

Lenka Clayton



**Open Field at Catharine Clark
Gallery**

Published on August, 2021
By Max Blue



Black Mountain College was founded in 1933 based on the belief that the study of art was central to education. Over the years notable faculty and students included textile artist and printmaker Anni Albers, experimental composer John Cage, and San Francisco sculpture superstar Ruth Asawa. Although the school closed in 1957 it had an outsized impact on the American avant-garde, which continues today.

Open Field: Nine Artists Respond to the Ideals of Black Mountain College, on view at Catharine Clark Gallery on Utah Street, features contemporary artists working in the tradition of innovation and experimentation, while referencing figures from the school's history.

Mary Muszynski's installation *Spectral Compositions of Shade Light in the Smoky Mountains, NC 1997-1955, 2021*, greets viewers from the gallery's window. The piece features photographs taken at Muszynski's family home ninety miles from Black Mountain, printed on three silk curtains, which viewers are invited to arrange however they like. The photos are accompanied by subtly amplified field recordings of mountain wildlife. The piece sets the stage for the exhibition, engendering the feeling of passing into the North Carolina setting, a passageway to the theme of interactive art.

Music boxes perched on pedestals throughout the gallery make up *Listening to the Material, 2021*, by Nora Ligorano and Marshall Reese. Viewers are invited to crank the boxes, which play punch cards based on the patterns of Anni Albers's weavings and prints. By transcribing these visual pieces into music Ligorano and Reese engage in a dialogue between natural materials and machine processes while bringing Albers's work to life in a new way that invokes the music of John Cage, who often left elements of his compositions to chance.

Lenka Clayton redefines drawing in another tribute to Albers: ten experimental works on paper made using a typewriter rather than a traditional implement. The drawings themselves were inspired by Clayton's visit to the Josef & Anni Albers Foundation in Connecticut in 2018. The process was inspired by Anni Albers's technique of using a typewriter to design weaving patterns. Like Albers's weavings, Clayton's drawings are impressive technical feats, particularly *Houseplants Tended by Anni Albers, 2021*, in which the artist has produced with type something indistinguishable from a pencil sketch.

The gallery's rear room has been transformed by Reniel Del Rosario's installation *Exist Through the Gift Shop*, which features dozens of ceramic souvenirs available for purchase, packaged in the style of dollar store gimcracks. Each is a comic reference to the college's history and the art world: miniature copies of pieces by Albers, Asawa, and Cage; Frogs "to being your morning out in Black Mountain". A sign hanging beneath a ceramic security camera – also for sale – reads "THIEVES WILL BE PERSECUTED", a tongue-in-cheek acknowledgement of the fact that all of Del Rosario's pieces are in themselves referential.

If *Open Field* has a weakness, it's in this dependency on reference. Viewers unfamiliar with Black Mountain College's history and legacy might not appreciate the dialogue a more informed viewer would understand. While the show is supplemented with a few original pieces by Asawa and Cage, these don't offer much context. Time spent with each artist's statement is a must. As an homage to an institution which championed the study of art, *Open Field* is perhaps best engaged as an educational experience, through which diligent viewers will discover the legacy of the American avant-garde.

Open Field is on view at Catharine Clark Gallery, 248 Utah Street, through September 11, 2021. Viewers can also experience the exhibition via a virtual walkthrough on the gallery's website.

Image (top): Lenka Clayton, *Houseplants Tended by Anni Albers* (03/10/2021) in the series "Typewriter Drawings," 2021. Typewriter ink on paper, rendered with a portable 1957 Smith-Corona Skywriter typewriter, 14 1/4 x 11 1/4 inches framed. Courtesy of the artist and Catharine Clark Gallery, San Francisco.

<https://www.potrereview.net/open-field-at-catharine-clark-gallery/>