

CYNTHIA-REEVES

THE NEW YORKER

PHOTO BOOTH

# THE ANIMAL RESTLESSNESS IN ARTIFICIAL OBJECTS

By Max Campbell, NOVEMBER 18, 2016



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*"Straws no. 4," Mono Lake, California, 2015.*

THOMAS JACKSON

When the artist Thomas Jackson began working on “Emergent Behavior,” in 2011, he started with found objects. He collected fallen leaves in the Catskills and picked junk off the street in New York, then moved on to purchasing hundreds of cups and cheese balls, construction fences, glow necklaces, hula hoops, and balloons. He assembles these objects on outdoor frameworks, then photographs the installations. The resulting pictures show inanimate objects caught up in restless movement: some circle, some gather, some dip. In the color palette of a birthday party, Jackson’s bits of plastic and rubber evoke schools of fish that move like ink in the water, or birds streaking the sky. “We’ve so successfully separated ourselves from nature,” he said. By imposing the curves of natural systems onto unnatural objects, he bridges that gap and asks us to consider its breadth.

The flocks in Jackson’s pictures are so cheeky and vibrant, so artificial and yet so full of apparent animal instinct, that it’s hard to believe a photographer could have created the tableaux without an assist from digital editing. That’s intentional: “My little inside joke is that I still want my images to look like digital composites,” Jackson said in a recent interview. But instead of Photoshop it’s his sculpting and his scaffolding, which he installs on beaches and in deserts, that give life to the illusions. Look closely at your screen and it’s still difficult to make out the monofilaments stretched between large nets, holding up the whirling tutus and plates and straws—instead, it’s the plastic and fabric and rubber themselves that seem unable to bear remaining planted on the ground.

*“Emergent Behavior” will open at the Miller Yezerski Gallery, in Boston, on November 18th, and will be on display through December 23rd.*

*Max Campbell is a photo producer at newyorker.com. MORE*