

Matthew Brandt, Carbon, Birch, Silver, Rooms @Yossi Milo

By Loring Knoblauch / In Galleries / November 30, 2021

JTF (just the facts): A total of 21 photographic works, displayed in the East and West gallery spaces.

The following works are included in the show:

- 6 silver on gelatin silver print, mounted on aluminum, 2021, each sized 71x41x2 inches, unique, from series *Silver*
- 6 pyrograph on birch plywood with gold leaf, 2021, each sized 71x41x1 inches, unique, from series *Birch*
- 6 photographic glass chandelier pieces with painted metal armature, 2021, in sizes ranging from 27x19x19 to 92x21x21 inches, unique, from series *Rooms*
- 3 carbon prints with ashes and cinders collected from Palisades fire on blackout fabric, 43x32 inches (or the reverse), unique, from series *Carbon*

(Installation and detail shots below.)





Matthew Brandt has never been entirely content with using photography to document the surfaces and appearances of the world around him. Instead, he has continually pushed the medium beyond its normal boundaries, making photographs that incorporate the physical attributes and context of his subject matter into the very fabric of the art objects he creates.

In gallery shows in the last decade (reviewed in 2012 [here](#), 2014 [here](#), and 2016 [here](#)), Brandt has experimented with images of lakes and rivers soaked in the very water they depict, images of trees printed on wood panels made from the exact same wood, and images of extinct animals made from the tar of the La Brea Tar Pits, among his many projects. Again and again, over the years, we have seen him stretching and adapting the available processes of photographic printing to allow a specific element of the real to be brought into the end results. And it is when these modifications bring not only elements of obvious conceptual linkage and literal connection, but also a range of serendipitous chance deviations to the art-making process that Brandt's works become most intriguing.

This show gathers together four different projects from the past few years, offering a few examples of each in a mini-survey. The works in the front gallery interleave two projects using trees as their subject matter, alternating between the shiny metallic surfaces of silver and gold. This show gathers together four different projects from the past few years, offering a few examples of each in a mini-survey. The works in the front gallery interleave two projects using trees as their subject matter, alternating between the shiny metallic surfaces of silver and gold. The gold works come from the series *Birch* and are “pyrographs” – photographs that have been laser-engraved onto birch plywood and then scorched until they turn black. The majestic birch trees found in the woods around St. Petersburg, Russia, form the subject of these works, with tall, dappled-white trunks reaching vertically through the scrub of the forest. Up close, the engraved wood is highly textural, with precise divots and scrapings enshrouded in deep enveloping black. Brandt then uses an overlay of gold leaf to create a tunneled window effect, where the gold applied across the surface “reveals” the underlying relief, almost like a spotlight in the darkness. While the spreads of shiny gold leaf add an air of gaudy bling in a few cases, from a few steps back the push and pull between gold and black is more in balance, giving the images the satisfying feel of lushly impressive engravings or woodcuts.

The *Silver* series is somewhat less matchingly literal in its connection to its trees. Here the forest images are a bit more brooding and moody, with dark silhouettes looming up out of the grey. The silver link comes between the gelatin silver print (the photographic medium) and an overlay of dripping liquid silver that



BirchSP010A, 2021. Pyrograph on Birch plywood with Gold Leaf.

slithers down the surface of the prints. Depending on the thickness of this silver, and how it gathers and pools in more dense areas, the silvering can be softly transparent, like a gentle rainfall on a window, or altogether opaque, like the cloudy surface of an antique mirror. The silvered washes create reflection, bouncing the interior of the gallery (and nearby viewers) into the underlying forest, and up close, the surfaces offer a wide range of sinuous textures, like different weather conditions.

In the back room, Brandt's *Carbon* series continues the tree theme, but in even darker tones. His images come from the area devastated by the California wildfires, and are punctuated by blackened carcasses of now-dead trees and burned brush. Brandt has made carbon prints of these images, incorporating ashes and cinder collected from the fire sites into the process. The works have been printed on blackout fabric, and the black on black effect is both ominous and foreboding – only in raking light are the dark scraggly forms visible, turning them into ghosts or elusive memories. These works are hard to see, but the sense of discovery that occurs when the image does become visible makes the charred landscapes more memorable than they would otherwise be.

The most unexpectedly innovative works in the show find Brandt experimenting with the enduring presence of glass chandeliers. When acquiring the various chandeliers in the show (from sellers on eBay and the like), part of Brandt's bargain was obtaining the ability to make photographs of the rooms in which the chandeliers were currently hung. Back in his studio, Brandt then disassembled the glass pieces of the chandeliers and fused (and/or melted) fragments of the original room imagery to each individual glass piece. When reassembled into functioning fixtures, the works now had panoramic around-the-room views of the previous homes embedded in the glass.

The overall effect of this unlikely process is different at different distances. From far away, the chandeliers simply look like they have colored glass pieces hanging from the armatures. But up close, those fragments resolve into images of particular dining rooms, living rooms, bedrooms, and hallways, as though the old view the chandelier once had is now permanently etched into the fixture. The domestic details of carpets, hardwood floors, bookshelves, artworks, and furniture are surprisingly personal, making it feel like we have stepped back into those rooms. With this process, Brandt has given these objects an enduring sense of their own past, and a kind of inexplicable magic that feels unexpected.

The structure of Brandt's subject matter/photographic process matching approach inevitably invites (at least for me) some wary skepticism, but there is a nugget of artistic and conceptual eloquence to be found in the execution of each of these projects that pushes back on the doubt we might have that such pairings could be meaningful. For me, the power is discovered down at the detail level, where the charred etching, the watery silvering, and the distorted glass fusing start to break down into purer aesthetics – we can then, of course, jump back up to the overriding framework, but still be durably drawn in by the richness of the objects themselves. Even if the backstory can sometimes feel a little forced, Brandt has proven repeatedly (both here and in the past) that he can be a maker of compellingly original and unpredictable photographic objects.

Collector's POV: The works in this show are priced as follows. The works from the *Silver* and *Birch* series are \$30000 each, the works from the *Carbon* series are \$18000 each, and the chandeliers from the *Rooms* series range from \$18000 to \$60000, based on size. Brandt's work has just begun to enter the secondary markets in the past few years. Recent prices for the few lots that have changed hands have ranged between roughly \$6000 and \$28000