

*The Capital City Arts Initiative [CCAI] is delighted to present, Soft Walls, Deep Water, an exhibition by Molly Allen, at the Courthouse Gallery from June 16 – September 25, 2025. CCAI extends its sincere appreciation to the artists, the city courthouse, and to all those involved with the exhibition. In addition, CCAI thanks our commissioned writer, Chris Lanier, who provided the following essay.*

### **Perception Is a Playground**



*Buoyant Limbs, Weighted Mind Collage, and Porcelain on Wood Panel, 12" x 28" x 6"*

Collage is the most suited art form for bringing together disparate things, and tying them together with the bow of aesthetics. It doesn't necessarily have to be predicated on a unity, or clash, of direct opposites – but collage's pleasurable epiphanies often come from the shock of seeing one thing lying beside another thing that (in ordinary life) dwells in an entirely different zone. The leaps between geographies and taxonomies are collage's most fundamental magic trick – for Truckee-based artist Molly Allen, in this show, she's explicitly trying to mine the disjunctures between "place" and "space." As she frames it, "place" is a location, something with definite coordinates, while "space" is something more internal, psychological – something to be felt, rather than traversed. To that dyad, I'd add that this work is about interfacing the inside with the outside – literal items of furniture and décor are conjoined with images of water, rock, and sand.

Many of these pieces were developed at a recent artist residency at the Burren College of Art in Ballyvaughan, County Clare, Ireland. And so another dyad becomes the Irish landscape, and the desert landscape of the American West, where Allen has lived and worked for many years – but more on that, later.

The two-dimensional collages in this show are actually the first exhibited foray into the world of paper collage for Allen, who has mainly worked as a sculptor (and here, in the interest of full disclosure, I should mention that I've known Allen for over a decade. I met her first as one of my students at Sierra Nevada College; now that the campus has been acquired by the University of Nevada, Reno, I've had the pleasure of working with her as a colleague – where she serves as a Professor in Interdisciplinary Art, and Director of Fine Arts Galleries on the Lake Tahoe Campus. It's been a real privilege to watch her work mature and develop over that time).

Collages are defined by the archives they draw upon – stamped by the visual rhetoric of



*Between Rooms, Between....*, Collage on Paper, 12" x 16", 2025

their sources. Hannah Höch, for instance – a pioneer in art collage, and an inspiration to Allen – worked on a series of collages through the 1920s that drew from contemporary fashion magazines and reproductions of tribal masks. Romare Bearden, in creating his collages of Black social life, cut clippings from magazines like *Ebony*, *Jet*, *Life*, and *Look*. Allen has friends who are architects and interior designers, and draws from their display magazines. She also uses photographs of her own. This is where most of the exterior landscape elements come from – the shores, rocks, and waters.

In a way, she's working in parallel with architects and designers. They are arranging furniture and decorative accoutrements to organize space in an alluring or evocative way – Allen is arranging images of those objects to evoke her own imaginary rooms, rooms whose boundaries are just hinted at (or perhaps entirely elided). They are rooms that can only be occupied through the projection of one's imagination. The movement from architectural magazine to art collage is a migration from interior decoration to "interiority decoration."

The chairs that repeatedly emerge in the collages function as a sort of invitation – a place for the viewer to sit and inhabit the space/place for a while. There's nothing "homey" about the invitation – the chairs are modern, minimalist. They look like they belong in an office, or perhaps a gallery foyer. As Allen puts it, they invoke the body without materializing the body.

The curtains or draperies that appear in these works are also obviously drawn from Allen's archive of interior decoration photography, but they nod farther back into art history as well. The translation of fabric draperies into marble, clay, graphite, or paint has been a persistent vehicle of art pedagogy – the exercise of rendering drapery is a basic formal study. As a drawing exercise, it forces the student to focus on pure form. The student isn't drawing a "thing," with all the associations and visual stereotypes that cling to even the most humble still-life subjects – they're drawing the contours of space folded upon itself, gathering highlights and shadows into the visual drama of its own convolutions.

Here the draperies also function as veils. With the excerpted body parts that appear in the collages, they can suggest burial shrouds or mortuary shrouds. Perhaps they are occluding something out of an impulse of propriety or decency. For Allen, the draperies are connected to the surfaces of water – the "deep water" of the show's title. There is an obscure, perhaps unknowable territory beyond their ruffled skins.

Alongside Allen's paper collages, she has created several collages that blend paper cut-outs with sculptural elements, bridging back to her more familiar mode as a sculptor. These pieces also draw from a self-created archive – Allen sculpts small modular pieces (disconnected body parts, architectural elements like ladders, small



*Echo's at the Landing*, Collage on Wood Panel, Porcelain and Hungarian slip Cast Porcelain, 28" x 14" x 6", 2025



*Spatial Negotiations of the Unseen, Collage on Paper, 12" x 16", 2025*

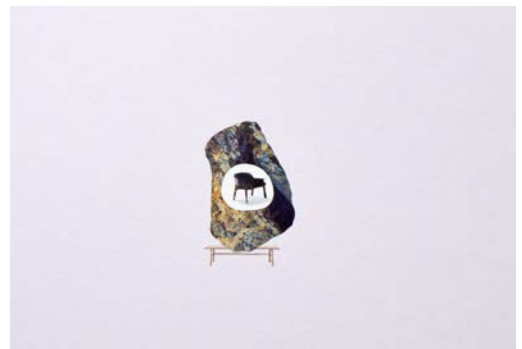
fishes), not with a predetermined placement in mind, but to develop a store of raw materials that she can pull from. She works intuitively, and having these items helps her react to what she's seeing as the piece comes together. These sculptural elements also help bridge the imaginary with the actual – these imagined tableaus actually extend from the surface of the picture, pressing a bit into the gallery, casting shadows. It's still an invented reality, however – the sculptures are mimics of things, not the things in themselves.

To return to the subject of the Irish landscape – Molly's family emigrated from Ireland to America in the late 1800s, not long after the potato blight. She was able to view, while visiting Ireland, the ship manifests with her ancestors' signatures written in them. That history was very visible, very present for her in the landscape, during her residency. She described it as a landscape that had a

kind of density – the density of history. In one of her collages, there is an image of a "famine wall." These were stone walls built during the blight, as charitable work projects, sponsored by landlords or churches, giving employment to starving peasants. Many of the walls establish no practical boundaries – they were walls built only for the excuse or for work. As there is "art for art's sake," these are walls for wall's sake.

Even without knowing the history, some of these elements of the Irish landscape have the heaviness and density that accrues to stone. For me, what connects these elements of Irish landscape to the landscape of the West (where Allen has made her home) is the sparse expanse of almost-nothingness in which she places them. Artists who contend with the Western desert all contend, by necessity, with the notion of emptiness. I don't think it's an exaggeration to say that all artists who deal with the Western desert understand that "emptiness" is an idea, and not an actual physical reality. Every physical emptiness is full of textures and atmospheres, echoes and ghosts. The things that arise from the desert to capture your attention are more forcefully felt because of that buffering aura that surrounds them. The desert is a place of punctuation.

Allen's most extreme use of "punctuated" space is the collage with only three basic visual elements – a low bench, a boulder, and a chair. It could almost be a microscopic blow-up of a single period typed on a blank page. The thin wood of the bench effortlessly upholds the boulder set on top of it (as Allen said to me, the places she constructs are fundamentally impossible ones – where scale doesn't make sense, and where gravity doesn't work). In the middle of the boulder, there's a white circle where the last element, the chair, reposes. A grey square of shadow lies beneath it.



*Waiting, Collage on Paper, 12" x 16", 2025*

It's easy to be maximalist with collage – the visual elements are ready-made, it's just a matter of cutting them out and pasting them together. When working with students on collage projects, I always underline the fact that, sometimes, a simple intervention can be incredibly

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impactful. One of my favorite collages is a very direct piece by the contemporary artist Marnie Weber, which joins together exactly two elements – a woman’s face, probably taken from a fashion advertisement, and (laid over her nose and mouth) the muzzle of a rabbit encircled and held by human hand, the rabbit’s white chiclet teeth bared in an uncomfortable grimace. The image was probably pieced together in a matter of minutes, but an entire history of cosmetics, animal testing, and gendered performances of “beauty” is coiled within Weber’s frontal juxtaposition.

Allen’s bench-boulder-chair trio isn’t as politically charged as that Weber piece, but it retains the same trust in the richness of the minimal gesture. It’s almost droll, how basic its constituent elements are – and how ambiguous and mysterious they can be made to be, by artful arrangement. Was the bench made for the boulder? Would a boulder desire a place to rest besides a flat spot on the earth? Does the circle within the boulder operate like a thought balloon – is the boulder thinking of a chair? Would it prefer to sit on a chair, rather than a bench? Or is the circle a hole cut straight through the boulder, through which we are looking at the chair? In that case, how distant is the chair? Is it just a few feet back? Or, in this horizonless space, does it sit at a far distant remove – perhaps the chair is miles away, monumental, dwarfing the boulder that frames it?

Most of these questions are absurd. There’s a playfulness to Allen’s operations that might be partially masked by the arid blankness of the picture plane. I think one thing she offers is this: perception is a playground. Of course, comedy is hardly the primary effect. There’s a quietude and gravity to the images that tugs the sleeve, provokes you to unwind some fundamental riddles. What does it really mean: to sit, to rest, to wait? How do those infinitives function on a human timeline, a historical timeline, a geological timeline? That negative space, in which those images are cocooned – it’s ultimately a realm of cognition, I think – a place for our thoughts to run their own tracks – in these venues, in these minimally furnished vacancies.



*Soft Thresholds, Inner Pools*, Collage on Wood Panel, Stoneware, Fabric, 12" x 26" 4", 2025

Chris Lanier  
Reno, Nevada  
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Molly Allen



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