

# List Projects 34: Brittany Nelson

January 15 – March 29, 2026, Bakalar Gallery



MIT List Visual  
Arts Center



*Rebecca*, 2026 (still). Video, sound, 5:20 min. Courtesy the artist and PATRON, Chicago

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Trained as a photographer, Brittany Nelson often uses analog chemical techniques, such as mordancage, bromoil, and tintype, in a practice that integrates archival research, the language of science fiction, and explorations of queer experience. Her practice moves between the speculative frontiers of science and art, surfacing hidden cultural histories and institutional artifacts to reflect on how contact, whether human or extraterrestrial, is imagined and idealized.

From the Mars rover *Opportunity* to science-fiction writer James Tiptree Jr., Nelson draws on scientific and literary referents to articulate metaphors for queerness rooted in isolation, yearning, and the imaginary. Outer space and its surrounding fictions become mirrors in Nelson's work of the fraught yet rich tension between absence and desire. Rather than external or direct, intimacy is staged as a private fantasy, formed by the dependent psychic relation of self and other. This expansive web of influences and themes takes on a personal resonance, informed by Nelson's experience growing up gay in Montana—a place where, like many rural or conservative areas, queer youth rely heavily on internal resources of imagination to build visions of freedom and community.

Featuring three new photographs and a moving-image work, Nelson's exhibition emerges from two primary points of reference: Daphne du Maurier's 1938 epic novel of obsession and longing, *Rebecca*, and the Green Bank Observatory (National Radio Astronomy Observatory) in West Virginia, home to one of the world's largest radio telescopes and a central site for SETI (Search for Extraterrestrial Intelligence) research. By juxtaposing the dense relationships in *Rebecca* with SETI's monumental instruments of cosmic detection, this new body of work considers how scientific inquiry and emotional projection converge.

Front cover:

*Green Bank Telescope*, 2026 (detail). Gelatin silver print, 42 x 62 in (106.7 x 157.5 cm; framed). Courtesy the artist and PATRON, Chicago



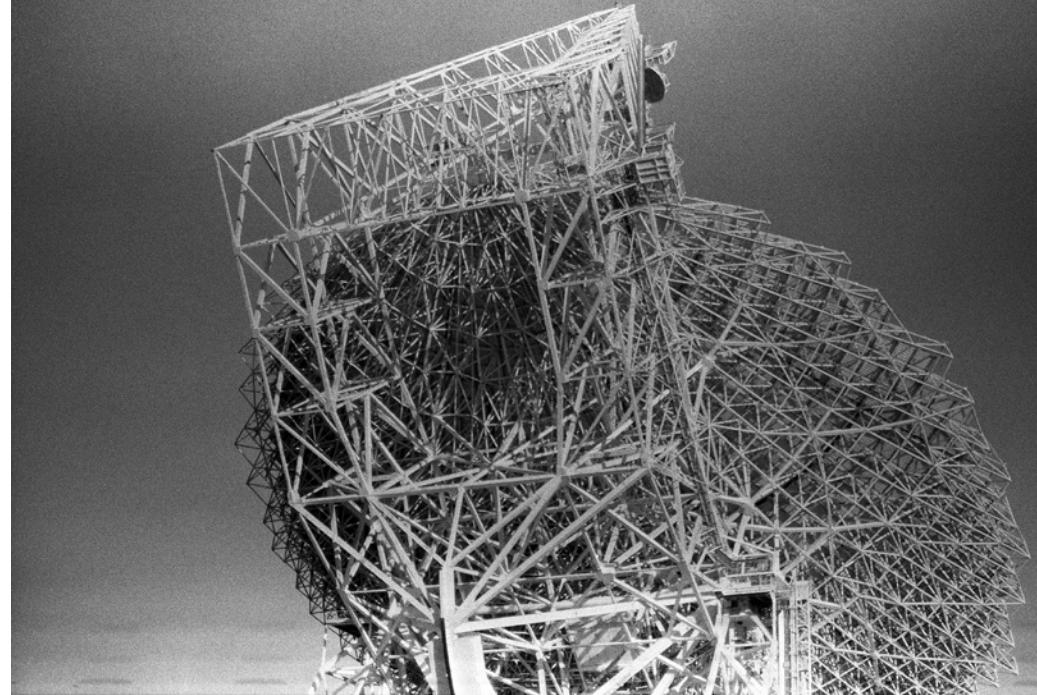
02 *Candle (still frame from Rebecca)*, 2026. Gelatin silver print, 30 × 47 in. (76.2 × 119.4 cm; framed).  
Courtesy the artist and PATRON, Chicago

## 02 *Candle (still frame from Rebecca)*, 2026

Produced from a still of Alfred Hitchcock's first American film, *Rebecca*, a photograph of a woman holding a candle in pitch darkness introduces the exhibition; she stands gazing ahead with her back to the viewer, the profile of her face softly illuminated. Hitchcock adapted this debut from Daphne du Maurier's 1938 novel of the same title, which is narrated by a young, unnamed woman who marries the wealthy, recently widowed Maxim de Winter after a brief courtship. Upon moving to his palatial estate, the woman discovers that the house and their life are haunted by her husband's late wife, Rebecca. Stoked by the psychological manipulations of the manor's head housekeeper, Mrs. Danvers, the young woman spirals into an obsession over Rebecca, wandering the house for the bulk of the story in tortured rumination. Mrs. Danvers, too, is fixated, but with a different emotional register; rather than destabilized, she seems to draw strength

and conviction from her love for the absent woman. Nelson's photograph is taken from a scene at the very end of the film, where Mrs. Danvers approaches the sleeping protagonist before a sudden calamity ruptures the prolonged psychological stupor that characterizes the novel.

A ghost story without a ghost, *Rebecca* is an epic of possession, as the deceased woman assumes an overwhelming and intrusive presence in both Mrs. Danvers's and the narrator's minds. For Nelson, the shifting interplay of infatuation and identification among the three women operates as a queer subtext that frames the exhibition. By transforming this film still into a large-scale silver-gelatin print, Nelson conflates the immersive gaze of cinema with that of photography, lending the adjacent photographs a sense that they, too, were pulled from a larger narrative.



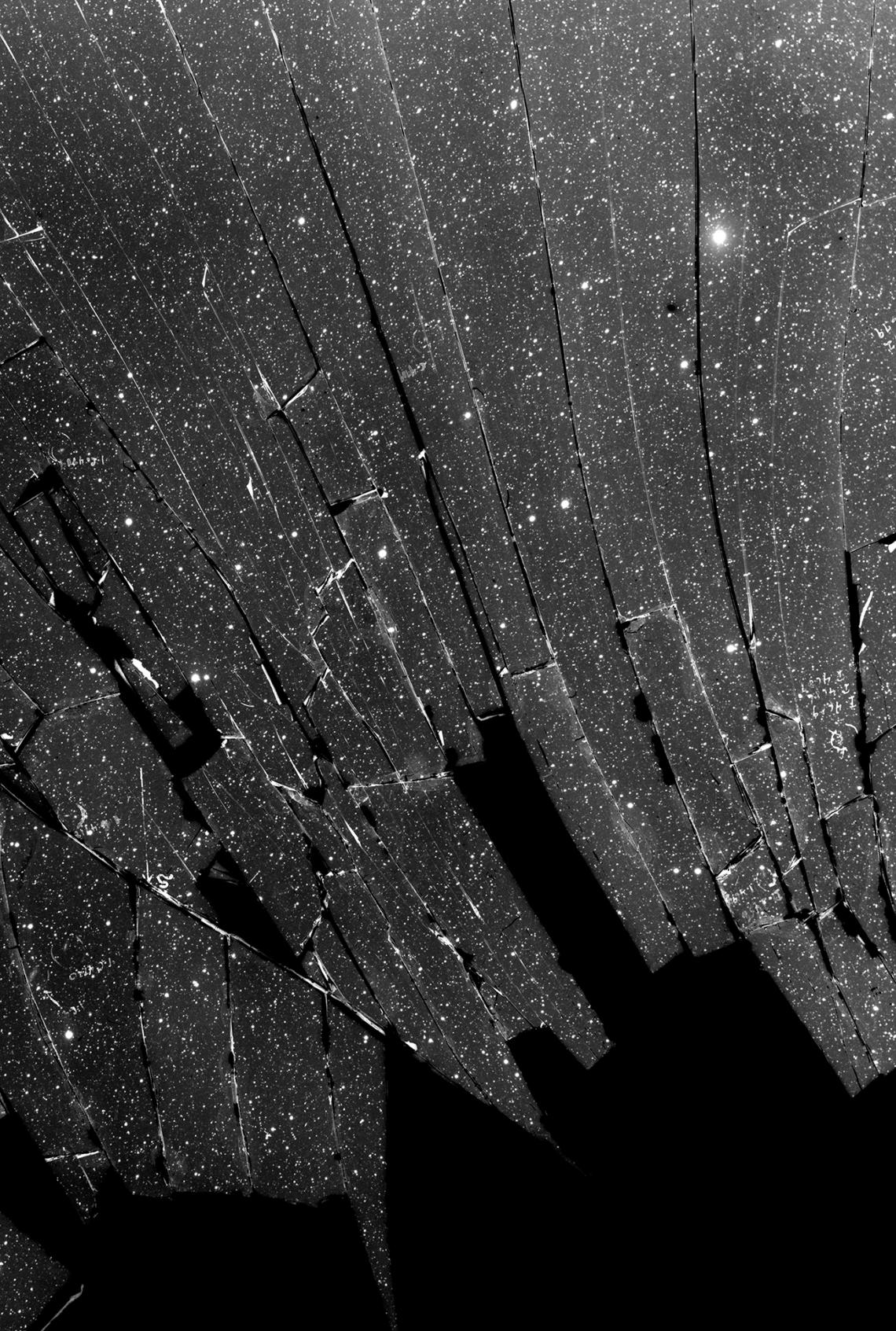
03 *Green Bank Telescope*, 2026. Gelatin silver print, 42 × 62 in. (106.7 × 157.5 cm; framed).  
Courtesy the artist and PATRON, Chicago

## 03 *Green Bank Telescope*, 2026

This black-and-white portrait of a radio telescope at the Green Bank Observatory was shot in 2024 during Nelson's residency at the SETI (Search for Extraterrestrial Intelligence) Institute. Located in West Virginia, Green Bank's sophisticated instruments receive signals from the far reaches of the universe, in efforts to discover and make contact with other life-forms. While the Institute's work has long inspired pop-cultural fantasies of extraterrestrial communion, the scientists themselves are quite grounded in reason and skepticism. Nelson recalls learning during her residency of our planet's unfortunate position in the Milky Way, and the resulting likelihood that—even if other intelligent life exists—Earth's physical

limitations may make contact impossible, rendering us alone in practical terms.

There is a poetics here of dogged devotion in the face of unlikely odds. Nelson exaggerates this romance in her photograph, personifying the telescope by capturing it from a side-rear profile reminiscent of Mrs. Danvers in *Candle (still frame from Rebecca)*. Rather than look directly at the telescope's face, we see the complex gridded supporting structure, which cascades like hair down the back of the monumental apparatus. Nelson has likened the telescope to an "ex-girlfriend," and the image's grainy texture and foggy tones lend the scene a sense of wistfulness, as though it were conjured from distant memory.

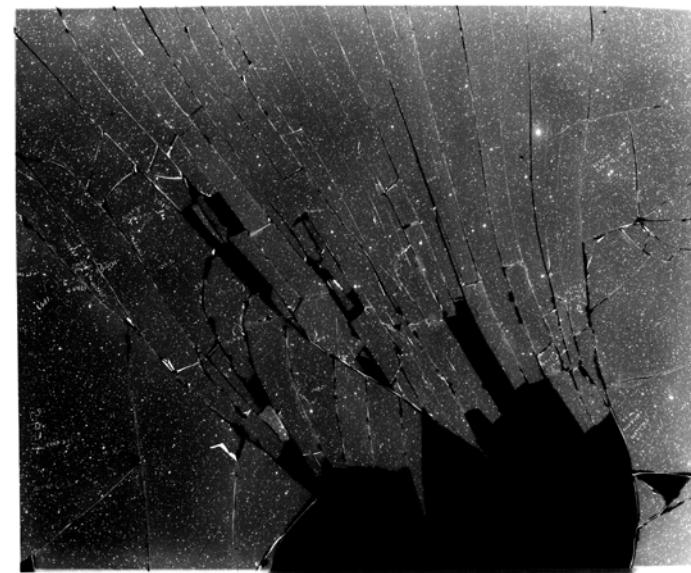


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## *Broken Plate (from Harvard Astronomical Photographic Glass Plate Collection), 2026*

Printed from a shattered glass plate negative shot in 1901 from a telescope in southern Peru, this photograph of a fractured night sky remains astonishingly intact, with the space left by missing shards filled in by the deep black tones of heavily exposed silver-gelatin. Nelson discovered the plate while working with the Harvard College Observatory's Astronomical Photographic Glass Plate Collection—a collection of over 550,000 negatives spanning more than a century of observations. Handwritten calculations appearing across the image were made directly on the glass surface by two of Harvard's so-called "Women Astronomical Computers" (1875–1950s)—a group of female astronomers who produced significant original research from their transformation of photography into scientific data.

This glass negative was most likely broken in a research lab, suggesting a brief moment when it slipped out of the hands of one of these two astronomers (credited in the collection as Sylvia F. Mussells Lindsay and Muriel E. Mussells Seyfert), their absence faintly echoing Rebecca's. The cracks also point to the decades of care collections staff have taken to keep the many pieces together. This image, like *Green Bank Telescope*, offers a poetics of devotion, and this time, the break-up is literal. Perhaps evoked by the black void revealed between the negative's cracks, an aura of defeat colors the photograph—a sense that even the most cutting-edge investigations might fail to bridge the distance between self and other.



Left (detail) and above:

*Broken Plate (from Harvard Astronomical Photographic Glass Plate Collection), 2026*. Gelatin silver print, 52 x 62 in. (132.1 x 157.5 cm; framed). Courtesy the artist and PATRON, Chicago

## Rebecca, 2026

The two touchpoints of the exhibition—du Maurier's *Rebecca* and the Green Bank Observatory—converge in this looping, first-person video montage. Amplifying the themes of intimacy and distance, the piece transitions from cycling, black-and-white photographs of the Observatory's telescope to increasingly frenzied color, digital handheld sequences. The contrast of the two types of imagery references different timescales and associations: the 35mm shots appearing romantic and temporally ambiguous, while the digital video is more cerebral and contemporary. Given Nelson's projection of an ex, or unrequited love, onto the telescope, the piece seems to elaborate a state of heartache, the contrasting image qualities evoking the long arc of memory shaped by attachment and loss.

06 Aphoristic subtitles, drawn directly from du Maurier's unnamed narrator—such as "Always Rebecca / I should never be rid

of Rebecca"—further infuse the shifting images with the intrusive emotional force of a lover's absence. An eerie soundtrack, produced in collaboration with experimental composer Mauro Hertig, integrates thumping and high-pitched mechanical sounds from the telescope's liquid-helium cooling pumps into the work, bringing a sense of unnerving proximity to the SETI structure. As the pace escalates, so, too, does the emotional charge, producing a tension mired in longing and collapsed connection.

Nelson brings the interdependence of self and other—and its associated dynamics of identification and differentiation—into the experience of watching the video. Through the first-person perspective of both image and narrative, she places viewers in the psychic space behind the camera: one shaped by fantasy, whose failure gives rise to its own form of erotics.

## FURTHER READING

Du Maurier, Daphne. *Rebecca*. Doubleday, 1938.

Sobel, Dava. *The Glass Universe: How the Ladies of the Harvard Observatory Took the Measure of the Stars*. Viking, 2016.

Swift, David W. *SETI Pioneers: Scientists Talk About Their Search for Extraterrestrial Intelligence*. University of Arizona Press, 1993.

Wittig, Monique. *The Lesbian Body*. William & Morrow Co., 1975.

Žižek, Slavoj, ed. *Everything You Wanted to Know About Lacan But Were Afraid to Ask Hitchcock*. Verso, 1992.



I kept wondering what she was doing



Above:  
*Rebecca, 2026* (stills). Video, sound, 5:20 min. Courtesy the artist and PATRON, Chicago



## ABOUT THE ARTIST

**Brittany Nelson** (b. 1984, Great Falls, MT; lives and works in New York, NY) is an artist working in photography, video, and installation. She studied at Montana State University and the Cranbrook Academy of Art and is an Associate Professor of Photography at the University of Richmond. She is a recipient of the Trellis Art Fund's Stepping Stone Grant (2025) and a Creative Capital Foundation Grant (2015), among other awards. Her work has been exhibited at the Museu de Arte de São Paulo, Brazil; KIASMA, Helsinki; Bonniers Konsthall, Stockholm; Le CAP – Centre d'art, Saint Fons, France; Fotogalleriet, Oslo; Trondheim Kunstmuseum, Norway; the Museum of Contemporary Art Detroit; and Brooklyn Academy of Music; among others. She has been an artist-in-residence at the Headlands Center for the Arts and the SETI Institute, both in California. Her monograph *Out of the Everywhere* was published in 2019 by Mousse Publishing, and her work has been featured in publications such as *BOMB*, *Art in America*, *Frieze*, *The New York Times*, and *The New Yorker*.

*List Projects 34: Brittany Nelson* is organized by Natalie Bell, Chief Curator, with Marina Caron, Assistant Curator.

## SPONSORS

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Left:

*Rebecca*, 2026 (still, detail). Video, sound, 5:20 min. Courtesy the artist and PATRON, Chicago

## RELATED PROGRAMS



Film Screening: Alfred Hitchcock's *Rebecca* (1940) with Brittany Nelson

Wednesday, February 11, 2026, 6–9:30 PM  
Public program — Bartos Theater

Graduate Student Talk: Swati Ravi

Thursday, February 12, 2026, 5:30 PM

Public program — Bakalar Gallery

Connecting Nelson's artistic practice with scientific methods used to study black holes, this lecture will highlight the shared roles of imagination, inference, and uncertainty in making the unseen legible.

All List Visual Arts Center programs are free and open to the public. Registration is required. For more information about events and programs related to this exhibition, please visit:  
[listart.mit.edu/events-programs](http://listart.mit.edu/events-programs)

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