

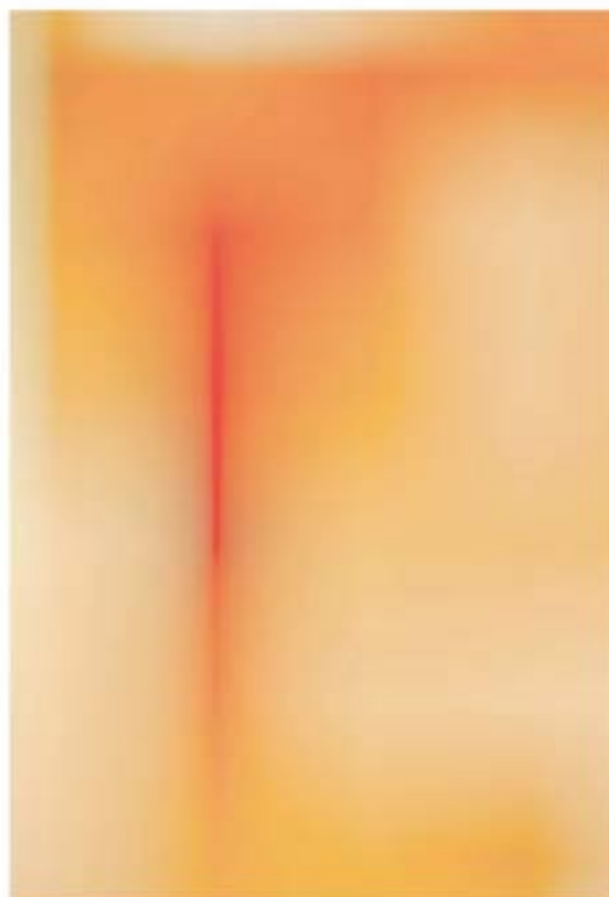
Rockland exhibit combines iPhone and biology to create a world of color, geometry | Column

John Woodruff's 'Interiors/Exteriors (the nature of nature)' is showing at Triangle Gallery through June 28.

Community: **Rockland**

Posted 11:00 AM **Jorge S. Arango**

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John Woodruff, 'Exterior #117,' 2023. (Image courtesy of the artist)

There is quite a bit of abstract photography happening in Maine at the moment. Among the artists working in this genre are Luc Demers, Carol Eisenberg, Bryan Graf and Sarah Szwajkos. Another, John Woodruff, is currently showing at Rockland's Triangle Gallery in an exhibition titled "Interiors/Exteriors (the nature of nature)" (through June 28).

When I first encountered Woodruff's work, he was shooting pictures of the sun and moon, printing many copies of them and cutting around these shining stellar bodies to form amoebic shapes. Then he would lay them on various levels of stacked glass shelves before shooting down through the glass layers to produce images that were at once print and collage but also seemed to emit multiple points of light. They were luminous and dazzling.

Subsequent experimentations with photo collage were less successful in that they seemed to effort too much and came off as a bit loud and garish. With this "Interiors/Exteriors" series, however, he has hit upon something both sublime and profoundly meaningful.

For the Triangle Gallery show, Woodruff is shooting with an iPhone and combining his interest in biology (in which he earned a degree) and his experience as an architectural photographer. Indeed, the images at first blush look like blurred architectural structures or aerial views of city plans. But they are so much more.

Woodruff points his phone at organic and inorganic elements outdoors (i.e.: lichen, moss, volcanic rock) and shoots them in soft focus. By blowing them up in scale, he further distorts the images, revealing minute worlds of color and geometric structure. They are labeled either "Exterior" or "Interior" and numbered to distinguish one from the other. This sort of cataloguing has nothing to do with whether they were shot outside or inside; the "Exterior" and "Interior" designations merely indicate the fact that the image suggests to Woodruff one or the other.



John Woodruff, "Exterior #82," 2025. (Image courtesy of the artist)

The experience of standing in the gallery amidst them is dreamlike and a little woozy. They emanate a profound meditative quality where form feels indistinct and color seems to pulsate and quiver. The wooziness comes partially from the indistinctness of the images, which denies resolution and fixed meaning — actually contradicting the origins of photography as a static record of a moment in time. But we also feel slightly disoriented because there is something deeply resonant in them that seems to relate to the dynamic nature of our being as a constantly evolving, morphing, disappearing form that reconstitutes differently from one second to the next.

This is not to say that the perpetual change of both image perception and the essential nature of our being do not have structure. The most stationary, least blurred, elements of the photographs are the clear, grid-like geometries that emerge within each, suggesting some sort of universal order undergirding the impermanence of both image and being.

Fundamentally, Woodruff is tapping into the universe of fractals, where one form that does not conform to traditional geometric shapes like triangles, circles and squares, is repeated over and over again at infinitely smaller and concentrically larger scales. A classic example of this is the fern frond. Each frond is made up of smaller leaves that mimic the overall fern frond form. That repeating self-similarity then multiplies in the cluster of fronds that make up the larger individual plant. This gets at the “nature of nature” idea. Woodruff’s pictures, in other words, record the inner nature of nature’s own forms.



John Woodruff, “Exterior #41,” 2025. (Image courtesy of the artist)

The impact of this psychologically and somatically creates both a sense of resolution (the assurance that there is an underlying order to the universe) and a challenge to our sense of something separate and unique. To some, the latter can be an unsettling contemplation. It denies our desire to differentiate ourselves from “lower” forms of life, forcing us to accept our oneness with all things, including each other. If we take this to its natural conclusion, we cannot then think of ourselves, at least at the most fundamental levels of our being, as different from those to whom we are opposed.

Do we pick all of this up when viewing Woodruff's work? Not necessarily. We can simply lose ourselves in pleasing structures and modulations of color, while simultaneously realizing that we are beholding minute details of familiar things (lichen, moss, granite) that we normally would not see with the naked eye. This in itself is fascinating — and endlessly rewarding — enough. We can correlate some to art with which we are familiar too. A piece such as "Exterior #41" can recall Richard Diebenkorn planar Los Angeles roadscapes. "Interior #122" may put us in mind of Donald Judd's stacked box sculptures. "Exterior #117" might evoke Lucio Fontana's sliced canvases.

But if we can discern these more universal implications, the work can feel transformative, as if we are touching down into a deeper state of consciousness. It is a beautiful and moving body of work.

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