LETHA WILSON combines the mediums of sculpture and photography, transforming her images of the American West—vast canyons, desert plants, and sky—into objects embedded in walls, floors, and ceilings. Her sculptural materials expose the ways that aspects of industry and architecture are integral, rather than opposed, to our ways of defining the natural landscape and wilderness. Concrete is a manmade substance that maintains a geological texture and drywall is the ubiquitous wall panel made of gypsum, a mined mineral. In Wilson's art, these and other materials trouble the line between established categories of the organic and the synthetic, the natural and the constructed.

Wilson has recently extended these concerns to Cor-Ten steel, adhering photographs to sheets of the iron alloy. In one floor-based work, she made a piece of steel behave in a surprisingly graceful fashion (FIG. 1). One corner curls off the floor to reveal what looks like a gradation of warm-toned colors on its underside. This is, in fact, a photograph by Wilson of a sunset at the Bonneville Salt Flats in Utah. The combination of painterly rusted steel with the illusionism of a mechanically reproduced image finds a more impressive scale in *Hawaii California Steel (Figure Ground)*, a new site-specific outdoor sculpture created by Wilson for deCordova's PLATFORM series.

Printed directly onto the surfaces of this nearly ten-foot-tall steel sculpture are two photographs showing a rock face in Joshua Tree National Park and a palm frond on Kauai Island, Hawaii. These views from contrasting climates intersect and fold so that one sees small segments of the images at various angles, yet never their entire composition. The disparity between desert and jungle is heightened by the sculpture's placement in the cultivated New England terrain of deCordova's Sculpture Park. Additional bends and cuts into the steel compel visitors to see through and circulate around the standing sculpture and to experience juxtapositions between the uncannily detailed photographs and the physicality of the surrounding rocks, pine trees, and lawn.

Central to Wilson's work is how landscape is conveyed and manipulated through photographic representation. The photographs on her sculptures are taken during her solo retreats to national parks and other nature preserves, which
provide a necessary restorative balance to her urban studio practice in Brooklyn. These images are not the picture-perfect vistas of Ansel Adams or the banal post-industrial landscapes associated with New Topographies photographers, such as Robert Adams. Instead Wilson’s images are candid, close-up studies—exercises in paying attention. Printed at a monumental scale for Hawai’i California Steel, these intimate views of granular rock and glistening palm become abstracted and fractured along the bends of the steel sculpture.

Wilson’s desire to travel stems from family vacations during her childhood that involved long hikes in and around Colorado, where she grew up. One such trip was an excursion to Michael Heizer’s iconic work of Land Art, Double Negative, 1969-1970, near Overton, Nevada. The massive work has sometimes been considered an ultimate machismo artistic gesture, as Heizer carved out two massive trenches from a sandstone mesa using dynamite and bulldozers. To her surprise, Wilson found Double Negative to be more subtle and poetic than she expected, as years of erosion had rendered the work less brash and harshly geometric against the enormity of the plateau and surrounding valley. Pitting human-made sculpture against the expansive sublimity of wilderness was central to many artists associated with Land Art during the 1960s and 1970s. Wilson builds on this legacy, as her sculptures similarly combine geometric forms and the rugged terrain of the American West. Additionally, her work relates to ways in which photographs and films of iconic works of Land Art were often integral to their creation and existence, since so few people are able to make pilgrimages to these far-flung locations. Using her own travel photographs, Wilson brings distant locales to deCordova. The images of jungle and desert are like portals to the places she experienced alone and carefully studied.

Wilson’s practice involves continually learning by doing. She tests new operations with her chosen materials and photo-mechanical processes in order to understand their properties and limits. In Hawai’i California Steel, the photographs are printed
directly onto Cor-Ten steel through a relatively new process called direct-to-substrate printing. Unlike applying a sticky layer of printed vinyl, this process fuses the photographic images to a metal surface, allowing them to remain outdoors for many months without fading from sun exposure. Cor-Ten is an alloy metal that includes a small amount of copper and other elements. When the surface oxidizes, it forms a dense but shallow barrier against corrosion that results in its recognizable rusted surface. The expressionistic and earthy textures of the steel have been favored by many sculptors since the 1950s. From Louise Nevelson to Richard Serra, artists have used Cor-Ten steel to create monumental outdoor works that reference modern industry, as compared to the classicizing associations of marble or the organic quality of wood. Wilson’s sculpture purposely dialogues with this history of modern sculpture and finds specific comparisons on deCordova’s campus with DeWitt Godfrey’s Lincoln, 2012, and Fletcher Benton’s Donut with 3 Balls, 2002.

Wilson further explores sculptural materials through methods that range from the mundane to the aggressive: she folds, props, leans, creases, soaks, rips, tears, punctures, smothers, and so on. Although each artwork results from many actions, her pieces do not feel overworked. They are a testament to Wilson’s perpetual questioning—a continual “what if?”—that gamely propels her in untested directions. Her sculptures often convey playful inversions, as with California Sunset Lean, 2014 (FIG. 2), in which a simple wooden pole props up (and punctures) a digital print of a picturesque sunset against a gallery wall. Instead of offering an escapist window into a pristine landscape, the drooping photograph is haplessly wedged between the pole and surrounding architecture. Clever relationships between image and structural support also emerge in Hawaii California Steel. The central architecture of the giant palm frond is set just slightly off-center from

FIG. 2
the cross section of the sculpture, as if to suggest the leaf is partly responsible for holding up the vertical panes of steel.

One of the primary operations that Wilson used to activate *Hawaii California Steel* is the “fold.” Folds appear in many of her sculptures; their most florid form is found in the fanning pleats from a recent series of concrete tondos (FIG. 3). The folds provide both a sense of order and punchy wit to Wilson’s photo-sculptures—stabilizing an unruly bed of lush ferns or interrupting the overwhelming sentimentality of a sunset (FIG. 4). One of the most endearing folds of *Hawaii California Steel* is the small triangular tab at the top corner that resembles a dog-eared page of a book. This allusion to the page is deliberate, as Wilson has created two artist’s books in advance of this sculpture.

In addition to this literary connection, folds offer a sense of open-endedness and dynamism, bringing disparate elements close together and into association with one another. At its most elemental, a fold moves a flat surface into active, three-dimensional space. With its creases and folds, Wilson’s sculpture hinges between two and three dimensions. There it enters into longstanding conversations between photography and sculpture that emerged with the former’s invention in the late 1830s. While sculpture is traditionally physical and often immobile, photographs are portable, flexible, and can multiply. Yet both mediums rely on the interplay of light and shadow. Many artists,
from Constantin Brancusi to David Smith, took photographs of their sculptures in order to activate new perceptions of their three-dimensional work. A contemporary generation of artists, such as Erin Shirreff and Liz Deschenes, has extended the complexities between these two artistic mediums by further revealing the sculptural and material possibilities of photography in their work.

Wilson similarly teases out the inextricable relationships between photography and sculpture, both by expanding photography's scale and bringing her work outdoors. Set within deCordova’s Sculpture Park, Hawaii California Steel exposes how our expectations and experiences of the landscape have long been shaped by the visual technology of photography. The folds and cuts of her sculpture break up the illusion of a picturesque window onto nature, making us aware that nature and culture are interdependent—rather than opposing—forces.

Sarah Montross, Associate Curator


CAPTIONS

COVER + INSIDE COVER
Hawaii California Steel (Figure Ground), 2017
UV prints on Cor-Ten steel
110 x 76 inches
Courtesy of the artist
Photography: Anchor Imagery

FIG. 1
Face Down (Sunset), 2013
C-print, Cor-Ten steel
30 x 40 x 7 inches
Image courtesy the artist and Art in General
Photography: Steven Probert

FIG. 2
California Sunset Lean, 2014
Inkjet print, wood, hole in wall
12 x 20 x 5 feet
Image Courtesy the Artist
Photography: Brian Barr

FIG. 3
Concrete Wave Tondo, 2012
C-print transfer, concrete
28 x 28 x 2 inches
Image Courtesy the Artist

FIG. 4
Headlands Beach Concrete Fold, 2014
C-print, concrete
17 ½ x 13 ½ x 2 inches
Image Courtesy the Artist
BIOGRAPHY
Letha Wilson (b. 1976, Honolulu, Hawaii; lives and works in Brooklyn, New York) earned a BFA in Painting from Syracuse University and an MFA in Combined Media from Hunter College, New York. She also studied at the Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture in Maine. Her work has been shown at venues including Art in General, The Studio Museum in Harlem, the Bronx Museum of the Arts, and the International Center of Photography, New York. Wilson was recently an artist-in-residence at Light Work, Syracuse, New York, and the Center for Contemporary Art and Culture, Pacific Northwest College of Art, Portland, Oregon, which resulted in solo exhibitions at both venues. Wilson was awarded a New York Foundation for the Arts Fellowship and a Jerome Foundation Travel grant.

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PLATFORM
PLATFORM is a series of one-person commissioned projects by early- and mid-career artists from New England, national, and international art communities that engage with deCordova’s unique landscape. The PLATFORM series lets artists expand their practice and visitors experience new approaches to contemporary sculpture.

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