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## **REVIEW: Touch the Spindle at Capital Gallery**

By Amy Mutza

At Capital Gallery a fairytale is unfolding, but rather than a magic pumpkin carriage, an exploding hearse awaits you.

Capital's inaugural exhibition, *Touch the Spindle*, combines work by Virginia Overton, Will Rogan, and Cynthia Daignault. The fairytale theme of *Touch the Spindle* is fitting for Capital's first show since it introduces the gallery's petite space with an Alice-in-Wonderland-style (dis)orientation regarding scale that is as an invitation to EAT, DRINK, and expect big things from small packages.



Virginia Overton

Untitled, 2015

Duratrans, bulb guards, fluorescent bulbs and fixtures

Dimensions variable

Image from Capital Gallery

Curatorially, *Touch the Spindle* is a carefully thought out show. Five total artworks by the three artists are arranged in a way that creates distinct pairings and direct lines between the pieces. For example, Will Rogan's two photographs, depicting his exploding hearse, are situated across the room from Cynthia Daignault's pair of canvases that make up her piece *Mirror, Mirror*. A quadrant of Virginia Overton's hair-wrapped light tubes oversee the show from the high-up Rapunzel vantage point of the ceiling; while Rogan's hanging mobile, made up of shards from the exploded hearse, bisects the space vertically. These interactive lines crisscross the gallery, producing a show that feels organized and clearly suggestive, like a host who politely introduces party guests to one another in order to strike up conversation between them.

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## From Spinning Records to Spinning Gold (Rapunzel-style)

Recently opened in San Francisco's Chinatown, Capital Gallery is the latest venture by collaborators Jonathan Runcio and Bob Linder. Linder and Runcio, who are also friends and colleagues of mine, have been collaborating since the inception of their "Let's Get Weird" night every other Friday at the Rock Bar. At Let's Get Weird they spin records, play art videos, and stage performative entertainment, such as xerox parties and sculptural hotdog nights. With Capital, they have expanded their partnership to a more permanent space.

In many ways, their 100 square foot storefront location works in their favor. Rather than feeling constrained by the small size of the gallery, Runcio and Linder seem to be reveling in it. During the show's opening—not able to fit in the gallery all at once—a crowd gathered on the sidewalk, luring in more onlookers to the already well-attended event. While the usual reception chaos means you can barely see the artwork, gallery-goers took turns going inside only a few at a time. This meant we all had plenty of breathing room inside and out, as well as an unobstructed viewing experience (not to mention a gallery that was immaculately clean by the end; a benefit for the proprietors more than the crowd, but nonetheless).

Capital's floor-to-ceiling storefront windows provide a clear view to the gallery's interior. Besides being visually appealing, it gave us the opportunity to watch people inside look at the artwork, an unexpected and voyeuristic bonus. Seeing how others interact with and respond to art can nuance your understanding of how the work operates on different scales—a larger social scale and a smaller, more personal scale. Plus, it can be a pleasurable experience, and I can't argue with that.

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## Exhibiting Magic



Will Rogan  
Before, 2015  
Silver gelatin prints, two parts  
8 x 10 inches, 10 1/2 x 13 1/2 inches framed  
Edition of 3  
Image from Capital Gallery

Will Rogan's works deal with time. The two photographs in *Touch the Spindle* are close relations of the video Rogan created last year of a hearse being blown up, titled *Erased*. In *Erased*, which was filmed with an

appropriately-named Phantom camera that takes 6,900 frames per second, Rogan turned a symbol of death, a hearse, into an epic slow motion film. The spectacle of Hollywood pyrotechnics is elongated into a thing of beauty in which a few seconds becomes 6 minutes, and booming sound is transformed into a slow growl. Time is a reminder of mortality, and Rogan drags it out to extreme proportions, conflating the concepts of death and beauty with a comical twist (Watch a video on the making of Rogan's *Erased* [here](#)). Unlike the video, however, the photos in *Touch the Spindle* minimize the explosion to only two phases: before and after, the hearse and the cloud created by the explosion.



Will Rogan's slow motion exploding hearse

Like a magic trick in which now you see it and (POOF!) now you don't, time is cut out of the middle and the object disappears in the snap of a finger. Recalling another work by Rogan, an artist book of magicians' obituaries, the photos give the hearse, an object that represents the serious, melancholy obligations of life, a shiny topcoat of magic. It's clear that Rogan is a magician artist, reminding the viewer that things are not always as they seem.

Wit and magical transformation come together in Cynthia Daignault's *Mirror, Mirror* (2013) as well. At first glance, this piece reads like a straightforward quip. A painting of a framed mirror hanging on a wall is split in half. Made up of two separate canvases, which are *Mirror* and *Mirror*, the painting is a literal interpretation of the famous fairytale line "mirror mirror on the wall." The piece is also a mirror of itself since the halves are symmetrical, including the painted shadows that surround the mirror's edges. However, this witticism is only the entry point to the work; the slick surface of the mirror. What makes this work interesting are the ways it poetically engages the human psyche, which it does through a gentle, yet unrelenting refusal.

Mirrors are inextricably linked to the psyche. Mirror gazing evokes concepts of the ego, self-recognition, and narcissistic over-admiration (remember when 'selfies' had to be taken in the bathroom mirror?). Our culture is fascinated with mirrors because they're necessary for the upkeep of physical appearance and because of the idea that they can give us insights into who we are, relating outward appearance with the inner soul and psyche. *If I can see myself, then maybe I can understand myself.*

Psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan famously theorized about the "mirror stage" as a vital part of a child's development, which then continues to influence a person in his/her adult life. Marked as the point when a child first recognizes his/her reflection as his/her own body, the mirror stage corresponds to the relationship of the self with the image of the body and the relationship of the self with the rest of the physical world. According to Lacan, the mirror stage creates an association of the fragmentary idea of the self with an image of an ideal. He related the experience, or misunderstanding (as he has it), of the mirror stage with alienation: an othering of the self. This ideal is a fantasy, in Lacan's view, so that we are always striving with false hope for rational order that we can never obtain. Whether you are on board with Lacan or not, it's clear that mirrors are tied

to our understanding of who we are, as both physical bodies occupying space and as self-aware sentient beings.



Cynthia Dagnault  
*Mirror, Mirror*, 2013  
Oil on linen  
Two parts: 60 x 22 inches each  
Image From Capital Gallery

Mirrors also act as a magical touchstone. A variety of cultures and histories associate magic and superstition with mirrors. They should be covered during a wake, and breaking one can give you seven years of bad luck. Saying ‘Bloody Mary’ into one in the dark can conjure a ghost, while vampires have no reflections at all.

Additionally, mirrors provide multiple perspectives and views of that which cannot otherwise be seen, from spy mirrors to peek around corners to rearview mirrors in our cars to pocket-sized mirrors to check our makeup. Mirrors reflect reality, but the space they create is imaginary, flat as well as infinite.

Looking at Dagnault’s *Mirror, Mirror*, it feels that all of these psychological and magical associations are swirling within. Painterly gray strokes indicate a reflective surface, but the mirror produces nothing. *Mirror, Mirror* refuses to answer the question of who is the fairest of them all. Any desire to see the self reflected in the mirror—or, as many fairy tales magically spin it, another person, time, or place—is thwarted. Dagnault’s characteristic velvety, loose brushstrokes allow for hope that if I look hard enough the light and shadows will take form, revealing something or someone. Furthermore, they let me believe that I could find more than merely a reflection of reality, but something magical. The usual reasons for mirror gazing, maintenance and self-admiration, are transformed into a searching gaze; a look for something else, be it the fairest of them all, Bloody Mary, or Lacan’s Ideal-I. The longer I look the more certain and uncertain I am that I see something, and this seems to be one of the painting’s main points: to entice more than a cursory glance.

Installed several inches apart, the diptych of canvases are not flush with one another, making the heart of the painting the gap between them rather than the painting itself. The central focal point of the work is the gallery wall behind the work, not the canvases. Not only does the gap between the canvases literally break up the

mirror (seven years bad luck!), metaphorically it foils narcissism and won't produce any answer to the question of Beauty. *Mirror, Mirror* is an empty portrait. It doesn't matter if I want to see myself or someone else, the mirror refuses to show a face that could be judged for its attractiveness.

Furthermore, in drawing the eye to the space between and behind the canvases, *Mirror, Mirror* undercuts the painting's sacred position on the gallery wall. When modern art rejected painting's traditional role as the "window onto the world," in a sense it merely replaced it with the role as the window into the artist's soul and/or mind. Daignault's painting simultaneously engages and disengages with this idea by drawing the viewer's eye away from the work to the white wall of the gallery. Suddenly, the mirror, mirror on the wall seems like a cruel diversion and a cover-up. Vanity is mapped onto the reflective surface, which is used to distract from what is really behind it. What or who are we not supposed to see and why (I can't help thinking of nefarious and political uses for two-way mirrors)? With *Mirror, Mirror*, desire to see is transferred back and forth from the self to what lies behind, beyond.

While mirrors can signify vanity and narcissism, Daignault brings a magical element to the mirror, not by showing the viewer, but by denying the viewer. Daignault's work aligns the quiet poetics of formalism regarding light and color with a poetics of the psyche, and, in doing so, *Mirror, Mirror* creates a space that connects seeing with feeling, looking with longing. Artists, who are often famously credited with being narcissistic, have made a practice of looking long and hard, seeing what others miss, within the mirror and without. Daignault lends the viewer the artist's method of looking; a method that dissolves subject into color and light as well as looks behind and beyond the surface. *Mirror, Mirror* also seems to be a reminder that though we may look long and hard, we may not find what we are looking for and what we do find is not what we expected. After all, the word *narcissism*, meaning self-centered and vain, comes from the myth of Narcissus, who famously fell in love with his own reflection; however, when he looked into the pool of water, Narcissus never recognized himself.