

# Lilly McElroy: Meeting with the sun, poking holes in beauty

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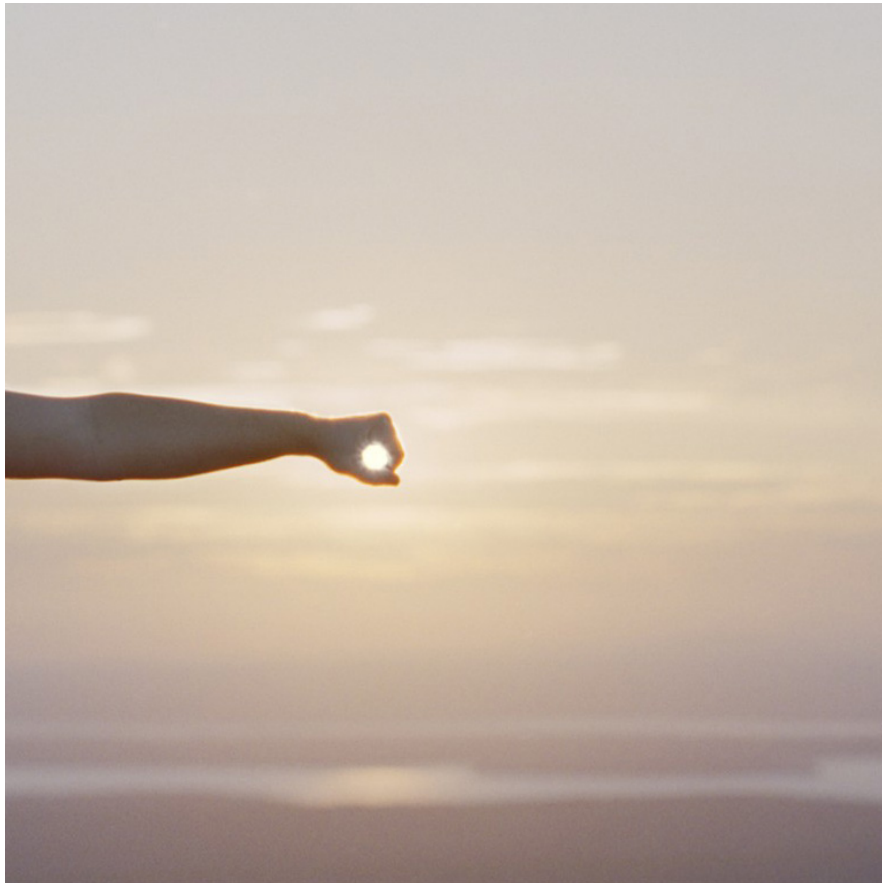
Lilly McElroy's "I Will Destroy You (21.084176459575733, -157.02758455686487)" (2023), an archival inkjet print of hand altered negative, 40 x 50", was part of her recent solo exhibition, "I Will Destroy You," at Studios Inc. (from the artist)

## A deep sense of eco-anxiety pervades the artist's photographic interrogations of the American landscape

"Destruction can be generative," Lilly McElroy announced with chilling confidence at her recent Studios Inc artist talk. Speaking like a true iconoclast, the lens-based artist retains a deep knowledge of photography's history and processes, while practicing a healthy

irreverence for the medium.

“I’d like to think Ansel Adams would hate my work,” McElroy says with a sly smile. The artist imagines herself a kind of anarchic ancestor of Adams, bringing her large format 4 x 5 film camera out in the landscape, a meditative explorer seeking the ideal moment to press the shutter, make the exposure, and hence, fix the image. That’s where the similarities end. McElroy’s art practice has a history of body-forward performative actions, intentionally destructive ones, that physically alter her photographic imagery.



Lilly McElroy, “I Control the Sun #2” (2014), archival pigment print, 40 x 40” (from th artist)

McElroy’s latest work, presented in two recent exhibitions in Kansas City and Lawrence, interrogates the American landscape in palpable ways while surfacing a deep sense of eco-anxiety — the very real fear of environmental doom — entangled by accompanying emotions of guilt and grief. As billions of humans can now attest, coping with climate change in theory or practice can be overwhelming, depressing, anesthetizing. Undaunted, the artist takes matters into her own hands.

A dozen works from her “I Control the Sun” series are on view in the Spencer Museum of Art exhibition, “Reading the World.” McElroy’s index of land-sea-sky-scapes all share in common the artist’s arm grasping into the side of the image to encircle the rising or setting sun with

her hand. In each atmospheric scene, sometimes blob-like and out of focus, others crisp as a kung fu punch, her thumb and index fingers repeatedly ingest the fiery orb like an ouroboros.



Lilly McElroy in front of her work "The Monolith," in which she poetically conjured our existential dread of an eclipsed sun (photo by Jim Barcus)

The initial perception of the artist's bodily form breaks the picture plane for a quick laugh, but seeing the gesture repeated through this series shifts it into a powerful act of agency. McElroy has re-inserted the female body into the image so that it parallels, overlaps or merges with the landscape — like it's always been there — while engaging, controlling no less, the solar source of light itself, haptically.

It makes sense that a photographer would do something like that, moving lights and bodies around, putting on the scene. McElroy harnesses these formal, elemental forces into communication — nature, body and light interacting as a series of visual aphorisms. The

images could illustrate the enigmatic fragments of the ancient philosopher Heraclitus, famous for gems like: “The sun is new each day,” or “The sun is the size of a human foot,” and “If there were no sun, it would be night.”

Over multiple bodies of work, McElroy has developed a toolbox of iconoclastic gestures including breaking, tearing, scratching, sanding, poking and generally disrupting the picture plane. A touchstone was her 2014 video “A Woman Runs Through a Pastoral Setting,” which set the stage for her current work in one vaudevillian take; just as the viewer is lulled into gazing on a pleasant country scene, the title gives away the punchline when a woman with a running start enters the frame, busting through the pastoral scene, revealed in that moment to be a paper backdrop, tripping up the protagonist, who disentangles herself from the clingy façade only to dash off into the actual pastoral background and out of the frame.

### Destroying Postcard Aesthetics

Fast forward a decade, McElroy’s gestures have become smaller, more focused, the humor deadpan, the mood approaching dystopian sci-fi. Her actions reveal a visual vocabulary of black holes or “generative absences,” methodically destroying conventions of aesthetic beauty, centuries of pretty pictures, entire canons of photographic purity. “Creating an entry point,” McElroy called it.

Her recent solo exhibition at Studios Inc, “I Will Destroy You,” featured a series of seductive, large-format color landscapes, titled by their GPS coordinates, in which McElroy reorients our maladapted “postcard aesthetics.” Once in the magical space of the darkroom, McElroy developed each photographic negative only to physically manipulate it — scratching away the emulsion to obliterate the presence of the sun over ocean, prairie, lake or desert.

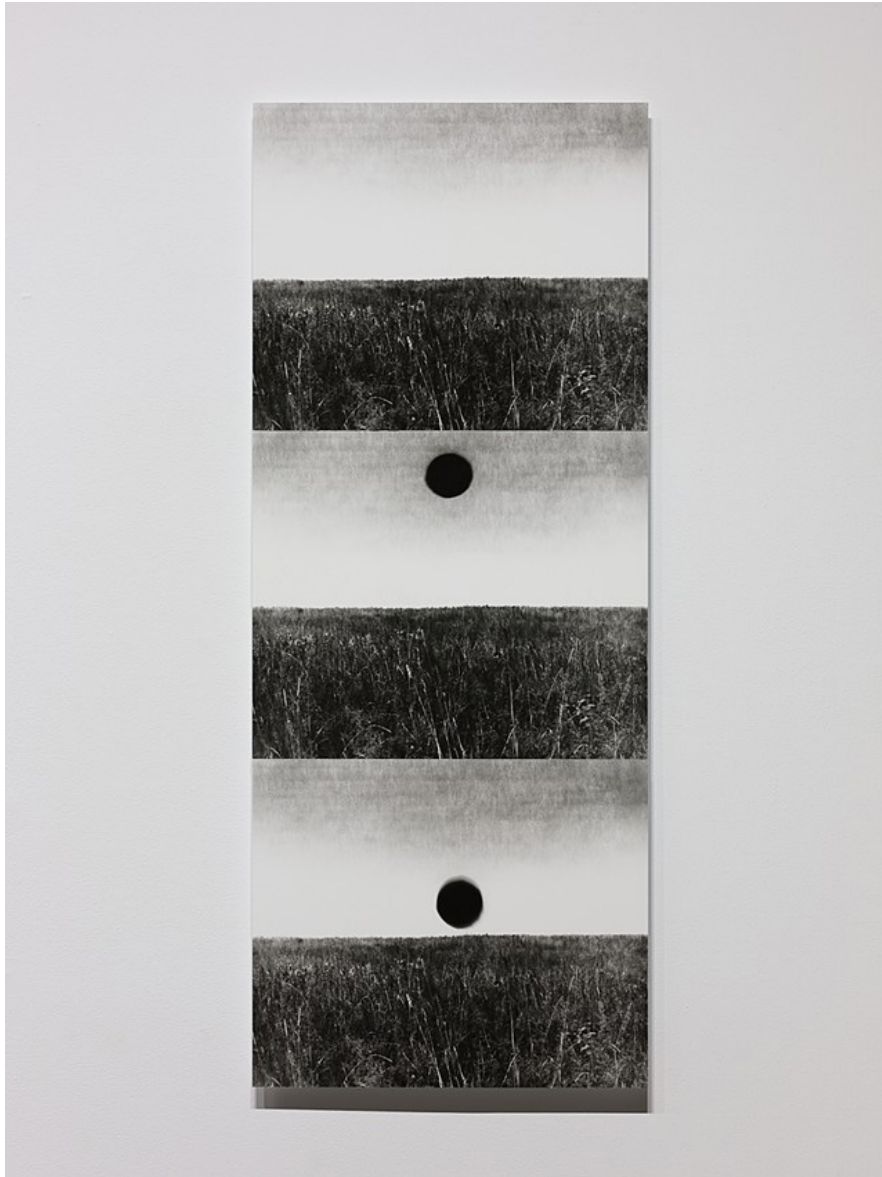
The artist’s picking away of visual information with her fingernail, scratching and abrading layers of color-saturated emulsion, reveals flaming yellows, reds and pitch-black holes in the final image. The voids read like bullet holes inflicted on the image. At first, they seem shocking, senseless, violent, certainly irrevocable interruptions of beauty. How dare she? What’s she got against beauty, anyway?

In a trio of arresting works entitled “This is the Result,” McElroy takes the destruction further into experimental territory by tearing her 4 x 5 negatives. The unpredictable physical ruptures reveal silvery gashes of exposed emulsion that appear like rockets exiting the planet’s atmosphere, or molten stars being born. The curled edges of the unframed contact prints are formal documents of her darkroom destruction. On the gallery wall they look like charred artifacts of a nuclear detonation.

McElroy shifted materials, texture and mood, yet again, with “The Monolith.” On one side of a large black temporary wall is a tiled image grid of 42 gelatin silver contact prints from paper negatives. The inverse exposed image is anchored by a dense prairie grass-scape in the



lower half. Above, an empty sky is smothered by shadowy forms. Cometh Hitchcock's "The Birds"! An apocalyptic wave of grasshoppers? Packs of flying monkeys! Just an F5 tornado brewing?



Lilly McElroy, "Monolith, One," (2023), unique gelatin silver contact prints, 60 x 24" (from the artist)

The elephant in "The Monolith" is the fuzzy black orb that hovers ominously large above the horizon line. In a sea of grass, McElroy has poetically conjured our existential dread of an eclipsed sun. In that photochemically frozen moment, the artist invites us to confront the fragility of life and our planet's merciless dependence on the sun in papery soft focus. It's a moment familiar to generations of Cold War kids who grew up anticipating thermonuclear destruction with every passing plane. These days, its eco-anxiety turned up to 11.

Casually propped in opposite corners of the exhibition were McElroy's playful video loops, "The Sun in my Hand," in which the artist raises her arm up toward the sun against a clear blue sky. Holding a small mirror in her upturned palm with slight gestures, she bounces a series of flashy reflections and lens flares signaling communication with, and through, the sun. The shiny simplicity of this work recalls pure childlike play, replete with joy and potential danger. On deeper levels, it reflects a profound human desire, at our peril, to capture, possess and harness the power of our local star.

Unlike Icarus, however, McElroy wisely remains on the ground, in the landscape, sense of humor intact. Her body and her practice are the vehicles for remaking the mythology of the American West — by actually poking holes in it. No, Ansel Adams would not be amused. This artist has the cosmic audacity to erase the sun, sand it away, penetrate the pictorial landscape. It suggests a curious skepticism about who or what is behind the curtain of the Wizard's hidey hole. By bringing destructive physical processes into the work as positive gestures, the observer becomes the participant and holes become portals. "That's the fun of the void, right? The not knowing," she prodded mischievously.

**For more information about McElroy and her work, visit [lillymcelroy.com](http://lillymcelroy.com).**

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