

Karen Zalamea

*When the sun rises, we keep the fire aflame*

March 22<sup>nd</sup> to May 12<sup>th</sup>, 2018

**BAF Gallery**

108 East Broadway, Vancouver, BC

The exhibition *When the sun rises, we keep the fire aflame* introduces a thoughtful new body of work by BAF's latest artist-in-residence Karen Zalamea. Bringing a fresh perspective to the traditions of landscape photography, the Vancouver-based artist's exhibition stems from a recent exploration of iconic American landscapes—from Yellowstone National Park to Utah's Bonneville Salt Flats. This series was shot outdoors, marking a shift for Zalamea who is more accustomed to working in a more controlled studio environment. Reflecting on this new corpus, she writes:

*While aware of the historical legacy of photographing the American landscape, plus the romantic lore of the road trip, this project's impetus questioned the relationship between camera and vista, the potential for abstraction within nature, and a break with conventional display.*

Describing this work as “reflecting on what a photograph can be,” Zalamea pushes the limits of photography beyond its traditional two-dimensional pictorality into objecthood. Underscoring what she calls the “slippery nature” between mediums, some of her photographs are framed and hung on the wall; others are cut up and collaged, others still are presented as three-dimensional sculptural pieces—literally taking up space and pushing into the viewer's vicinity. Foregrounding texture and materiality, Zalamea also experiments with various materials, printing her photographs onto silk, canvas, and metallic paper. These “soft photographs,” as she describes them, are sensuously displayed, draped and wrapped onto platforms and plinths of various heights—some sheets cascading onto the floor, others left hanging in midair.

Attentive to the material surface or, as she calls it, the topographical “skin” of landscape—and the many configurations of rock, sand, grass, tree, and water that this encompasses—Zalamea creates black-and-white and colour photographs that are intensely detailed, calling the viewer's attention to the natural hues, textures, patterns, and marks in the landscape. The resulting imagery often oscillates between figuration and abstraction. Displaying a fluid perspective, the photographs frame landscape in unexpected ways, often eliminating geographic reference or other spatial context. Her cutouts equally disturb the viewer's sense of scale and perspective: a large body of water might be the size of a puddle, an imposing rock formation merely a pile of stones.

If within the popular imagination photography is still often linked to dispassionate objectivity, Zalamea's malleable photographs and her display of them have less to do with inventory, collecting, and documentation. Rather, her project subtly suggests a poignant awareness of the impossibility of pinning nature down given its transient, shifting quality, and our fragmented experience of it. This profoundly existential, even elegiac realisation reverberates through the exhibition.