



Ryan Foerster, *Universe/Garden*, 2018, 12-part suite of unique C-prints, debris, each 14 3/4 × 11 3/4".

Ryan Foerster

C L E A R I N G | U P P E R E A S T S I D E

Ryan Foerster has a penchant for rescuing rejects, courting accidents, and embracing disasters. When Hurricane Sandy flooded the artist's home in Brighton Beach, Brooklyn, ravaging the photographs stored in his basement, he exhibited the buckled, bleeding prints as new works. His recent solo show at C L E A R I N G's uptown branch delivered similarly resourceful, unabashedly imperfect projects. Among them were twelve pieces made with defective photo paper, nine cast-off aluminum printing plates, and a sculpture composed of flotsam found on the beach: a tangled fishnet, a battered soda-can fragment, a toy raccoon. Foerster's scavenger tendencies—part of a punk ethos that has characterized his work since he first began making zines as a teenager in Newmarket, Ontario—have earned him well-deserved comparisons to Robert Rauschenberg, who famously sourced materials for his Combines from the streets of New York.

Foerster moved to Brighton Beach in 2011, and the neighborhood has served as his muse and collaborator ever since. The aluminum plates in this show, for instance, were originally used to print a book of jokes by the artist's retiree neighbor, Ira Wolfe. After collecting daily emails of

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homegrown humor (“What do you call the science of yodeling? Echo-logy!”), Foerster released *Wolfe-Arama: Jokes from Ira* (2014) through his publishing outfit, RATSTAR Press. A group of pale-gray panels, “Brighton Beach/Ira’s Jokes,” 2014–18, each tattooed with eight pages of jokes in lowercase Helvetica, were blotched and blurred like Rorschach tests. Dense black zigzags suggesting spiky seismographic data cover some plates, and among the smudges one could pick out the whorls of printers’ thumbprints. After being used to produce hundreds of books, printing plates like these are normally discarded—not unlike chickens that are killed after they stop laying eggs. We rarely see or value these unique objects, dented and stained: The elevation of banged-up survivors is at the heart of Foerster’s practice.

On the opposite wall was a suite of prints titled *Universe/Garden*, 2018: sheets of near-black photo paper that Foerster pinned down with tomato pots and left outside for months. One can imagine the anticipation of lifting each container to see what had happened: a surprise similar to cracking open geodes as a kid, or microwaving CDs to marvel at their melted, blistered beauty. Fiery rings and spheres, swirling with color like gutter-puddle rainbows, burn at the center of each, the corroded emulsion blazing in shades of molten magenta wreathed in licks of algae yellow, poppy red, and lichen green. All of these prints are encrusted with dust, dirt, and even a few leaves.

The tactility, modest scale, and nonprecious nature of these works are especially gratifying at a time when so much contemporary photography takes the form of clinically well-printed, pointlessly colossal C-prints. Foerster’s camera-free engagement with the medium makes Man Ray an obvious ancestor, but Robert Morris is an influence as well, in spirit if not in method. Morris championed the use of materials that react to time, and the power of art that reveals the process of its creation. Foerster is one of the few artists working today who plumbs the depths of what photography can be by dropping it down every well he can find.

In the alley outside the gallery lay a stone carved with the words CHANGE BOTH RIB (the name of the exhibition and an anagram of *Brighton Beach*). Most viewers probably strolled past the piece without noticing it, a fact Foerster may well have anticipated and quietly enjoyed. His work is often antisocial, in the best possible sense. It feels as though it derives from a personal, private need, independent of an audience. After all, this is an artist who once installed his

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photographs, exposed to the elements and weighted down by debris, in an empty lot in a derelict part of Miami. It was spring and the Basel crowds were long since gone. Foerster is the rare artist who rewards attention but does not need yours.

—Zoë Lescaze