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Julie Blackmon at Robert Mann Gallery, Nancy Holt at Columbia, and 'Americanana' at Hunter College

This week's Best in Show

By Robert Shuster

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Julie Blackmon. Courtesy Robert Mann Gallery,
New York



A study of infant aerodynamics: Blackmon's *Baby Toss*, 2009

Details:

Julie Blackmon: 'Line-Up'

Robert Mann Gallery

210 Eleventh Avenue

212-989-7600, robertmann.com

Through October 23

Child Protective Services would probably want to visit several of the families depicted in Julie Blackmon's photographs, if any of the households were real. Inspired by Jan Steen, a 17th-century painter noted for scenes of raucous families, Blackmon meticulously assembles tableaux of unsupervised children, who often appear on the verge of harm. In *Tinker Toys*, a boy stands precariously at the top of a bookcase, while a preoccupied girl, seated below in the darkened room, stares at the floor, indifferent to the raging infant on her lap. Drowning seems like a possibility in *The Power of Now* (a reference to the self-help bestseller)—lounging adults pay no attention to a face-down boy in a pool, or to his naked friend perched on its edge.

But Blackmon winks at our unease by stylizing the drama. Figures and props are carefully arranged and color-coordinated, shot over a period of days, then seamlessly pieced together in Photoshop. The soft, painterly textures, enhanced by the pigment prints, only add to your sense of skillful contrivance. In the masterful, dreamlike *High Dive*,

with its country setting moodily darkened by twilight, parents dining outside a mansion ignore potential danger on a balcony, where a group of kids—one of them holding up a toddler—are flinging dolls into a wading pool. A few of the pictures here slip into affected cuteness (like ads for Target), but when Blackmon follows more devilish inclinations, her work carries disquieting power.

Nancy Holt: 'Sightlines'

While Robert Smithson and Michael Heizer were pioneering the Land Art movement, building monumental works that altered the earth (most famously, *Spiral Jetty* and *Complex One*), Nancy Holt was finding art in the land itself. Holt, who had married Smithson in 1963, joined her husband's earnest engagement with the world, but her work—nicely surveyed here, through the 1970s, in films and photographs—has been more intimate, filled with a Zen-like appreciation for life's details, however ordinary. Her 1971 audio tour of her New York apartment—a performative extension of her early concrete poetry—instructed the listener to make precise movements and observe certain objects in the room. That kind of focused but restricted view, especially one seen through a lens, would

become her signature.

In 1972, on a Rhode Island beach, Holt tunneled through the edge of a dune with a pipe, allowing visitors to see through the sand on either side. That same year, she installed her *Missoula Ranch Locators*, a group of primitive viewfinders placed, like totems, at compass points in a Montana field. The idea showed up in her films, too—in one, she asked pairs of artists to interpret footage, matted into a telescopic circle, of New York streets. Their conversations, charming for being so devoted to the task, express the essence of her art: seeing, even celebrating, what might otherwise remain neglected.

The oculus would take on monumental proportions in 1976 with the artist's best-known work, *Sun Tunnels*—four hollow concrete cylinders lying on a remote basin in Utah. Aligned in pairs along the axes of an X, they're positioned so that the sun, at dawn and dusk on the solstices, shines directly through two of the tubes. And in each, holes in the surface direct light onto the curved interior, making a pattern of white dots that corresponds to a specific constellation.

If you can't make the pilgrimage anytime soon, Holt's own documentary chronicling the achievement movingly captures its simple, spiritual effects. *Miriam & Ira D. Wallach Art Gallery, Columbia University, 2960 Broadway, 212-854-7288. Through December 11*

'Americanana'

The spelling of the show's title, no accident, is a spoofing neologism for a collection that pays homage to American crafts while upending the inherent nostalgia. It's a great idea, deserving a wider contribution and a bigger space, but the 13 pieces here make a funky sampler. Melvin Edwards presents four selections from his long-running *Lynch Fragments* series—industrial objects welded into menacing wall reliefs, hinting at African-American oppression. H.C. Westermann, perhaps best known for his antiwar work, protests mass production with beautifully designed metal-and-wood dustpans, which stand like minimalist sculpture. Nearby, Robert Gober's bronze butter churn also suggests memories of a simpler time, until you see that it's covered, strangely, with barnacles. *Bertha & Karl Leubsdorf Art Gallery, Hunter College, 68th and Lexington, 212-772-4991. Through December 4*

