



# Capital City Arts Initiative

The Capital City Arts Initiative [CCAI] is delighted to present, *New Crop 2019*, an exhibition by artists Mark Combs and Frances Melhop, at the CCAI Courthouse Gallery from June 4 – September 26, 2019. CCAI extends its sincere appreciations to the artists, the Carson City Courthouse, and to all those involved with the exhibition. In addition, CCAI thanks our commissioned writer, Kris Vagner, who provided the following essay.

## Impermanent Markers

Two artists traveled different paths to the territory of human temporality

Frances Melhop grew up reading time-honored stories—“the ones that aren’t the tidied up fairy tales,” she explained. Later, working as a fashion photographer, she shot spreads for magazines like *Vogue Australia*, *Elle Portugal*, and *Marie Claire Italy* and found that the narratives and aesthetics from *The Chronicles of Narnia* and the *Brothers Grimm* still guided her imagination. She met the fashion industry’s requirement to illustrate the clothing and models in a flattering light—but she met it a bit subversively, partially on her own terms. “I just wanted to create these characters that you could identify with,” Melhop said. “I had to have a storyboard. ... I had to have subtlety, and I had to have some of the dark side of fairy tales.”

Her magazine images convey magical mixtures of made-up worlds—a cursed princess with an air of *Sleeping Beauty*; the nonsensical proportions of *Alice in Wonderland*; the occasional gothic flourish of a Tim Burton film; and wry, surrealist stylings like those of Magritte and Dalí.



Frances Melhop, *Vanish*, photographs on silk organza, 2018

Eventually, Melhop, now an MFA candidate at the University of Nevada, Reno, switched from making photos in a commercial realm to making them in an academic realm. She found different ways to use portraiture to raise questions about how and why people are represented in pictures, especially women and girls. How do we try to define ourselves—and others—when we make images? Which parts of our personae are likely to be represented during a given era? Which parts are allowed to be? Do we call the shots about how we will be seen, or are there larger systems at play?

To probe these questions from different vantage points, Melhop has made several groups of images, using technologies and trends from different eras. In a recent series, she looked at a current phenomenon—selfie culture. She made a grid of 25 rough-edged, postcard-sized canvas pieces, pinned, specimen-style, to a dark background. Each canvas contains an eye, nose or mouth, borrowed from a stranger’s Instagram feed.

For her current series, *Vanish*, Melhop found images of girls, teenaged and younger, from the 19th century. Each girl is in her Sunday best, pictured head to toe in the center of a frame, eyes fixed in an intense gaze.

The pictures come from tintypes that Melhop collected from junk shops. (In hindsight, she said, it may

have been their dark fairytale undercurrents that first caught her eye.) A tintype is made by exposing a metal plate inside a camera for several minutes, hence the stiff poses—a subject had to hold perfectly still for the entire process. As always in Melhop’s work, the ramifications of whichever technology she’s using are important to consider: Tintypes, invented in 1863, were more affordable than earlier forms of photography, making them popular with middle-class families. Traveling portrait artists set up temporary tintype studios at fairs and carnivals. Before this development, girls appear in the photographic record much more infrequently—as if the pre-tintype world had been made up mostly of soldiers, miners, Abraham Lincolns, Edgar Allen Poes, Frederick Douglasses, and the occasional Emily Dickinson, bride, or grandma.

To make the works in *Vanish*, Melhop collected tintype portraits of girls over several years, digitized them, repaired any damage, and printed them poster-sized on translucent sheets of silk organza. The silk hangs away from the wall, willowy and thin, catching even the slightest breeze. Each girl’s high-collared dress, Victorian boots and expressionless gaze situates her firmly in the past. Forgotten, even. Melhop said that almost none of the pictures she’d collected came with much identifying information, that she’d found them far from any family album they may have been part of, forever confined to anonymity.

For most girls’ pictures, an additional piece of silk hangs near it, this one with her image repeated in a ghostlike negative. While we already know that these Civil War-era girls are long gone, seeing them again in white and black instead of black and white somehow further accentuates their impermanence.

In a sense, Melhop explained, these wistful portraits are metaphors for the way memories work. “Memories get buried,” she said. “And they have different opacities all the way through, until they just finally kind of disintegrate.”

Melhop’s magazine images, selfie canvasses, and tintypes on fabric are all part of one lineage. “I’m kind of looking at both ends of the spectrum and trying to contextualize where we came from,” she said. If the arc of her career has been to examine the forces that dictate how we are seen in images, the *Vanish* series posits that the ways we are seen—as children, as adults, and long after we are gone—are perhaps further out of our control than we’d like to think. The effect of this realization can easily add up to a nebulous sense of universal uncertainty, a sense that all is fleeting.

Two color photographs from an earlier Comstock series, feature worn residences as portraits of Virginia City. Melhop captures the historical and lived-in shells of that community.



Frances Melhop, *Triangle – A/P #1*  
*The Comstock Portrait Project 2013 - 2017*  
digital Photograph on Hahnemühle cotton rag, 2018

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While Melhop’s career-long investigation of portraiture eventually led her to the subtheme of mortality, for sculptor Mark Combs, mortality was the starting point.

“It’s a big part of me being an artist,” he said.

He was accepted to art school at age 19 but deferred to pursue a career in the Air Force. “As a military medic, the things I saw were horrific,” he said. “I was young. I was 21 the first time I went to a war zone, 39 the last time I went to one.” After he retired from the Air Force, he had a job training people who respond to mass casualties such as hurricanes and bombings, then took a year off, then enrolled under the GI Bill at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas, where he completed a BFA in art. This year, he completed his MFA from UNR.

Combs’ recent sculptures depict oversized human bones made of felted wool and polished steel. Each



Mark Combs, *Ossuary*, welded steel, needle-felted wool, vacuum seal bags, grommets, hardware, 2019

one is sealed in a plastic bag. The plastic bags hang in a grid. The entire presentation appears resolved and composed, but the artist's path to such gleaming surfaces and orderly compositions was no straight, easy road.

Combs said that the transition from military life to student life was difficult in more ways than one. As a medic, he'd seen too many injuries and deaths to keep track of, and those experiences took their toll in the form of PTSD and depression, which followed him into his studies. As an art student, he wrestled with the contrast between a well-ordered military mindset and the more metaphorical outlook his professors expected. "The military trains you to

be concise, precise, brief and exact," Combs said. At first, he was frustrated that people couldn't read in his work the messages that were, to him, so clear and straightforward. "It would upset me that people wouldn't see what I was doing," he said. The solution: "I tried just to mess with things and see how I could broaden the perspective to more general themes."

His current project is anchored tightly to a theme by its title alone, "Sic Transit Gloria Mundi." It's a Latin phrase that means, "Thus passes the glory of the world," acknowledging head-on that everything and everyone will one day be gone. This phrase and its variations are used in many contexts, in many cultures. Notably, on Wikipedia, the phrase is just one link away from the page on "vanitas" paintings, photorealistic pictures in which artists placed symbols of mortality—usually a human skull—among earthly riches. Vanitas paintings began in the Renaissance and have been riffed on in every way imaginable, from serious to satirical, ever since. For Combs' part, he conjures them up subtly—omitting any symbols of wealth or indulgence that would have suggested the vain futility that was part of the Renaissance version of the genre. (Combs is most certainly not running from—or glossing over—the truth. In his MFA exhibition, an app counted down the days until his projected death.)

As a viewer, you'll know for sure that you're in the territory of mortality, and you'll also know that Combs will not be standing at the gate to hand you a map and a compass. But he has left enough references for a self-guided tour.

Most of his plastic bags contain a radius and ulna, the bones that make up the forearm, but there's also the occasional ball joint, jaw, or semi-fictional bone. They are all ostensibly human, but detached and anonymous. The bags and their grid-shaped arrangement may well invite notions of scientific classification. The bones themselves could be easily read as a memorial. The materials they're made of half-transcend and half obey their own physical laws—the wool has the softness and porousness you'd expect, but also, it's in the improbable shape of a rod that holds its shape. The steel, which is curved or bulbous in the right places, hints at being more easily malleable than it really is. Combs put hours and hours into welding, hammering, and grinding it just so.

A few pieces even have embedded in them the occasional railroad spike, wrench, bolt or nut. "A lot of these actually all have their own individual hidden history, because they were once other things," Combs said. "Now there's a whole new meaning to it. Which is also a reference to humanity and how we evolve. We recreate ourselves, which is something I've done myself." Combs includes two wall sculptures of

battered and welded car parts. The new welds, more accents than repairs, bring refinement and design giving new life to the discards.

Kris Vagner  
Reno, Nevada  
June 2019



Mark Combs, *Bi-Lateral*  
recycled car fenders, welding rods - various sizes, 2017

This exhibition is supported by a lead donation from the Southwest Gas Corporation Foundation. The artists and CCAI thank the Foundation for its generous support of this project.

The Capital City Arts Initiative [CCAI] is funded in part by the John Ben Snow Memorial Trust, National Endowment for the Arts, Nevada Arts Council, John and Grace Nauman Foundation, Carson City Cultural Commission, Nevada Humanities and the National Endowment for the Humanities, NV Energy Foundation, and U.S. Bank Foundation.



Frances Melhop and Mark Combs



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