expertly hung, fitting perfectly into the smaller artist project room that is connected to the larger main gallery. There's a lo-fi, late-80's video game quality to some of these paintings; Pac-Man comes to mind, even. In "The Falls XXV", a mountain pokes its way up from the bottom of this vertical rectangle. Large circular snowflakes the size of pebbles don't drift from above, but instead appear frozen mid-air. In "Falls XXVI", that same image is visible, but it is further zoomed out, with a broad horizon line separating the mountaintop and the sky. It seems as if there is a dead zone where no snowflakes would ever fall, yet the mountain tip is colored a stark white. Other works in this series focus on familiar

patterns, lining them up on strips against colored backgrounds. Such is the case in “The Falls XXXV”, a series of whitened patterns carved into a murky golden piece of paper.

Another curious element to this series is that Russell chooses to work with the primary colors red, yellow and blue, as if to keep things “pure,” thus playing with Romantic ideals of nature as “pure”. “The Falls XXX” is a mountain range colored red, and the mountains look hazy and jagged, with a distinct photocopied-too-many-times aesthetic of an old school ‘zine. The shades of red in it suggest a post-apocalyptic sensibility, or it could be a mountain range on the planet Mars. Either way, there’s nothing familiar about this particular landscape even though it looks like one in a painting you’d buy at a thrift-store.

The images in this body of work are created by placing a colored veil over the camera lens. The original prints are just fuzzy impressions of forest scenes. It’s a curious process that offers Photoshop-y results. This brings another pleasant surprise to this finite body of infinite possibility. Without creating a dialogue about making images in the age of mechanical reproduction, Russell pleasantly disrupts the assumption that all of these images are digital manipulations. What would Ansel Adams say about these images?

The names of each work in this series are far more straightforward than in previous series. Oftentimes in Russell’s work, he employs wordplay in the titles of his paintings. [“Rock Steady” \(2013\)](#), which is not included in *Ersatz Infinities*, is a painting of pink rocks overlaid with blue and yellow angular shapes, with green lines jutting. It’s like a series of puzzle pieces come together in one almost-perfect square. The title brings to mind phrases like “between a rock and a hard place,” or thoughts like “his body was hard as a rock.” There’s nothing steady about any of the rocks in this painting, however, giving the title a sense of disbelief. What you see is not what you get, it’s just what you see.

Russell brings this same playfulness to all of the works in *Ersatz Infinities*, but there’s a more direct quality to the overall process. No longer is he playing with paint; instead, all of the white scrapes in these paintings are drawn by hand. Russell carves into the pieces with a sharp object, literally shaping nature. In doing so, Russell gets at larger questions about man’s interruptions of the landscape and of nature itself.