

Introducing  
Jeffery Becton  
at AH Studio

# Intrduction and Interview

Inspired by the tidal reaches and atmospheric weather near his Deer Isle home and the Blue Hill Peninsula, Jeffery Becton creates provocative photo-based digital montages, often playing with the borders between dream and reality, interior and exterior, abstraction and representation. A pioneer in the field of fine-art photography, his montages frequently contain architectural elements and objects from these vintage New England houses, many of which are part of his personal history.

From the early 1990s, new digital tools allowed Becton to experiment with the layering of visual information. Becton blends and manipulates scans of his photography and other materials, to create surreal scenarios evocative of liminal coastal spaces. The layering of these elements offers form to visual ambiguities, reexamines the boundaries of mixed media, and creates altered realities that merge into images rich in symbolism both personal and archetypal.

Becton's works are meditations on ambivalence: digital montages, beautiful and unsettling mashups, altered realities. . . Walls, floors, and ceilings open to the elements—and to the imagination. They provide a framework but no shelter; they are lit with the clarity of memory. What we see depends on what we bring to the act of seeing: what memories, what desires, what emotions. Becton is really exploring our own permeability.

Deborah Weisgall, Jeffery Becton: *The Farthest House*

Shown in numerous solo, group, and juried exhibitions, Becton is widely collected in private and museum collections, including Bates College of Art, Farnsworth Museum of

Art, and Portland Museum of Art. By inviting Becton into her studio, which was once the artist Andrea Hamilton's family home, we are given a rare insight into Hamilton's own practice and how these lyrical, layered interiors speak to the wide open, often serene character of her landscapes.

NKE: Can you share your first impression of Becton's photographs?

AH: When you look closely at a Becton work of art, it is very rewarding. In his work there are elements that signpost a variety of techniques, such as the camera obscura used by Abelardo Morell in "The Sea in the Attic", in which an attic room acts as a camera obscura for the seascape beyond it. In this interior/ exterior image, refuge and prospect intertwine, and elicit a dreamy state of mind: part recollection part fantasy. You can see Becton's reference to the camera obscura effect, as if the structure of the room is what allows us to see the seascape beyond, through the light bouncing in.

NKE: Indeed, the principal element of photography is light, can you expand on why you find the process of understanding his work so compelling?

AH: It is a number of things, when you think of a photographer like Gregory Crewdson there is so much that goes into achieving a single image, it takes a lot of layers - from physically setting up the lighting, staging the scene, choosing the particular architecture - it is all very filmic, but also deeply conceptual.

In Becton's work, you often have the feeling of a special effect, a set that has been imagined and constructed but also remembered. But its power lies in the fact that this is not obvious; you do not know if

it is staged or found degraded and already water marked, we are looking at both a structure that is subject to entropy and at a photographic image which is by its very nature so fragile, and often fugitive. You don't know if the walls are painted or wall papered, you don't know how many elements were imported or already there and what was left out, but what you do get an emotional feeling. There is a sense of something encroaching, of potential danger. It is uneasy - or as Freud would say uncanny - and seems to capture the trepidation or the peril which is outside.

NKE: Yes, you are really directing our gaze here and sharing some deep insights into the craft of photography. How does an image activate the senses, or focus the mind by suggesting a possible but unquantifiable threat?

AH: It's that huge emotional/psychological aspect to these pictures that he is creating and I find it fascinating to try to explain what is going on. I see so many different elements of photography coming together, he's got a background in graphic design; he has a very clear sense of perspective, the way rooms are shaped, doors are opening, you do not know what is real and what is not; but the whole thing is theatre, the scene is set for your imagination.

NKE: What do you think Becton is saying with these images?

AH: If you look at this image in terms of a metaphor, it is like our ageing process: the peeling paint is like our skin and the house is symbolic of how we try to protect ourselves. If our homes are for our protection, in these kinds of situations, the outside world seems to be creeping in - the stormy sea is not just seen through the window but flowing

into the house, and that creates a feeling of instability and a loss of control of the internal space. You could also look at this as a metaphor for how the digital world is permeating our physical one, just as you could consider them an illustration of the end of photography as we know it. That is why they are psychologically so dramatic - there is no clear blue sky, it is a foggy, mystical realm. One is not sure what one is seeing out there.

NKE: What emotions do they elicit in you?

AH: These interior spaces are also lonely, empty, barren even. They have a Hopper-like disquiet, and are not comforting, not what they should be. They are a reminder that nothing is forever and nothing can really fully ever protect you. We are always at risk, never fully buffered from this actual world - no matter how many layers we use to insulate ourselves.

NKE: How do they relate to your work?

AH: A lot of people have said they remind them of my portraits. There are these familiar elements, things that we remember from our own safe or domestic space there is also that sense of generational fade - and a powerful nostalgia. When looking at his images we ask ourselves questions about our own lives - such as was this the grandparent's house, will it be lost, how do I preserve it? They embody the anxiety many of us have over property and whether things can be maintained, preserved for the next generation, and remind us that nothing is fixed, immutable.

NKE: What has it been like showing them in this space?

AH: There is a pleasing dreamlike quality to them, they recall the way a memory of your home as a child appears distorted

or disjointed in a dream. We used to live in this studio, and I am deeply attached to this space, the light, and the memories. These images conjure so many emotions that are a part of being human, feelings of loss and nostalgia, and the fading of the images we carry in our minds that connect us to the places, and people who are no longer here. A sense of the finite, nothing lasts forever. This aspect relates especially to this space in Kinnerton street, which is constantly under threat from development, always trying to protect it. It could be the railings of this house, not just from the wear and tear of time, but incursions, protection of your internal space from outside elements that are coming in no matter how much you try to protect yourself.

NKE: You are very interested in the history of art, philosophy and psychology and have extensive research projects that underscore many of your own photographic series, can you speak about Becton in this context?

AH: Some images feel artificially constructed, but when I see these pictures, they are telling me stories, they are poetic. They don't feel false, even though they are composite images, there is an emotional truth to them, something felt he is trying to convey which is very painterly. It makes me want to share this story with others, because it feels very compelling, but also open enough for each viewer to find something that resonates with them. They invite a double take and encourage long looking in order to try to understand the references and elements. I see so much art history in them: Edward Hopper's *Rooms by the Sea* strikes a similarly intriguing chord and *White Doors* c. 1905 by Vilhelm Hammershøi from

Denmark, who broke with the convention of occupying interiors with people at all. There is a sophistication in his homage to art history playing out in these spaces.

NKE: Most of these images were made in Maine and relate specifically to that climate, how does this speak to your work?

AH: I feel they speak to a northern climate in general, where weather is cold, damp and one has to protect both the self and the house from the elements. They recall the paintings of Andrew Wyeth, images that became very symbolic of life in Maine... but they speak a story to all of us that live in these kinds of climates. The light in these pictures is very diffuse, subtle, light of the north - a soft light that you get in the winter. Ethereal, damp, layering.

NKE: They seem to highlight photography's power is to make even dreams seem quite concrete, would you agree?

AH: I'm deeply interested in technique and I love to experiment - it's really interesting to me that Becton often starts these images with black and white film. They begin in the analogue and then there is a whole life cycle of processes that he uses, which is very reflective of where we are now in photography. For example you can make a negative from the digital file and go back to the dark room and start again - there are so many techniques in play here - but what is the effect?

In a black and white analogue picture it is the light, dark, grain, a cinematic quality. In Becton I see a composer - he is taking images, not just found images - and he is composing like a painter.

Andrea Hamilton

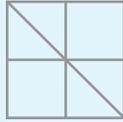
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