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A Father and Daughter's Art in Conversation Across Six Decades

This exhibition of works by Stan and Sara VanDerBeek shows how both artists span traditional boundaries between media and engage similarly intangible concepts: spirituality, the mutability of time, memory, and space.



Sara VanDerBeek, "Baltimore Dancers Twelve" (2019), digital C-print, 20 x 15 3/4 inches. Edition 1 of 3 (courtesy of the artist and Metro Pictures. New York)

ASHEVILLE, North Carolina — *VanDerBeek + VanDerBeek* at the Black Mountain College Museum + Arts Center in Asheville, North Carolina, brings together works by the late experimental filmmaker (and polymath) Stan VanDerBeek and his daughter, photographer (and fellow polymath) Sara VanDerBeek, who is also the exhibition's co-curator. Although their careers never coincided — Stan died in 1984, when Sara was seven — the show identifies areas of conceptual and visual overlap between father and daughter, and feels very much like a collaboration between artists.

Growing up in the shadow of a pioneer of "expanded cinema" (a term he invented), Sara VanDerBeek has

managed, strikingly, to establish her own firm voice as a creator. Her multivalent work — combining photography, sculpture, and installation — has been featured in solo exhibitions at the Whitney Museum of American Art (2010), the Hammer Museum (2011), and the Museum Boijmans van Beuningen (2015), among other institutions. Yet her output, including these successes in her own right, has inevitably been touched by her father’s creative legacy.



Stan VanDerBeek, “Untitled” (1950, printed 2008), silver gelatin print, 8 x 10 inches (courtesy Stan VanDerBeek Archive) Sara VanDerBeek, “Baltimore Dancers Six” (2012), digital C-print, 6 x 8 inches (image); 16 1/4 x 16 1/2 inches (frame). Edition 3 of 3 (courtesy of the artist and Metro Pictures, New York)

Stan VanDerBeek took some of his earliest steps as an artist at Black Mountain College. Sara VanDerBeek and her co-curator, Chelsea Spengemann, are deeply immersed in the Stan VanDerBeek Archive (of which Spengemann is the director), and the exhibition is rich with archival materials that illuminate many of the ideas he began formulating at BMC. After arriving at the school in 1949, he wrote poems, studied painting with Joseph Fiore, and explored photography under the guidance of Hazel-Frieda Larsen (later Archer). The exhibition includes VanDerBeek’s photographs of dancers at BMC that make stunning use of silhouette, cropping, and long exposure, anticipating some of the radical techniques he would apply as his explorations into visual media broadened. Later, he would collaborate extensively with some of the luminaries whose names are still closely associated with the school, including John Cage and Merce Cunningham.



Sara VanDerBeek, “Roman Stripe IV” (2016), diptych; 2 digital layered C-prints, each: 96 7/8 x 48 7/8 inches (framed), overall: 96 7/8 x 100 3/4 inches. Edition 1 of 3, 2 APs (courtesy of the artist and Metro Pictures, New York)

VanDerBeek began his experimental film work in the 1950s, not long after leaving Black Mountain. His films and videos often incorporate wildly eclectic imagery — combining found footage, animation, still imagery, and riotous soundtracks — all moving at an exhilaratingly frenetic pace; a paradigmatic example is his 1963 tour de force *Breathdeath*, on view in this show. VanDerBeek observed that he was simply following the rhythm of his times. In the 1968 documentary film *VanDerBeekiana: Stan VanDerBeek’s Vision*, he declared: “Culture is moving into what I call a ‘visual velocity.’ Sometimes I wake up and think to myself: It looks like it’s going to be a 60-mph day.” In an effort to cram as much experience as possible into the dizzying moment, in the mid-1960s he invented his Movie-Drome, a vast, dome-shaped audiovisual laboratory built in Stony Point, New York, in which multiple film projections could be experienced simultaneously. Investigating the intersections of art, technology, and communication, he understood the power of television and foresaw the then-nascent potential of computers, fostered by stints as artist-in-residence at Bell Labs, MIT, and NASA.



Sara VanDerBeek, "Roman Stripe IV" (2016), diptych; 2 digital layered C-prints, each: 96 7/8 x 48 7/8 inches (framed), overall: 96 7/8 x 100 3/4 inches. Edition 1 of 3, 2 APs (courtesy of the artist and Metro Pictures, New York)

Among his films featured in this show are two untitled 1965 collaborations with dancers; these were eventually used as projections accompanying *Variations V*, a multimedia performance project by Cage, Cunningham, and David Tudor. In one — with the privileged access that only film or physical intimacy can offer — we see up close Cunningham's gloriously gnarled feet and watch him move like an animal, graceful and frantic, across his rehearsal room.



Stan VanDerBeek's Movie-Drome (1963–65) under construction in Stony Point, New York (courtesy Stan VanDerBeek Archive)

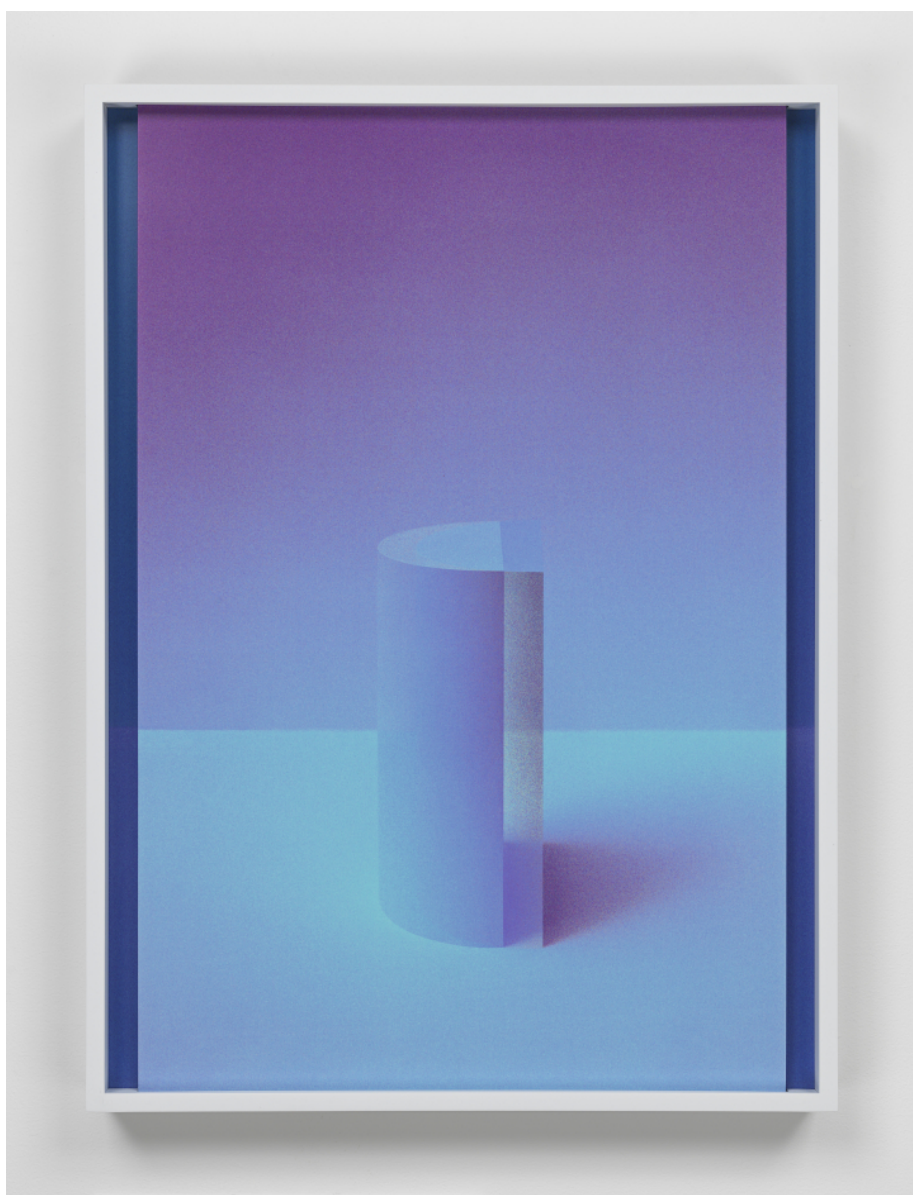


Stan VanDerBeek, still from *Breathdeath* (1963), 35mm film transferred to video, black and white, sound, 14.33 min. (courtesy Stan VanDerBeek Archive)

It is in the realm of dance that the resonances between Stan and Sara VanDerBeek's work are most immediately apparent in this exhibition. Drawing from her father's archive, Sara incorporated some of his images of BMC dancers in her 2008 project *Four Photographers*. She subsequently pursued this theme, photographing dance students at the University of Maryland, Baltimore County, where her father taught in his later years. Her ongoing series *Baltimore Dancers* explores the interplay of light and body. Layered color images are boosted with digital interference in recent additions, recalling her father's psychedelic video and film experiments.

"Like my father, I feel like a bridge," the younger VanDerBeek said in a talk before this show's opening. The two artists span traditional boundaries between media, and they engage similarly intangible concepts — spirituality, the mutability of time, memory, and space. Yet while Stan was a maximalist, Sara is decidedly a minimalist — her diptych "Roman Stripe IV" (2015), a pair

of monumental C-prints, evokes the meditative visuals of Agnes Martin or the purposeful linear trajectories of Frank Stella. Two other photographs here, “Roman Woman VIII” and “Roman Woman XI,” depict fragments of Classical sculpture, a recurring theme in her oeuvre, in blasts of high-contrast electric hues. In such works, Sara VanDerBeek engages freely — as her father did — in all parts of history, from the ancient to the future. In this way, too, they are both bridges.



Sara VanDerBeek, “Setting Sun VI” (2019), two layered digital C-prints, 20 x 14 1/2 inches (image), 20 1/2 x 15 inches (frame) (courtesy of the artist and Metro Pictures, New York)



Stan VanDerBeek, "Untitled (Lune Light)" (ca. 1955), paint on wood panel, 10 3/8 x 5 7/8 inches (image); 12 3/8 x 7 7/8 inches (frame) (courtesy Stan VanDerBeek Archive)

The exhibition also highlights instances of poetic alignment between the two artists. One gallery wall is lined with nine figure studies by Sara VanDerBeek, layered C-prints in seductive neon colors, their titles invoking the rising moon and the setting sun. Nearby on the floor a white cylinder lies on a bed of cloth: her "Moon" (2015). Overlooking them is a small painting made by Stan VanDerBeek ca. 1955, "Untitled (Lune Light)": a full moon in a deep blue sky over a simple landscape. Here, as throughout this show, bodies in space — sculptural, filmed, photographed, painted; dancing, abstracted, celestial — are fundamental to the artists' bodies of work.



Stan VanDerBeek, “Untitled” (1950, printed 2008), silver gelatin print, 8 x 10 inches (courtesy Stan VanDerBeek Archive)

VanDerBeek + VanDerBeek continues at the Black Mountain College Museum + Arts Center (120 College Street, Asheville, North Carolina) through January 4, 2020. The BMCM+AC’s 2019 “ReViewing” conference took place at University of North Carolina Asheville’s Reuter Center, September 20–22; the focus of the symposium was Stan VanDerBeek, and the keynote speakers were Sara VanDerBeek and Chelsea Spengemann.