



**Start with a sculpture:  
Sara VanDerBeek at  
Altman Siegel**

By Arthur Comings  
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When sculpture and photography go out for lunch, sculpture generally picks up the tab. We all know who's the big shot here; photography's glad to be along for the ride, but it's sculpture that the maitre d's going to recognize.

Some photographers have a foot in both camps, of course. Bad boy Robert Mapplethorpe's work in black and white has been compared to images of Michelangelo. Mapplethorpe once said: "If I had been born one hundred or two hundred years ago, I might have been a sculptor, but photography is a very quick way . . . to make sculpture." His marble-like bodies – whether adorned with chains and leather or not – look like the Master's work; they *emulate* sculpture.

Photographer Sara VanDerBeek, currently at the Altman Siegel Gallery in San Francisco, comes at things from another angle. For her, sculpture isn't something to emulate, or even to reproduce in some particularly evocative or flattering way. As Caludia Altman-Siegel explained to me the other day, the sculptures that VanDerBeek makes herself are mere starting points – a place for the artist to take off from. The real work comes after the physical work has been created and the camera's set up – but once the picture has been taken, the original work is destroyed. If she's working on location, of course, her subject matter is spared to fight another day.

But take a look at "Treme," a thickly painted rectangular obelisk that looks like it could have been dashed off by Philip Guston in a quiet moment. The top half's a muddy white, the bottom half has the blue of India ink, but it looks like she didn't wash her brush very well between painting the two halves. Who cares? The piece is gone now – got it? What VanDerBeek has is an image that she can play with, and she's sharing the result with us.

Or "Ghost," another rectangular monolith, this one one constructed of three identical white-painted blocks, each bearing a diagonal brace on its surface. Why's it so fuzzy? How come it almost merges into the background? Doesn't she know you shoot things on a neutral ground, so the viewer can concentrate on the work? Well, to start with, she shot the piece twice, several hours apart, so the two images are superimposed on each other, with just enough offset to make you nervous – and suggest the title. But remember, the thing is gone – all you have is VanDerBeek's image, consisting of the foreground, the background, and anything else that she allowed into the frame. And that's enough.

Sara VanDerBeek: Of Ruins and Light  
October 20 – December 18, 2010  
Altman Siegel Gallery  
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