

**REAL  
ART WAYS**

56 ARBOR STREET  
HARTFORD CT 06106  
860 232 1006  
REALARTWAYS.ORG

This exhibition is a result of Real Art Ways "Step Up" competition in 2004, which requested proposals from emerging artists living in New York or New England. "Step Up" was juried by Joe Amrhein, Owner/Director of Pierogi 2000, Artist Ellen Driscoll, and Tumelo Mosaka, Assistant Curator of Contemporary Art at the Brooklyn Museum.

The exhibition was made possible by a grant from the National Endowment for the Arts.



REAL ART WAYS, founded in 1975, is a nationally recognized, alternative multi-disciplinary arts organization that presents and supports contemporary artists and their work, facilitates the creation of new work, and creatively engages and informs audiences and communities. Real Art Ways is an active presenter of different art forms, including music, performance, spoken word, film, video and visual arts. Real Art Ways has a particular commitment to supporting the work of emerging artists.

On the cover: Logarithmic Spiral, C-print, 24 x 20", 2004, Private Collection.

# Kevin Van Aelst



The Golden Spiral, Series of 9 C-Prints, each 20 x 24", 2004, Private Collection.

## Kevin Van Aelst

By Owen McNally

As a bright kid in high school in State College, Pa., Kevin Van Aelst was passionate about math and science. He savored the certainty of numbers and biology's and astronomy's astounding revelations about fundamental life processes and the workings of the universe, all the while dreaming of some day becoming an architect.

By the time Van Aelst got to Cornell University, he still had an intellectual passion for all-encompassing scientific principles, everything from the periodic table to chaos theory. At Cornell, he majored in psychology, an imperfect science rooted in human ambiguity, quite a bit removed, say, from the certainties of fractal geometry, one of his favorite subjects in high school.

In a dramatic, life-changing event, Van Aelst at 18 purchased his first camera. His love for photography and art heated up over the next four years in college.

Fortunately for the art world, Van Aelst, who's now 25, decided, after graduating from Cornell in 2002, to focus on photography rather than architecture, biology, math or physics. After grad-

Kevin Van Aelst was born in Elmira, New York, but grew up in Boalsburg, Pennsylvania. He attended Cornell University where he received a degree in psychology. Van Aelst moved to Connecticut in 2003 and received an MFA from the University of Hartford in 2005. His work is in the permanent collection of the Wadsworth Atheneum. He currently lives and works in Hartford.

**REAL  
ART WAYS**

uate studies at Hartford Art School, he received his MFA in 2005, determined to be a photographer/artist even if it is a chancy career choice.

As an encouraging sign of things to come, the Hartford-based artist has already been hailed as “an up and coming photographer” by The New York Times on the strength of his “Complex Confections” exhibition last summer at Real Art Ways.

Van Aelst’s “confections” are, indeed, complex, since they’re rooted in his fascination with science, as demonstrated by his photographs’ allusions to topics ranging from fractal geometry to the Golden Mean.

But these concepts, no matter how weighty, are illustrated in a witty manner by his photographs of the most mundane and edible of materials—everything from Triscuits and Krispy Kremes to spilt milk and perfectly shaped egg yolks fried sunny side up.

Among the photographer’s non-edible working materials from daily life, he also employs such unlikely seeming objects as floor tiles and favorite old sweaters.

Most miraculously, he has even found an amusing way to use lint to illustrate summer night sky vistas. Never have fuzz

**Oreo Yin-Yang, C-print, 16 x 20”, 2005, Private Collection.**



balls harvested from an old sweater played such a celestial role in art.

What Van Aelst creates are images that counterpoint the profound and the mundane by, for example, illustrating cell division with text book-like arrangements of Krispy Kreme doughnuts. His photographs reveal how images of the cosmic and the comic cohabit, even right under our nose, or, more accurately, right on our plate or in our next snack.

Take for example, the ordinary Oreo cookie.

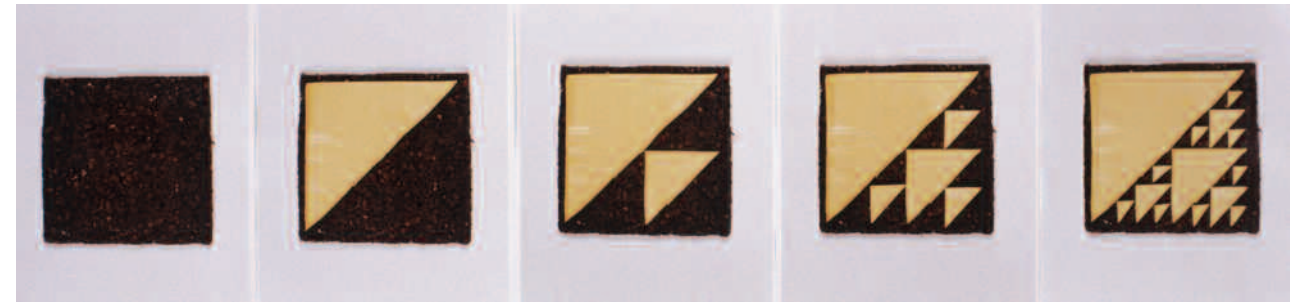
In “Yin Yang,” he shows the visual bond between the mass-produced, American Oreo and the ancient Chinese symbol for the Yin Yang, universal emblem of harmonious interaction of opposite forces.

Like a fine poet, he makes metaphoric ties between this oddest seeming of odd couples, boldly connecting the appearance of the humble chocolate and white crème Oreo with that of the venerable Yin Yang circle. The Yin Yang and the Oreo, in Van Aelst’s visionary world in which all things great and small connect, are each other’s doppelgänger image, divided into similar light and dark segments.

Appropriately enough, Van Aelst began his amusing images of food for thought by using a slice of Wonder Bread for his “The Golden Mean.” A hallmark work, it was reproduced last year in the New York Times Magazine to illustrate a writer’s musings on the impact of white bread on American culture.

The Golden Mean, Van Aelst explains, is an ancient, virtually sacred concept of symmetry rooted in classic geometric principles of balance and proportion, architectural paradigms used in the design of everything from the Parthenon to cigarette packs.

Working first with a razor and, for the final surgical incisions, with an Xacto knife, Van Aelst carved a progression of fractal patterns on an ever diminishing slice of bread, arranging his series of photographs in nine minimalist grids. The fractal patterns keep repeating themselves in an orderly, decreas-



**Sierpinsky’s Gasket, Series of 5 C-prints, each 16 x 20, 2005, Private Collection.**

ing scale. You can see the hand of the artist in what initially looks like an odd kind of hieroglyphics sculpted on Wonder Bread.

Aside from the underlying joke—his linking of a transcendent principle of order with an ordinary slice of our daily bread named Wonder—one of Van Aelst’s prime points here is that his art is something that anyone can do.

“It’s about the demystification of the art process, about art being revered and something that only trained people can do,” he explains. “Anyone could have done this if they had just thought of it first.”

Not just anyone, of course, can come up with Van Aelst’s out-of-the-blue linkages, his creative leaps of the imagination.

Take, for example, “Sierpinsky’s Gasket,” one of his fractal fugue inventions that play thematically with Velveeta on pumpernickel flat bread. Bread and cheese are transubstantiated into fractals, again demonstrating how the extraordinary is visually linked to the ordinary, even amidst cheesy, crusty materials.

In another science/food (sci-fo) photograph, “Logarithmic Spiral,” milk drops spilling out of a carton are suspended in space and time. A Plexiglas background provides a black, textureless atmosphere, making the simulated freeze-frame image look clinically cool.

Although Van Aelst insists that he’s concerned only with a work’s concept and not its aesthetics, this image has a spacey, mystical kind of charm.

Despite their well-engineered subtexts, the photographer’s works lend themselves to a wide menu of interpretation.

Viewers have read everything into them from anti-elitist Marxism to geo-politics. One exegete interpreted Van Aelst’s juxtapositioning of an American-made cheese on German flat bread as a commentary on foreign policy.

Once you enter Van Aelst’s agile, imaginative mindset, you too will start noticing visual hints of lofty concepts lurking among the most ordinary things on a dinner table, a diner counter or shopping aisle.

A genuine wit, Van Aelst not only amuses with clever visual puns, but also opens your mind to fresh, imaginative ways to view the world.

*Owen McNally is a former arts and features writer for The Hartford Courant where, before retiring in 2002 after 40 years, he also served as night city editor, editor of the paper’s former Sunday Magazine, TV critic, critic-at-large, book editor and jazz critic. Currently, he’s a freelance writer who writes features and criticism on a wide range of cultural subjects, often on the visual arts and jazz for a variety of publications, including The Courant and Hartford Magazine.*