



# 'Nyktomorph' Group Show Reveals the Power of Uncertainty

By [Irene Borngraeber](#) • Oct 8th, 2009 • Category: [Arts](#), [Featured](#)

The exhibition “Nyktomorph” at Curious Matter is an exploration of what the darkness holds. That eerie shape you catch out of the corner of your eye, that shadow that could be ... (but might not), that destabilizing feeling you get when you sense someone might be watching you. The artists in this show have taken the looming uncertainty of the nyktomorph, or “night creature,” and transformed it into visual expressions that together range from the mysterious to the disconcerting.

Climbing the front stairs to Curious Matter’s brownstone exhibition space you come face to face with your first creature of the night — and your first hint that this show is as much about invoking flights of our imagination as it is about the visual works of the artists themselves. “What’s that on the floor?” In the mid-day sun it was hard to tell, as I squinted into the darkened interior of the gallery. My brain jumped as I realized — Oh ... they’re birds!” But the pigeons hadn’t suddenly decided to become fly-by arts aficionados; the stuffed pair were part of a piece created for the show by Curious Matter co-founder and curator Raymond Mingst.

The sculpture is by far the most visceral incarnation of a changeable night creature, but it's not alone in its exploration of the split second gap in consciousness that stretches between the known and unknown. All of the pieces in the show essentially exploit the precarious moment when you're not sure what you're really seeing or experiencing, when you can't tell reality from what you think may be happening. They are designed to destabilize, to make us question not only what's physically there, but how we feel about not knowing for sure. We're being toyed with.

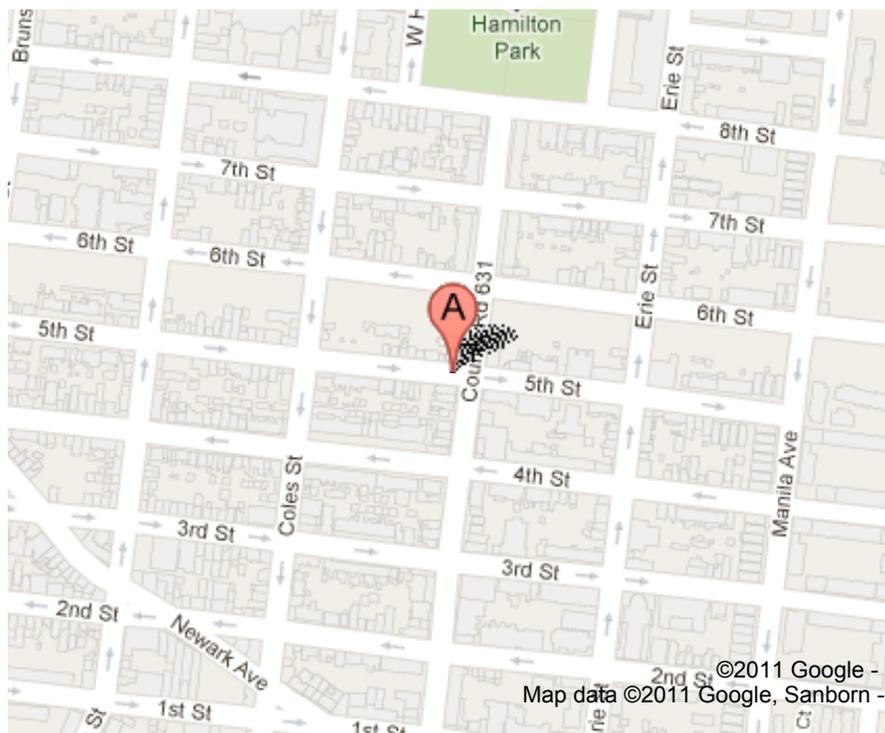
Ross Bennett Lewis' photograph "Muñeco", taken as he himself stumbled into the gaze of a marionette, at once teases and draws us into a place where objects (or are they sentient beings?) appear to peek around corners. His not-quite-sinister portrait watches us as we tour the show, like an uncertain door-keeper. Other works are not so direct, suggesting settings where unknown creatures may be hiding in the shadows. Olivie Ponce and Stacy Seiler both conjure up uncertain fantasies through the creation of non-specific, atmospheric landscapes that are hauntingly barren, neglected, and untamed. Perhaps the nyktomorph is behind these twisted spires or rusted-out buildings, or perhaps it is the landscapes themselves that become ever-changing creatures of the night.

The show is tightly put together and includes the works of twenty four artists who are active both locally and nationally. The beautiful exhibition catalog includes an artist-written description of each work, and — though it is enlightening to read what the artists have to say about their creative processes — in the spirit of the nyktomorph it's more fitting to let yourself go and imagine the story behind each mysterious representation. Christopher Moss' painting of two sock puppets engaged in what looks like a bloody battle between the hands and face of the person wearing them is as distressing as it is visually compelling, and its ambiguity (Who is in control? Who is the attacker?) epitomizes the uncertainty that makes the nyktomorph so vaguely threatening through its lack of definition. The unknown shape in the darkness frightens because we don't know what we're dealing with — or what it can do.

Mary Hill's mesmerizing video, "Father and Daughter", also highlights the transmutable and fluid nature of the nyktomorph by focusing on its potential beautiful and playful qualities, rather than its more sinister undertones. We watch as bathing beauties flip and swim, folding and unfolding in a kaleidoscope of arms and legs, creating unexpected ripples and shapes to an otherworldly soundtrack. It's haunting, in the way you'd expect benevolent ghosts to be.

The show tackles the ultimate ambiguity of the nyktomorph; that dark shape could very well be a harmless trick of the light, a real animal threat, or an otherworldly creature. We don't know what the shadows hold or what tricks our minds are playing, but through this show we come to understand and appreciate the power of such uncertainty.

**Nyktomorph**  
**Through Oct. 18th**  
**Curious Matter**  
**272 Fifth St.**  
**Sundays: 12-3pm or by appointment**  
**Contact: 201-659-5771 or [curiousmatter \(at\) comcast.net](mailto:curiousmatter@comcast.net)**



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**Irene Borngraeber** is an artist, art historian, and writer. She has worked in museums in the U.S. and abroad and currently covers the New York art scene for *ArtVoices* magazine.

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**Ross Bennett Lewis** 10/12/2009 02:28 PM

Irene, As a contributing artist to the Nyktomorph Exhibition, Thank you for the wonderful review. Ross B. Lewis

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**Curious Matter** 10/09/2009 10:25 AM

Many thanks for the lovely review--it thoughtfully captures the spirit of the "Nyktomorph" exhibition. I'd also like to acknowledge Arthur Brusco, co-founder of Curious Matter and co-curator. Sincerely, Raymond E. Mingst

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