

Nature Word

Susannah Hays shows the world in an unworldly light.

By *DeWitt Cheng*

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Near the end of Louis Malle's philosophical comedy, *My Dinner with Andre*, as the intellectually adventurous Andre's esoteric and exotic narrative winds down, the everyman Wally finally sputters in reply: You don't need to go to Everest to attain enlightenment. If you *really* knew what was in the average cigar store, it would just *blow your mind*. The photographs and photograms of Berkeley's Susannah Hays, in accord with Andre's aspirations to transcendence, also prove Wally's point — that ordinariness is extraordinary, too, if we can but see it. In everyday imagery — shadows on grass, glittering mica flecks in pavement, antique glass bottles, and miscellaneous papers found on the street — Hays discovers images that foster mindfulness — at least for a while: worldliness ("the world") returns quickly, according to Andre.



Detail of Susannah Hays' "Empty Bottle No. 6."

Hays' means are relatively simple and direct: traditional gelatin-silver prints for the *Walking the City* series, poetically charged urban landscapes that interpret landscapes in cosmic terms; silver-sunprints, or camera-less solar photograms, for the *Leaf* series, which transform oak, ivy, and eucalyptus leaves into rich umber tracteries or maps; Epson digital prints for her *Between Cedar and Vine* series, memorializing the ephemera — shopping lists, doodles, kids' homework — that Hays salvaged for fifteen years on her daily coffee runs; and gelatin-silver photograms for her *Bottle Series*, antique glassware set against black backgrounds and seen as if irradiated from within, revealing normally invisible whorls, ripples, streaks and plates — like ectoplasm pseudopods flash-photographed at a séance. (The transparent bottles with their energy patterns also take on a protozoan-like aspect, as if illuminated under a microscope, which, Hays notes, resembles her enlarger.)

Several writers have theorized about the light in these photograms, which seems to emanate from within the objects. John Rapko: "Light is shown almost as a substance and always as revealing a complex inner structure that could never be guessed. ... How

can one make sense of these paradoxical presences, the light-things of this world? ... The bottles and leaves seem icons of consciousness." Hays has declared her interest in "the essential interconnectedness of all things in the universe ... organic and inorganic, physical and spiritual, mundane and magnificent, visible and invisible...." She pursues a modern, scientific version of mystical vision, in which boundaries are meaningless and objects glow with preternatural radiance, paradisiacal jewels, incandescent with being. ***Nature Word ~ Verbe Nature*** runs through October 25 at **NoneSuchSpace** (2865 Broadway, Oakland). Paragon-Media.org/nonesuchspace or 510-625-1600.