Passing glances: Stacey Evans explores light perspectives in ‘This Familiar Space’

‘This Familiar Space’ is two years in the making, and the dozens of works that comprise the show (including this collage) were made by artists here in Charlottesville and in Besançon, France, one of Charlottesville’s Sister Cities. Image courtesy of Stacey Evans

Culture

One of the first assignments Stacey Evans gives her photography class is to visit the same place at different times throughout the day, a few days in a row. She tasks her PVCC students with noticing the light, how it’s different minute to minute, hour to hour, day to day. If Monday’s morning light is soft, Tuesday’s might be bright, and Wednesday’s might be grayed by rain.

It’s a practical lesson for an art that relies on light not just for composition but for mood, for atmosphere, for meaning. It’s also a rather practical (and sometimes difficult) lesson for life: Change is constant.

Change is also a major theme in Evans’ own photography. She ruminated on it in “Ways of Seeing,” a series of collages from photos shot through train car windows and exhibited at Second Street Gallery in April 2017. It’s present again in Evans’ current SSG exhibition, “This Familiar Space/Cet Espace Familier,” which opened online last week.

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Evans served as artist, producer, and curator for the show, which is divided into four unique, but related, groups of works. Evans planned to mount it on the walls of SSG’s Dové Gallery, until the space closed due to the COVID-19 pandemic, and she had to envision and execute it for the web.
The first segment, “Daily Muse,” is a series of 11 photographs of the same rooftop view in Besançon, taken by Evans on a 2018 Sister Cities Commission trip. Capturing this view from her hotel room became a routine for Evans on the trip, and though the visual perspective is technically the same, none of the photos are. The sky differs, sometimes drastically and sometimes subtly, from image to image, affecting the colors of the building below, the shadows, and the overall tone of the photographs. In the bottom center space of the grid, Evans has written, “This too shall pass,” putting to words what the eyes and the mind have already acknowledged, consciously or not.

Evans expects the text might resonate deeply with viewers right now, as we’re all eager for the pandemic to pass. But, she says, we’re not always so open to change: We like our routines, too. And the set of photographs presented in “Daily Muse” shows how routine and change are not necessarily opposite, but complementary, co-existent. It’s about “understanding that things aren’t permanent. Change does happen, and [you have to be] okay with change, because if you get stuck in your ways, I don’t see that as a good thing,” either.
Evans’ role shifts a bit in “Look to See.” She made photographs in both Charlottesville and Besançon, and students altered them into collages. She had Charlottesville High School students start a batch, then brought them to Besançon for Lycée Louis Pasteur students to finish; the Louis Pasteur kids started a new set of collages that Evans brought back to Charlottesville to be completed at CHS.

Evans also served in a production role for the third piece, “The Ones We Can Still Save,” a sculpture and video collaboration between Charlottesville-based artist Nina Frances Burke and Besançon-based artist Gabriel Hopson. Each artist gave Evans a small package of materials (the one requirement: that it fit in Evans’ suitcase) for the other to use. Hopson, who is diabetic, sent Burke an insulin pen full of the life-saving medication, something he can easily access (and even spare) thanks to French health care, something that is difficult, sometimes impossible, for people to access in the U.S. health care system. The pen was full but unusable, and Burke embedded it, inaccessible, in a nest-like sculpture. Together with Hopson’s video (we won’t give away all the details), it’s a comment on the differences between the American and French health care systems.

Across all of the works in “This Familiar Space/Cet Espace Familier” there’s evidence of connection of people across time and space. “That’s always been in the show,” says Evans, though the theme might project a bit more right now.

Recognizing the ways in which we’re all connected—and how our own decisions can affect others—is important, says Evans, who considers herself “a global citizen first and an American second.” That realization can complicate our constant internal, highly personal, negotiation between change and routine, already a delicate balance to strike. For Evans, the secret to staying grounded is looking up, thinking about the ever-shifting sky, and “the umbrella that connects us all,” she says.

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