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What exactly am I looking at?

That is the question many viewers will ask themselves during a visit to the head-bending "Double-Take: The Poetics of Illusion and Light" at Baltimore's Contemporary Museum. The enjoyment is not in the answer, but in the asking.

Rich in visuals and ideas, "Double-Take" is aptly named. Bernhard Hildebrandt's video installation "The Corridor," for instance, features a mirror. Positioned at a right angle to his video projection -- a short, endlessly looping clip lifted from Jean Cocteau's 1946 film classic, "Beauty and the Beast" -- it's a low-tech yet effective form of duplication, folding the moving pictures in on themselves like a flickering Rorschach inkblot. (The plot of "Beast" itself is an exploration of the doubling theme, but that's another story. Or is it?)

Elsewhere as well, the artist's work comes in pairs, including two examples from his untitled series of "stereo" images. On one side hangs a painting in minimalist black (or white) enamel; devoid of virtually all detail, each could be the door of a kitchen appliance. Next to it hangs a photograph of that same painting, or rather, of the light reflected in its glossy surface. Now look back to the original. What was once empty now looks surprisingly full; what was all surface suddenly holds hidden depths. And it took a camera, not your eyes, to show you them. All too often, as Hildebrandt says, "we look, but do not see."

Alexandra Grant's work deals with language and drawing. Part sculpture, part text, the centerpiece of the artist's installation is a lacelike orb made from words "written" in bent wire. Called "Nimbus II" after a text by avant-garde writer Michael Joyce, Grant's word-cloud is a metaphor for the free-associative workings of the human brain and the latticelike connections of the Internet. Lit from below like a giant, spinning Christmas ornament, it throws an ever-changing "poem" in shadows on the wall, legible one instant, illegible the next. In a sense, what it's doing is "sabotaging" itself, to use Grant's term, casting doubt on the trustworthiness of symbols. Is meaning something we find in words (or, for that matter, images)? Or is it something we bring?

That notion of reliability -- can we trust our own eyes? -- lies at the heart of Mary Temple's "Southwest Corner, Northeast Light," a trompe l'oeil painting of sunlight falling on the museum floor and wall from a nearby window. First problem: The titular light source is physically impossible. "There's no such thing as northeast light," Temple says. Then there's the fact that there's no window.

A clever trick, to be sure (rendered in four subtly different values of white paint and a mix of light and dark wood stain). But as with the rest of this show, there is more going on here than meets the eye. Temple's installation goes deeper than the retinal, playing with memory and emotion as well. Just try not to feel relaxed while bathed in the branch-dappled yet thoroughly fictional sunbeams.

We see, in other words, not only with our eyes, but with our hearts and minds. If there's a larger question raised by "Double-Take," it's not "What am I looking at?" but "How?"

*Double-Take: The Poetics of Illusion and Light Through May 11 at the Contemporary Museum, 100 W. Centre St., Baltimore.*