PICTURESQUE SNOT:
POLEMICS OF THE LANDSCAPE

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a collection of correspondences between
Jordan Tate and Abigail Susik

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2.2.18, 3:24 P.M. EST

Abigail,

Oddly enough (or not oddly at all) I've been thinking quite a bit about anarchy after our chat. This was one of the engaging themes of *Hope in the Dark*, but not the reason I recommended it. Solnit has an interesting approach to activism and a manner of discussing global paradigm shift in a way that was compelling and complex, yet open and relatable.

The notion of anarchy and/or rejection of hierarchy/structure also worked its way into my compositions last week - I was actively seeking out gnarly and chaotic scenes that challenge traditional norms of landscape photography. Ironically, a few days later I went to Whipp's Ledges Reservation while in Cleveland and was initially disappointed by the picturesque snot that had fallen on the forest the night before as I was hoping for some dense forest rather than snow covered landscapes. That said, I found myself accepting and allowing myself to appreciate this type of beauty and not impose too much structure on myself for the parameters of the project. I think that is what resonated with me the most from *Hope in the Dark* - Solnit had a brief discussion about the problematic use of binaries.

Anyway, I'll attach one from each place - the truly gnarly negative hasn't been processed yet (by chance). I had a chat/interview with Kim Beil, an art historian who is working on a presentation about installation images who mentioned I read another book: *Sight Unseen - Whiteness in American Visual Culture* which apparently makes an argument about whiteness, power, and the photographing of Yosemite.

No need to rush a response, just putting some thoughts down. Have a great weekend!

/
jordan





2.6.18, 12:38 P.M. PST

Hi Jordan,

These thoughts about anarchy and landscape, and the hope that landscape might be able to instill today for some makers and viewers, does remind me of one of the binaries we started talking about a little last week (...and there are so many dualisms when it comes to the coding of landscape since the advent of the industrial era!).

I feel like your interest in anarchy as a set of possibilities or agencies in landscape, paired with your reference to Solnit's ideas about hope in the long term through continued activism, relate on one level to the potential for difference, aberration, agency and change that still might be able to be read into landscape as a "natural" space. But this potential otherness of landscape is nevertheless a big, open-ended question, right? Due precisely to its perceived difference through binary (us/it). Is there pure landscape as such—or is landscape always something framed and comprehended by the viewer? Is there unruliness and lack of hierarchy in landscape as a necessarily delimited field of "natural space," or is this part of the projection that is put onto natural space as enframed by a viewer? It's a tricky distinction and one that I think is more than just parsing for a refinement of ideas that aren't necessarily helpful to answer our question of why landscape matters so much right now.

What is the difference between land and landscape?

I am not trying to dash altogether the idea that landscape can offer an alternative space of otherness, rest or separation—particularly from a digitized image world—but rather, I am questioning where exactly we might find the hope or difference in landscape. Or more specifically, I'm interested in why you are turning to landscape, in the way that you are currently, using analog photography as a



means of recording your confrontation or facing-toward landscape.

Are you finding that the main difference you experience with landscape is about being in that space as a photographer, or about the space itself as separate from you, or about the remainder of that space as it is secured in the photographic image? I'm asking because I feel like all three of those modes of relating to landscape could be quite different. Since I wasn't there in the snow with you that day, I find that I am for the most part clutching the final document, the remainder of your time, the photograph itself, in my search for signs of a sense of space and difference in the landscape as it is rendered frozen, two-dimensional and black and white in your shots.



One of the things that I find relieving about these two images that you sent is that they are comparably more free of coded signs than most other images I deal with during my day, such as reproductions of works of art, news images, photographs of faces coded with signifying expressions. The landscape is not attempting to communicate with me in the photograph, although I suppose it could be communicating in some manner with something (not me).

But for you, you were there in the space with your binary vision of two eyes, and your mono-perspective of the camera lens, and the snowy escarpment itself. Was the landscape most real in your lens or in your eyes, or was there no difference? I feel like this question probably sounds unclear. What I mean is, how did you see the landscape and what was it like for you?

By the way, I liked your typo "picturesque snot." It seemed very apropos. It's like as soon as you captured the photographic image, the coolness of the place, its difference as land, was suddenly transmuted into gooey snot as "picturesque" enframed picture—landscape.

Best,
Abigail





2.13.18, 4:37 P.M. EST

Abigail,

This is super insightful and challenging. Thinking of the landscape as a non-other reframes (or reiterates) how we as a species position ourselves within (or rather apart from) the world. The notion of "natural" is also equally complicated as the spaces I am photographing in are government owned and regulated (local, state, or national) and also function as governed spaces (albeit through their lack development/active "preservation"). This dialogue, the one which you have beautifully coined picturesque snot, does challenge our relationships with the land on a broader scale. Inevitably, it is something that is viewed to be "consumed" either through a camera, hike, forest bathing, etc. still positions the landscape as something not just other than, but in service to people - something of utility.

I'll admit, that this is kind of a bummer to think about, as I am essentially treating the landscape in a similar fashion as the nationalist movements and painters I am attempting to criticize, and also as a rejection of over-wrought and disingenuous (or willfully ignorant) meta-photographic inquiry that positions the photograph in opposition to the constructed image (which is ironically the separation that people were attempting to make 10 years ago in separating the photograph from the representational image - but not the representational as "constructed").

The irony of this cycle isn't inherently different that the irony of my dealing with the landscape, but I am comforted by the fact that multiple gestures inform the process rather than relying solely on the photograph (from the criticism of nationalism, the questioning of the ontology of the photograph, the use of the landscape as nationalist domain, the economics of the sale of art (and economic disparity), and our existence as beings on/in and in-formed by new (and newly troubled) digital spaces (domains).



Fresh perspective on one's own assumptions are always painful and productive. I think (to finally answer your question) the difference of the landscape and my role in it is apart from the photograph. The photograph is almost a record of having-been-there and something to share as an aesthetic experience (a massive separation from my earlier practice). So when thinking about how I relate to the landscape as a part of my practice I'm not able to place my practice at a single point, the closest is the first, but I would suggest that for my process it is more the being in the landscape as a person that is most important, not primarily as a photographer (although admittedly, I always do take the 4x5).

That said, I think your third paradigm is also accurate - what I have is the remainder (or remnants) of the land that has been "scaped" and therefore made object and other. This gets to the question of the difference between land and landscape (as I see it) - land exists and landscape is observed but it can't exist as landscape (or you can't be sure of its existence as picturesque enough to be a landscape) until you observe it. It's Schrödinger's Landscape.

Really though, it is also a manifestation of a powerful Weltschmertz that I am not alone in feeling. The world we live in is not the world I expected or knew. Everything is just a little but fucked, but also strangely hopeful.

It is perfectly described as picturesque snot. You are my hero for that one.

/
jordan





2.13.18, 4:03 P.M. PST

Jordan,

Well, that's the funny thing…The photographs you attached to your previous email, the snow parkscapes of Cleveland, Ohio really didn't actually look like picturesque snot—something composed, inviting and beautiful. They had a slightly uneasy feeling for me for some reason—relating perhaps to the notion I have in the back of my head that even though they were necessarily framed by the format of your camera, these landscapes were totally indifferent to you.



As parkscapes, they are little fortresses of the natural, in the sense that they are walled in against encroachments. As plots of land they were of course initially stolen from the local indigenous population, and after having been seized, were eventually set aside or chosen for some reason—perhaps they contained some kind of natural or historical feature (the brawny rocks?), or maybe simply because they were already remainders of some sort (didn't fit into the golf course?)—left over tidbits of land now called "public."

In that sense, the parkscapes you are photographing are reserved spots of displacement, I suppose what Foucault might call a heterotopia—but I am more getting at the idea that they are rather more apprehendable as glaring signs of the landscape as a uniform and very obvious signifier of total cooptation of life into capital, than any kind of difference as such. I guess I am feeling Weltshmertzy, too, because these parkscapes are looking dystopian if anything—not any kind of otherness but an oppressing sameness. The landscape is monotonous indifference.

The idea that for me, I can actually find some peeling away or separation from the perception of these photographs as picturesque snot—an aesthetic which I argue we are trained to see quite automatically when looking at the landscape and its representations, is pretty significant. It's like the picturesque is fully failing as a projection device that I (as a generalized viewer) have worn for so long—because I know it is not only a myth but an impossibility—like a crappy veneer really starting to peel back from a crappier substrate.

The remainder of the picturesque persistently remains as a code or overlay when I view the photos, but at the same time this other kind of goo or unidentifiable snot comes in—something like visual noise or random incident, the essential blasé stance of the landscape in response to our ceaseless interventions, and also the futility of our interventions ultimately in the face of this indifference. Like the "Ramble" (or is it "Bramble"?) area of Central Park, with its tangle of hills, little streams, and uncut growth—is this a more "fortunate" area in the park, more "true" as landscape? It seems nearly the same as mobbed Times Square, when I think back to my time in the city.

I think I am also trying to say: is there any land that is not already landscape? Your idea of Schrödinger's Landscape is really fun in a black humor kind of way—that's what I meant when I said it's hard to know if you (anyone) can even see the landscape, it is so hypothetical. As you said, land is service, utility, very Heideggerian. Even land that is melting ice or smoking cinders—glaciers, Antarctica, the sinking Marshall Islands, burning vineyards in California. Everything is owned and surveyed. Preservation is really just reserving designated space.

The backyard is microcosmic of the nation's cooking and carving action of land. Island-making and moat-building are infrastructural to capitalism, whether you are on the empowered or disempowered side of the coin of currency. The nation is a park open only to its particular public. The park is a fragment of the nation.



Where does this get us (or your project rather), as seen by me?

1) there is no way that your photographic "views" are not essentially coded and re-coded—I can't speak for the possibility of decoding yet, but I'll keep thinking about it;

2) this coding now flips immediately back and forth for a beholder between "picturesque snot" and the banal understanding of landscape as a signifier of capital;

3) thus your appropriation of the genre of photographic landscape is an appropriation of an appropriation, which moves the work close to an avant-garde idea of détournement, but I'm not sure yet how I feel about slapping this label onto the photographs ipso facto.

Is simply witnessing the landscape as an automatic sign of nationalism tantamount to détournment as a form of twisted, ironic critique? I get that there is a critique here, but it doesn't seem twisted to me. It is, rather, unnervingly straightforward. Is it Realism?

I have more questions and thoughts about your discussion of the importance of your corporeal presence in the landscape, and how that relates to your association between digital, national, and privatized spaces as domains. But I will leave those thoughts for next time.

P.S. Please send me some more photographs to look at.

Abigail

2.13.18, 4:26 P.M. PST

I realize that we are discussing the photos aesthetically in quite negative terms—but in fact, they are very beautiful. I am conscious that my politicized commentary may run counter to your desire to sell these in a gallery. Shall I try to veer away then from this critique of the picturesque, and talk about beauty, too?

Abigail

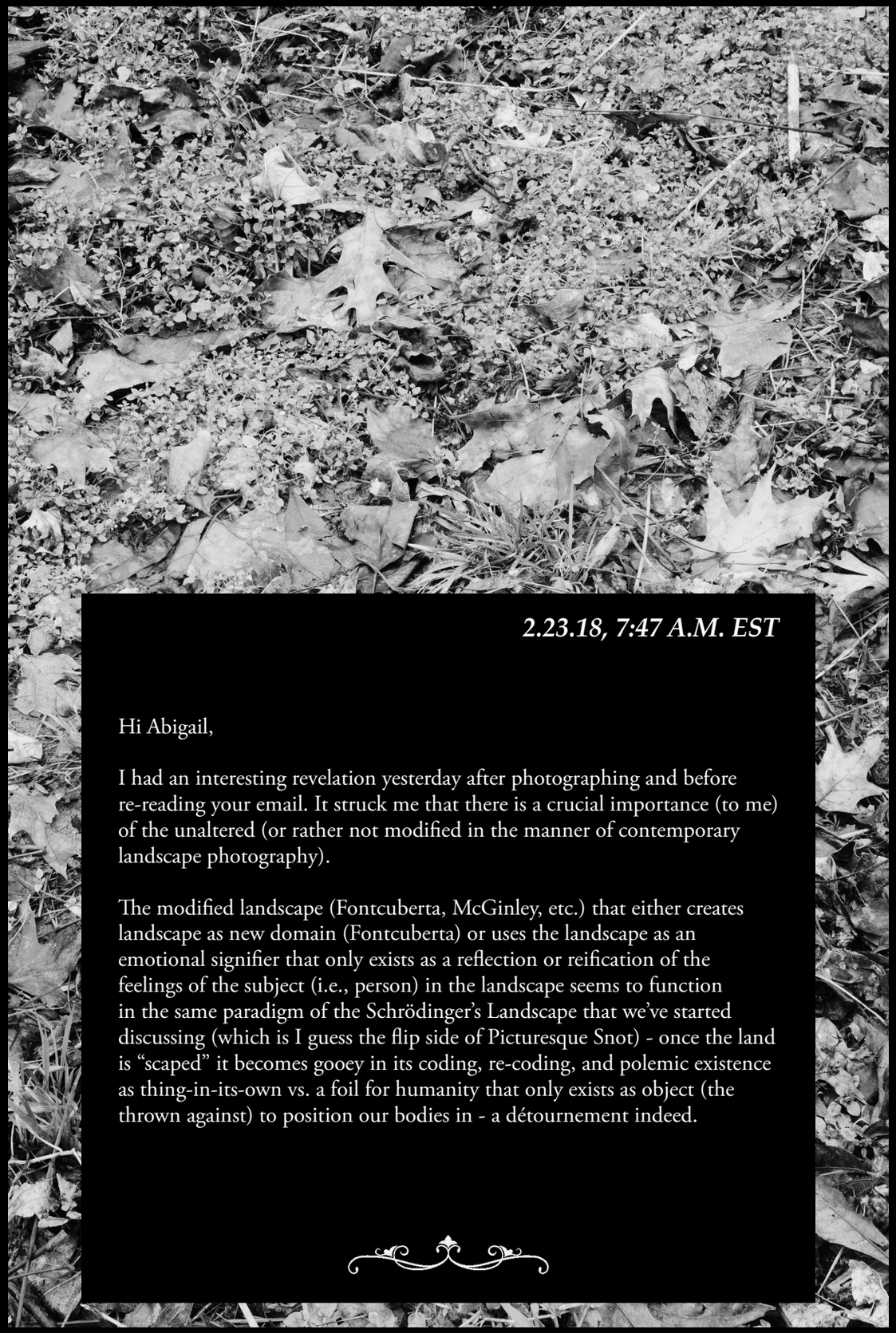
2.13.18, 8:23 P.M. EST

Not at all. I was using picturesque snot as a metaphor for the polemics I'm dealing with / acknowledgement of the aesthetic disparity between these and the classic landscape rather than as an aesthetically disparaging term.

Discuss as you will, I'm choosing not to burden myself with the concerns of the market except in terms of market criticism. That is why I have no issue giving these images away or selling them at cost. It doesn't feel right to profit from them.

/
jordan





2.23.18, 7:47 A.M. EST

Hi Abigail,

I had an interesting revelation yesterday after photographing and before re-reading your email. It struck me that there is a crucial importance (to me) of the unaltered (or rather not modified in the manner of contemporary landscape photography).

The modified landscape (Fontcuberta, McGinley, etc.) that either creates landscape as new domain (Fontcuberta) or uses the landscape as an emotional signifier that only exists as a reflection or reification of the feelings of the subject (i.e., person) in the landscape seems to function in the same paradigm of the Schrödinger's Landscape that we've started discussing (which is I guess the flip side of Picturesque Snot) - once the land is "scaped" it becomes gooey in its coding, re-coding, and polemic existence as thing-in-its-own vs. a foil for humanity that only exists as object (the thrown against) to position our bodies in - a détournement indeed.







This is precisely why the attached images feel so appropriate - the realism defies the pictorial expectation of misty flowing waterfall by presenting the thing-as-it-is rather than coding it in the manner of the “landscape” it becomes the much more provincial and amateur Parkscape. Something that doesn’t mystify place or institute an economic impossibility to scape for your self (melting glaciers and sinking islands). I want the images to be banal and dense but not at the cost of beauty. While I am not smitten with the waterfall attached here, I do appreciate the tension between expectation and reality.

It likely isn’t a “final” image but it is something I am drawn to - I appreciate its lack of beauty while still being picturesque while the other image is (to me) stunningly beautiful, but not picturesque. I think it is realism, but a complicated and conflicted realism, a realism laden with Weltschmertz?

P.S. Both of these were shot a stone’s throw from a golf course - I guess they just didn’t fit.

P.P.S. ¯_(ツ)_/¯.

/
jordan



3.2.18, 4:59 P.M. EST

Dear Jordan,

Forgive my slight delay in responding. It was snowing last week in Portland, which is a big and rare event here. The city more or less shuts down and everything goes haywire.

After I sent you the last message, I felt a bit disappointed in the "grump" quality of my thoughts. I went for a walk in my own local park that day after hitting "send," and I found myself feeling the same sense of slight relief I always feel when I get away from my computer and my relentless list of things to do (although the walk in the park was also on the list of things to do). "Why am I so 'grump' on parkscapes," I asked myself in this awkward phrasing? My thoughts were enlivened somewhat by the little blades of individual grass that I noticed as a dragged myself up the park's summit—they were so multitudinous and yet also identical! These blades of grass inhabit Mt. Tabor Park, which is supposedly the only active volcanic feature within a park in North America. It's quite a climb to the top of this volcanic vent, from which, on the somewhat rare sunny day in Portland, you can see the distant shark's tooth of the mother peak that runs the whole show: Mt. Hood. The big pines that sway at on the plateau of this little summit of Tabor Park always refresh me.

The park is an interesting study in contrasts, as many parks are. Mt. Tabor was seismically constructed over eons to help Mt. Hood blow off steam, so to speak. It's part of a frankly terrifying volcanic network that spans a big hunk of the state of Oregon. Starting in the late 19th century, the City of Portland terraced parts of this volcanic bulge called Tabor in order to create the city's three reservoirs, which were built to look like medieval moats, complete with crenelated parapets and metal fences in the shape of spears. Mt. Tabor is now the fortress of the city's fire and water at once—nearly a holy mountain of elemental forces that could kill or revive depending on the circumstances.

So many city parks are like this. Parks became a phenomenon in the late-18th century after picnicking in cemeteries became a social pastime, believe it or not, and when cities began to incorporate and wanted to reduce the number of 'badlands' within city limits—such as dumps, hanging grounds, slaughterhouses and reeking animal corrals.

Buttes-Chaumont Park in Paris, which fascinated the French surrealists during the 1920s, is a spectacular example of this pointed transformation of a disgusting "wasteland" into a charming "folly" complete with grottoes and fake hills. Remarkably Buttes-Chaumont was forced back into its former identity of "badlands" once the Commune hit Paris at the end of the 19th century and the park became a deadly battlefield and mass grave. It bears hardly any trace of this trauma — palimpsest today.

The story of Mt. Tabor Park is not nearly so dramatic, but the basic "otherness" outside of myself that I sincerely feel when I go there, reminded me that even with regimes of total cooptation, natural or artificial, there are aspects of many systems that can surprise, redirect and stimulate. Tabor park is part of both a natural system (volcanic) and an artificial system (urban water reserves). The city very much hopes that Tabor will not be called up for use as a volcanic vent by Big Mt. Hood anytime soon, and recently, after someone pissed in the largest of the three reservoirs, necessitating that the city drain the entire body of water (!) (met with howls of critique from residents), Portland doesn't much care to use Tabor as a cistern either. Even so, whether vent, reservoir, or just a space of exception from development, Tabor Park is a thoroughly instrumentalized and "used" space. So why do I get a sense of relief when I go there?



One thing that occurs to me is that what I called "Realism" and what you termed "unaltered" could lead us in our thinking toward the rich horizon of the current trend in non-human studies, which explores the idea that what is beyond the human is not so much an anti-humanism, but rather just extra-humanism (i.e., non-binary). That which is beyond the human amounts to a lot: forces, randomness, non-human systems and entities such as "nature" or animals. It is quite difficult in the realm of the city or in the domestic space to find any starkly unfamiliar trace of the non-human beyond the quotidian resources we use (air, water) or inhabit (the land and its climate), but nevertheless, the non-human is omnipresent in human life. The park is, as we have already decided, an immensely humanized and "scaped" place—and once it's photographed it lives on in a gooier state of representation: a depiction of a picture.

Nevertheless, our interface with the nonhuman systems, entities, phenomena are arguably more starkly present in a park than they are in the midst of an urban or domestic space.

That's where I get excited about your parkscape pictures. They seem to be calling up the indexical properties of the analogue film that you are using in conjuring our awareness of the non-human (unaltered) as opposed to the snot of the picturesque. That's what I meant by the indifference of the landscape. The image is accumulating in your negatives just as the leaves are accumulating on the ground. The water that rushes and spills over the rocks is like the incident of light bouncing of the leaf debris registering in your film. These actions are not so much inevitable as they are causal, and it is this pretty straightforward causality that I find comfortingly "spare"—not really minimal, but perhaps minimized in terms of rhetoric. Yes, these photographs are still representations and yes, parks are artificial, but there is also a perceptible pull away from coded meaning, if you allow yourself to look at that indifference or lack of meaning. Which leads us back to my grump and your Weltschmerz.

Which is more alienating—the inability to escape the human or the idea of the human as less than an afterthought?

A.





3.3.18, 10:16 A.M. EST

Abigail,

As always your timing is impeccable. I am currently in Pennsylvania, a wildly different landscape even than neighboring Ohio. It seems more geologic and sedimentary than the glacially scraped and scaped flatness of Ohio outside of the river valley where I live. I was running along the Schulkyll River on Thursday looking at boulders and tectonically shifted sheer rock walls - one of which I was reminded of in your discussion of the histories of Mt. Tabor. I was without phone or camera, as my mission was to court the sense of relief when one is away from tasks (though, admittedly running was on my to-do list as well).

While seemingly unrelated, the type of running that I have been engaged with stems from a book written in 1970 by Joe Henderson called Long, Slow Distance. The methodology (I've admittedly only read excerpts) is lovingly abbreviated to LSD, and from there I've bastardized my own version to focus more on the mental space of the long, slow distance mixed with a little bit of the Patti Smith "fuck the clock" mentality where the only adjustments to my pace are to slow down rather than speed up - maybe that puts Simon and Garfunkel in the mix too.

Anyway, moving back from the digression - but one that seems to fit with an overall worldview of mine that informs these images and my practice - I ran past one wall in particular that grabbed me. Without phone or camera, and the land having already been scaped in the construction of the public park that rested atop this very small mountain, I was forced to just be with the rock wall that I wanted to badly to photograph. The following day I was meeting with a young artist who was also interested in the notion of landscape and I did something which at the time seemed generous, but now feels altogether wrong and disingenuous and is introducing some conflict into the notion of photographing. Oddly, I'm almost embarrassed to share this but in the interest of developing a sincere and critical dialogue it is necessary. What is telling in my interaction with this young artist is how I chose my words. She was photographing rock piles and had expressed an interest in the notion of sedimentary layers, time, and the markings of history on place through the land (Mt. Tabor, but much smaller, less dangerous, and the fortress of fire and water).

I told her of the shifted and twisted tectonic formation of this small rock wall (which my fascination with it also formed before the wall was seen as I was driving from Cincinnati to Philadelphia and desiring to build more dense, raw and rocky images in response to the landscapes along the road).

In describing the wall, its location, and its significance to me, I had already scaped the image without a camera or record.

I then told her precisely where to find this small mountainside and “gave” her the photograph.

This was the telling gesture to me, this ancient wall of rock - a non-human entity formed in concert with massive geological forces (and aided along by human intervention) can’t exist in my mind outside of the human. I think this is where your arguments become most compelling. Given that the Park is a scaped place (I can’t bring myself to put quotation marks around scaping) and I exist within it I think it can be more difficult to have the non-binary interaction with human in the landscape. This is precisely why the snot of the picturesque is so problematic for me - it belies the complexity of these interactions and ignores the extra-human elements that make the dialogues so much richer. I’m starting to feel that my guilt for “giving” this young artist the photograph of the rock wall may be the discomfort of settling in to one of my first aware extra-human experiences - one where the complexity of gesture and my complicity within the work I am making. It doesn’t seem possible to extricate my own polemics from the work I am making.

I am, however, trying to trouble the picturesque in some of these. The waterfall image I sent last week is more successful in idea than aesthetic. It is an awkward step between the two binary amateur approaches to waterfall image, total clarity or misty idealism. I wanted to capture something in the middle.

This is a productive, although painful, awareness that further complicates the manner in which I’ll continue to photograph. I was already trending towards density, but now I’ll have to do so with a different awareness. Mounts Tabor and Hood leave me thinking about my last visit to the Pacific Northwest and the felt precarity of the human occupation of the tenuous land atop the Cascadia Subduction Zone (this was shortly after another article came out warning of the next “big one”). Coming from the Midwest, the idea of major geologic or meteorologic trauma isn’t felt or embodied. Our land was scaped by glaciers almost in preparation for easy development 2,000,000 years ago.





Glaciers were the original long, slow, distance runners I guess.

/
jordan







3.14.18, 10:24 A.M. HDT

Hi Jordan,

This is written from inside a plane flying over the Pacific. I am returning from brief a trip to Maui with my mother, and am enjoying the short five-hour flight home. Usually it takes me 9 hours at least and more money than I can afford to get to my childhood home in Tampa, and so I rarely see my mother, which I deeply regret. How ironic that it is closer and cheaper for me to get to Maui to see my parent during her sojourn there.

In any case the turbulence is really bad, and so this message could come out comparably rough.

I was very excited by the energy of your email last week. It sounds like a breakthrough of sorts, despite the discomfort of the feelings you had around your exchange with the young artist with whom you were generous.

Just wondering, did the young artist relate her practice of rock piles and questions of place to that of Robert Smithson and his brilliant flows, spills and litanies of entropy? Does she perhaps know about the Center for Land Use Interpretation in Los Angeles?





But to return to our discussion on your recent work, I've lately become really conscious of the large amount of time we both spend travelling. Over these last two or so months of our exchange about your landscape practice, we have both written as frequent observers of unfamiliar scenery. Inevitably travelling to new places sets up a dynamic by which we, as visitors, scrutinize and collect the fresh landscape to a heightened degree while, walking, running, driving or flying by/over in some form of transportation. At the same time, both of us are also transplants by way of academic jobs that brought us to the cities we currently live in. So I should also admit that on the most basic level I myself am often still viewing Portland from this unpleasant and frankly acquisitive state of mind, which in my most base consumer moments, sounds like this in my head: "What can this city do for me? What can I take away from it and hold onto going forward?"

Surely this question of the duration of presence in a place affects my rapport with the landscape I'm inhabiting long term or short term. I was just reading a New York Times Magazine article about the Oregonians in the Malheur area in the south of the state who were so infamously involved in the recent standoff with the government about land ownership and rights. As you well know, those involved in or sympathetic to the standoff view the land as rightfully theirs. There is nothing in their version of Malheur land that is not equivalent to themselves—the region is perceived as their very body, with its own sacred and justified functions and processes (natural



resources are there for exclusively for their use), which amounts not to a narcissistic reflection but a paranoid projection of the human body as "my land." This is very close to the idea of a nationalist blood and soil point of view that you have mentioned to me several times as a counterpoint for your landscape practice, but the Maleheur paranoia strikes me as less symbolic and more literal than Blut and Boden—nearly indexical—the land I stand on and traverse is my body through this touch and sustained co-presence.

If I basically perceive myself as a perpetual visitor in my house, office and town, not to mention my privileged access to frequent travel, this shift in duration and persistence of presences helps me escape the tangible touch of the earth surface as an extension of my body. I think that this viewpoint of escaping identification with place and turning into visitor, or invader from an anti-colonialist point of view that pertains to pretty much everywhere I go, accelerates the inevitability of scaping the land, not only because the land becomes more readily "picture," but also because I'm barely standing still in one place for a moment, no matter how slow I run (and these days, it's pretty slow). Landscape as a scape is a reflection of the human, which in my foggy ruminations can be distinguished from what I've called this other kind of indexical projection of land as body, but nevertheless they are perhaps more related than we like to think.

In any case, I think this difference in your status toward the landscape of Pennsylvania and the rock outcroppings along the Schuylkill river from that of the young artist is why you gave away the location and "rights" to your not-yet-taken photograph of the rock wall. At first, I thought the gesture was one of the master to the apprentice in a guild-like formation of generation rights and access through age-based hierarchy and favor, but then I realized that it was not the remnants of the guild structure in academia that prompted



the gift, but rather your position of what I have called escape in relation to the land as visitor. She was closer to the rocks than you were, in terms of her indexical and durational presence as dweller. You acceded to that precedence while driving by at first and then slowly running by. At least that's one way of looking at it.

I see that I have set up a framework in my past notes to you that now, perhaps annoyingly, I want to try and wriggle out of. I feel like we agree that it's impossible to take the scape out of the landscape, which means that that acquisitive, invasive projection and reflection are the very fabric of the human rapport with the ground we dwell upon and move across. That is one strata of feelings. But we could also access another layer that poses that the human is inescapable precisely because the human is non-human. I am not deliberately trying to be confusing. I don't mean that the human is a construction, although I think it is definitely one... but that beyond that ideology, I am attempting to formulate the human as negated, the human as landscape.

I am making a poor attempt to answer my own question from a recent note ("Which is more alienating—the inability to escape the human or the idea of the human as less than an afterthought?") and also respond to your dilemma with the young artist and the very interesting stuff you get at about glaciers toward the end of your last message. This notion of separating the human from the landscape and having the one stand beside the other in some "truth" is futile, but I think the human can dissolve and is dissolving into the landscape, which is where the real terror or cannibalism taboo lies in this relation. The human consumes itself as landscape and so moves toward not so much extinction in an accelerationist take, but a negation in an ontological sense (human as non-human).





Now I'm thinking about a lost Robert Smithson work from his early years that I've always admired in relation to this question. It's called Enantiomorphic Chambers from 1965, and consists of a wall structure including two mirrors that are positioned in such a way that they cancel out the reflections in themselves. This artwork is on my mind because I was reading some Deleuze and Guattari this week for an independent study I'm doing with two art majors. They wanted to read both volumes of Capitalism and Schizophrenia this term, and although I was reluctant at first, they persuaded me, and it's been great. We are reading A Thousand Plateaus right now, and this week included the section on "order-words," which includes the notion of "enantiomorphosis," which D&G relate to the notion of a new generation cancelling out the actions of the earlier generation.

I guess what I'm trying to say, by using the image of Smithson's wall sculpture as a crutch, is that by forever projecting and reflecting itself onto and off of the landscape, the human can be seen to eventually start to cancel itself out. If you stare at the mirror long enough so that you actually become the mirror, you ultimately disappear into the mirror. Maybe land was always landscape, and will continue to be. Is this at all what you are getting at when you talk about the slow run of glaciers?

A.



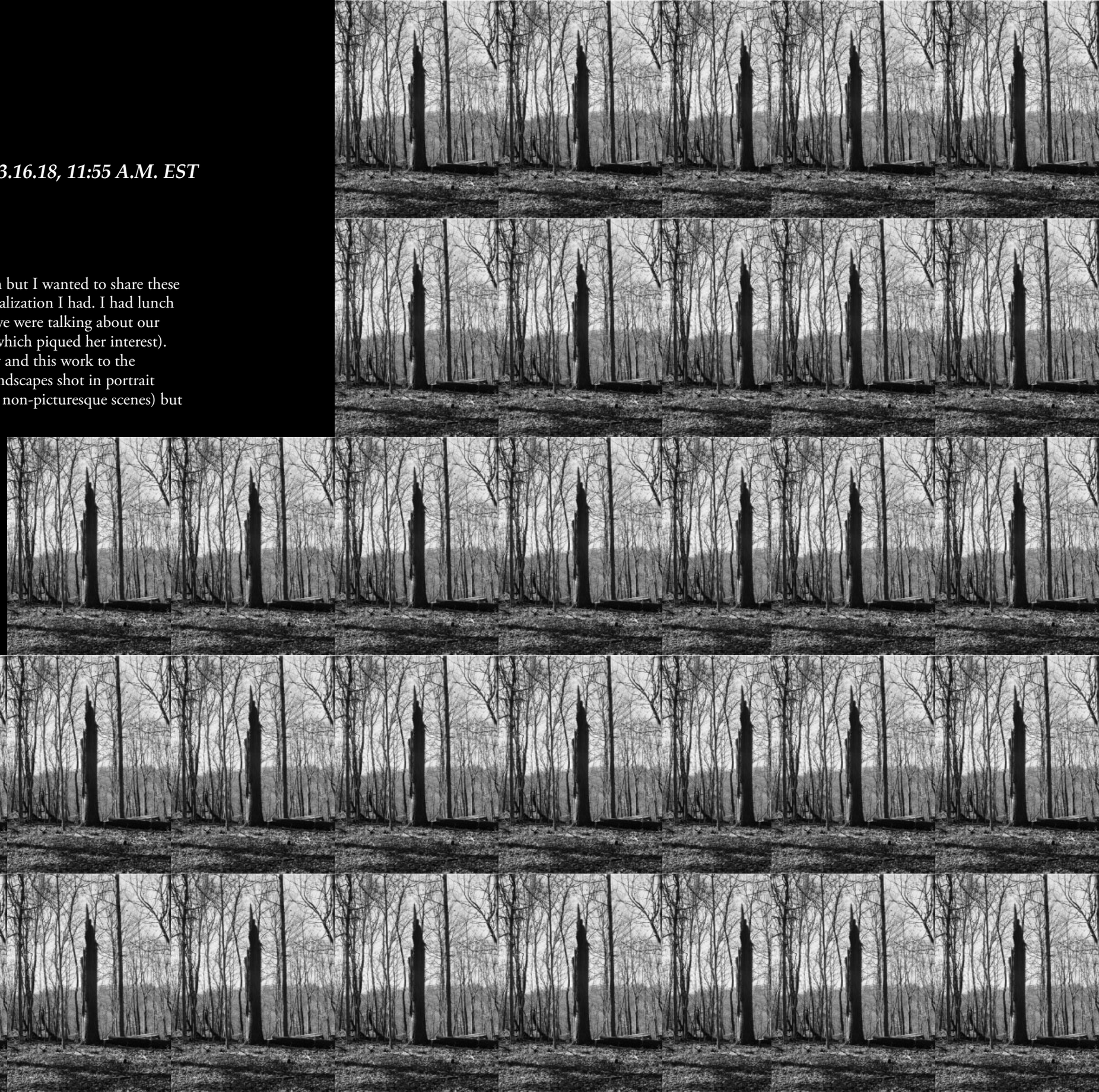


3.16.18, 11:55 A.M. EST

Hi Abigail!

I'll properly be responding to your email soon but I wanted to share these new images with you and mention another realization I had. I had lunch with a friend and fellow artist yesterday and we were talking about our exchanges and the idea of anarchy came up (which piqued her interest). I at first likened my relationship with anarchy and this work to the compositional strategies that inform it (i.e. landscapes shot in portrait orientation, rarely visible horizons, and dense non-picturesque scenes) but then realized that my approach to anarchy in the work is ironically more structural and political (or at least political in the sense that I'm co-opting strategies of anarchy). The work is in many ways a rejection of structures and norms, but with no offer of replacement. Its like a punchlist of things I have issue with (even starting with how I came to make the work as a rejection of repeated photographic tropes). Maybe it also speaks to my affinity for the ¯_(ツ)_/¯. It is the end-game of proper affiliation with anarchy as I relate to it- opposition without position. Thanks!

/
jordan





3.20.18, 10:34 A.M. EST

Hi Abigail!

It seems we have circled back, in a way, to Schrödingers Landscape (albeit viewed through the ouroborosesque mirrors of Smithson's Enantiomorphc Chambers).

I also realized through this particular exchange (and my fluidity with responding to some of your questions/prompts and not others) that I am far more hesitant that I likely ever have been to take a position. I'd like to think that this is me acknowledging the complexity of the gesture of a simple photograph, even one as frequently made as a landscape (although from my previous quick response) I think that it may be born out of a sense of humility (not something the artist is usually guilty of).
The idea of opposition without position is something that I now realize had been a growing presence in my work (and life). From a "fuck the clock" LSD Running mentality to my less recent crusade against artists using theory in the very specific ways that young artists tend to. "Using" is purposely chosen here, as I feel that there is rarely substantial engagement in the theoretical discourses of the art school theory pantheon (Deleuze, Guatarri, Bachelard, Foucault, Derrida, Barthes, etc.)

There is something about the post-war French philosophers that (to bring it back to Smithson) functions as a mirror to the students, not in the sense that they see themselves in it- I prefer Beckett for that (not French, but still kicking around Paris before, during, and after the war)- but that they've stared at is so long (i.e., post-modern art theory) that they cease to exist and only serve to reflect the ideas and structures (or post-structures) that that have been continuously reinforced - in part by the larger insecurities of the art market in possessing and having meaning apart from theoretical and/or political discourse (guilty as charged). They (and by extension many artists) forget that the very notion of theory is just someone else's best guess (although generally a dead white French man).

While I admit my parenthetical address of post-structuralism was a wink to those in the know as much as it was a way to categorize that particular epoch in Western philosophical history, I'd also like to propose that



our growing use of "post" as a prefix is telling to our identification with opposition rather than position. Given how I came to make these landscape works (as we discussed on the phone) it was a gesture of rejection rather than position- my goal was to propose an alternate to the aesthetically driven navel gazing of the metaphorgraphic structures that I had so long been a part of.

Ironically, the other day I thought of my work in contrast with the broader field of contemporary photography and settled on term that I think fits me, but also signals the end of a movement we are in.

From post-modernism (which never seemed to officially end or be rejected) we blended into the also unnamed "contemporary" to the point where some discussions of "contemporary" art start with (ironically) Duchamp- while I acknowledge that we as a species always feel as though we are on the precipice of some great change, I feel that we are at least at a time where we deserve a new category for the growing anarchy (anti-rather than post-structure) that I feel is growing more pervasive.

This isn't my first attempting at coining a phrase that situates the academic and/or cultural mindset in opposition (I was asked to be a provocateur at the American Anthropological Association Annual Meeting with a colleague and proposed "sans-disciplinary" as a tongue-in-cheek gesture)- but this one feels genuine, apropos, and heartfelt.

Post-Contemporary.

It is a way of stating my opposition without having to necessarily take a position. It is more active than the ¯_(ツ)_/¯ and also devoid of its humor but much more self-aware and critical. It is an anarchist position in many ways, something that allows me to point at all the things that I think are fucked, or have deeply problematic histories with confidence, but while also acknowledging that I don't have the answers.

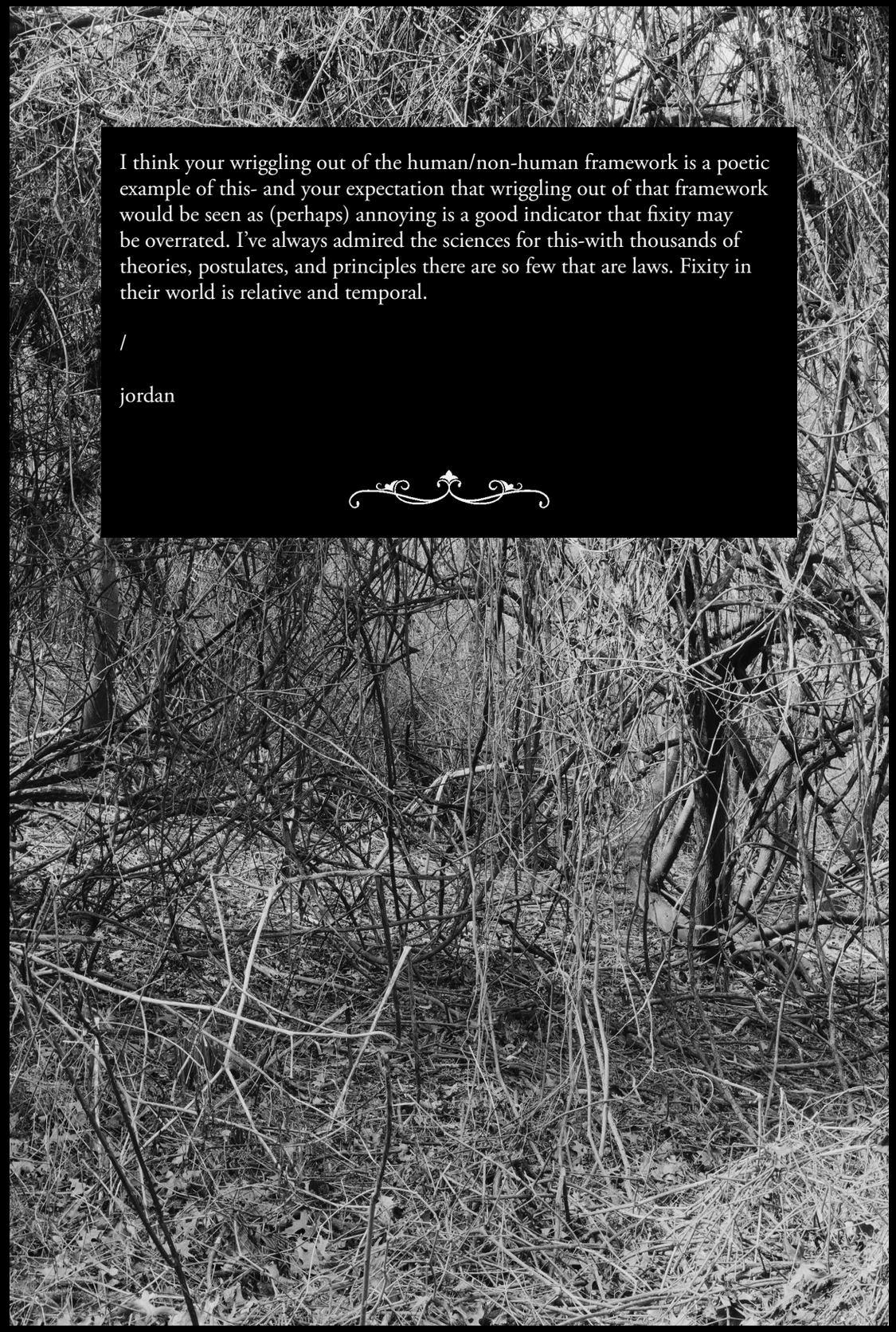
I guess it is the result of a Weltschmertz where the world I live in is not the world I wished (or thought) it was, but shared. I realize how often I tell students that they need to complicate or "trouble" their concepts-and I'd imagine that this is also a reflection of that mindset-nothing is as simple as it seems.

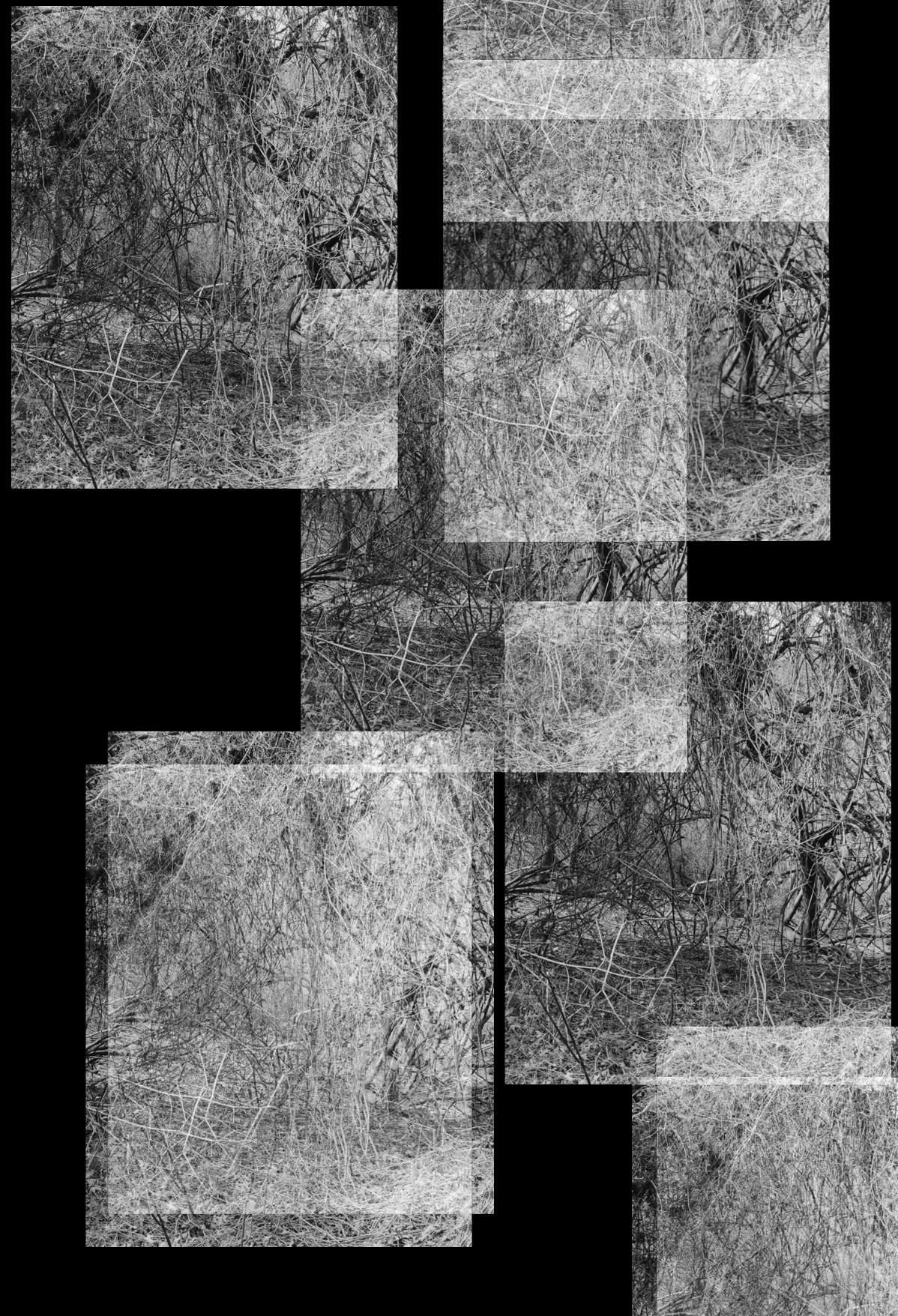


I think your wriggling out of the human/non-human framework is a poetic example of this- and your expectation that wriggling out of that framework would be seen as (perhaps) annoying is a good indicator that fixity may be overrated. I've always admired the sciences for this-with thousands of theories, postulates, and principles there are so few that are laws. Fixity in their world is relative and temporal.

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jordan







3.29.18, 8:27 P.M. PST

Hi Jordan,

I just spent the last few days hanging out in Evanston with Chicago surrealist, new leftist and SDS pioneer, Penelope Rosemont. I'm doing some research for my book project on surrealism and work/anti-work, but I also realize at this point that my friendship with Penny is about me looking for some answers in terms of politics and lived social reality in the now. She was with me on our most recent election night, which also happened to be the occasion of a celebration of Dada put on by City Lights bookstore in San Francisco, and she helped me immensely when I could barely cope with the news. Penny and her late husband Franklin Rosemont were neither anarchists nor communists in the 60s, but they were lifelong radicals and did support the idea of a worker's revolution—Penny still does today.

Starting in the early 60s they were very much inspired by many dead or nearly dead Europeans, such as their hero André Breton who they befriended in Paris in '66, but they were also able to see that WWII and the Nazis hadn't even begun to radicalize most of the world, despite the attending horrors of those developments. Things still needed to change in the 60s, a lot—racism, sexism, exploitation, repression- it was (and still is) everywhere. Spending time with Penny and her friends from the Solidarity bookshop days this week, amazingly during the first days of the 50-year anniversary of Mai '68, reminded me that things will always need shaking up in the human world, no matter how much "progress" we seem to have made or how many years have gone by since fascist fiascos of various ilks rise up amongst "humanist" tendencies in liberal societies. That's why I'm crushing out on Deleuze and Guattari right now—despite the grad seminar glamour that will forever plague them. Their subtly anarchist critique of society and the fascist that lies within every human strikes me as real and meaningful—political — rather than theoretical, although that strain of their discussion did not arise in my last note, I admit.

All this is to say that what I hear when you talk about opposition without position, it sounds something like a political refusal of aesthetic or intellectual hegemonic stances on the one hand, and a desire for the stark goals of radicalism on the other. Apart from your first message to me some weeks ago, we haven't really been talking about political realities other than what some might call the malaise of the Anthropocene (I am not personally a fan of this term, which seems misguided to me in the way that "humanism" seems misguided. I have purposefully been avoiding Anthropocene, perhaps simply given my own claustrophobic tendencies that make me want to refuse the idea that humans are so central to everything). I think I hear that you would like to move past designations of style (aesthetics) and periodization (history) in our discussion, to issues of political/social praxis, desire and commitment.

Instead of picturesque snot, Anthropocene, and other frames for your attention to landscape, we could instead borrow a phrase I spied in a photograph from '68 of Barbara's bookshop in Chicago, which bore a sign in the window mentioning "anarcho-zoology"—something that Franklin Rosemont came up with. What would an "anarcho-landscape" practice look like? A reordering of the horizon and the plain on meta and micro levels?

I'm assuming that you are using the term anarchism politically rather than metaphorically, and that your idea of anti-structure in art/aesthetics has to do with taste preferences and style trends as power systems and hierarchies. Thus your notion of "post-contemporary" wouldn't be a formal designation, as was the case with my advisor Rosalind Krauss's "post-medium" condition around the turn of the millennium—a phrase that certainly encompassed post-modernism but attempted to go beyond it into something like the post-contemporary at the same time. Politically stated, an anarchist aesthetics would seek to resist and subvert authoritative power structures as well as refuse them. The signifier of photographed landscape, therefore has a very tall order to accomplish if it is not only to slough off the old but also shrug away the "new" as contemporary. The only intentionality that could resist all of the typical visual codings would be your own sincerity of commitment in your praxis, and that does not necessarily compute as a visual signifier, beyond your own stance of fuck-the-system. The work of art is still susceptible to the vagaries of the reader, no matter what you do.

For Penny and Franklin Rosemont, it was not the art that was anarchist subversion, but their point of view and lived praxis—the whole burrito of their lives as artists and radicals. I don't know about you, but I find this comforting, since I don't like the idea of art as propaganda.

Hope you are well tonight!

A.



3.30.18, 10:36 P.M. EST

Hi Abigail,

So, I actually sat down to write you this email last night - and yours came through this morning like a present on Christmas morning. Before I dig in to your whole email I wanted to get your input on where my head is at (maybe advice is more appropriate?). I saw an artist and curator in public dialogue last night that was transformative, to say the least. Details aside, I feel conflict about my attendance at things like this (or maybe my motivation) but I think the people in the audience (apart from myself) had a "good" experience (although I also think that the event served to reaffirm their identities as cultured or as good liberals).

I guess what I want to know is if my conflict is self-indulgent, and my energies could be more productive elsewhere. I think our dialogue is shifting to the political/personal (which I enjoy) - but that also makes me uncomfortable (likely due to my position of privilege as well as my participation in both the art economy and the increasingly problematic [but also one of our last hopes] economy of higher education).

_____

I'll paste the text below - and I'm not sure what type of response I am looking for. This isn't meant to be a part of our official exchange, but maybe that would be insightful. Either way, I plan to engage in and respond to your email and references in my "official" response, but this is the opening salvo I'm presenting more personal turmoil than discourse. In a landscape driven metaphor, I feel like I may have crossed the Rubicon.

As always, your observations are astute and cut to the heart of the issue. My consistent difficulty with art (and my implicit participation in the intellectual and physical systems that orbit the notion of codified culture) and my unavoidable contrarian criticality came to a head last night at an event (somewhere between art, theater, and advertisement) last night.

What saddened me was her praxis and practice seemed inherently at odds. As I sat in the amphitheater watching the idea of "art" be performed by two people who claim to (or do) protest in praxis to the polemics of late stage capitalism, yet still sit at the table, stars in the dog and pony show of contemporary art, performing for whatever gratuity they are offered as they salve the consciences of those with means.



Sadly, this issue struck me so viscerally because I (and every artist I know) performs in this way. When my issues with the commerce of art resurfaced, (I used to have a site where all of my images were available for free) I was speaking with our mutual friend, Rick Silva, he pointed out the irony that as soon as I voiced my criticisms of the market and made works in this vein - they would sell. Rick, as always, was spot on.

So, I found myself sitting in the amphitheater, not only viscerally rejecting the performance I was watching, but also witnessing, on stage, behaviors of the performed artist that I have affected for the very same reasons that the lecturer did. I started to realize that artists aren't sitting at the table as much as we are the waitstaff.

Thanks for these exchanges, I find them to be so rewarding and I'm not ignoring your email, the paragraph above is my introduction to that.



4.3.18, 7:12 P.M. PST

Hi Jordan,

So sorry for the delay on this. My laptop died on Friday which was very nerve-wracking as I am in the midst of writing a book. It's all good now and no harm done except to my wallet and workflow. I hope you are well!

I very much empathize with and respect your predicament. I think we can continue to have a conversation without you having to address all of your understandable doubts about participating in the art market as an artist producer who makes saleable commodities. I personally believe in the power of subversive production, or art that could challenge reigning views and so provide a crucially important avenue for reflection, awareness and dialogue—even if said art-object is advertised and sold. So I have no quibbles with your role as artist but I also compute your frustration.

Perhaps if you just respond to my question by talking more about how your landscape practice is politicized—at all? How are the aesthetics of what you are doing informed by critique (either of politics or of the art world)? Perhaps you can say this succinctly and without having to condemn anyone or thing in particular. For instance, I think it would be difficult to do any landscape today that is not already political. What's your particular take on it (you have started to answer this in some of your notes, but I still feel it could be expanded)? How does this practice place itself within the broader realm of contemporary practice? Tell me more about post-contemporary, etc. I don't feel that either of us need to solve anything with our dialogue, but it would be cool if we can be frank about the limits we run up against—and I bet we can do that within our own comfort zone. I, for one, understand my role as a historian and sometimes theoretician of aesthetics politically—but also tell my students that I teach the history of "luxury commodities for the rich." I feel like I could also benefit more from hearing about your ideas of landscape as anarchist.

In any case, you understand your motives and interests better than I do—and I mainly want to support you as an interlocutor.

Does that make sense? We can always have a phone conversation too if that might help!

Warmly,

A.



4.16.18, 10:38 A.M. EST

Hi Abigail!

The development (reaction?) that I've had since our last exchange is particularly interesting - and contrary to both my earlier practice, and pedagogy. Interestingly (and maybe predictably) since my discussion of the schism between praxis and practice of many artists and the polemics that arise from the significant disparities within. My reaction has been to resist/disengage with the contextualization of the work and try to focus on the work itself and unite the praxis with the intangible politics that I have been kicking around.

Your insight and challenge (particularly with regards to the question of how I view the landscape as political) is again, spot on. It is starting to feel that the ideology/politic of the work is again a salve (as was the earlier drawing on the images to make them feel more "contemporary"). Not that the ideology or politics of my actions are in any way inauthentic, but after my most recent experience in the audience of the stereotypical artist talk I viscerally felt the divide between the politics I am engaged with, and the very typically grad-seminar influenced discussion of theory, politics, and polemics as another mode of making the work "contemporary."

So, to answer your question about how my landscape practice is politicized - I would have to say the politic isn't inherently related to the notion of landscape apart from the ethics of my approach. I think the work is more aligned with the rejection of previous representations of the landscape that somehow make it other, scape it, or make it vista. This was something that I came to (and with great conflict) during the installation of my solo show last week (I called it Picturesque Snot: Polemics of the Landscape) - I felt like for the first time in as long as I could remember I was thinking through the work rather than thinking about the work.

That is sort of where I am headed with the idea of Post-Contemporary, I am (in many ways - but struggling to do so completely) rejecting many of the notions of Post-Modernism, Structuralism, etc. that so heavily inform the production and consumption of contemporary art. That said, the discourse we have been having (while informed by these paradigms) has been



unbelievably rewarding and transformational in the production of the work itself - although when offline, I find more affinity describing particular landscapes as "fucking metal" and that being the best way I can articulate the well of excitement when I stumble upon a dense thicket or image that is almost unpleasant to look at.

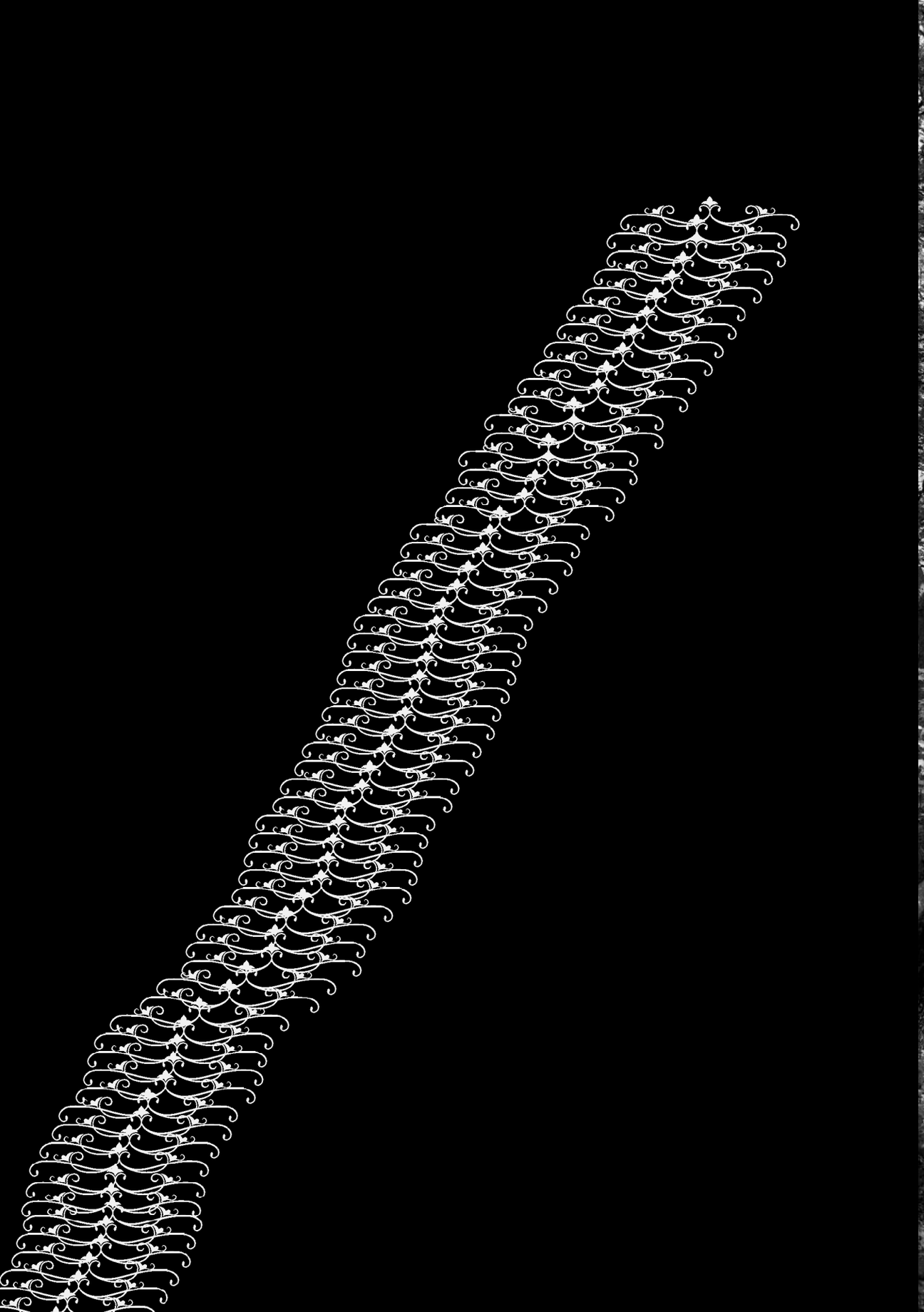
I hung a trio of images in Picturesque Snot that was so incredibly dense that I had to step back to look at them. I hesitated, thinking of the need for an exhibition to have flow, and balance one image with another as the viewer moves through the space. Ultimately, I left it there, hanging on the wall as dense and hard as I could make it (only an inch and a half between prints!). I left the opening early (even though it was my own show) partly for personal reasons and partly due to feelings of hypocrisy. After I left, however, someone came into the gallery and was discussing the work with the woman who runs the space and gave me one of the most rewarding responses to any work I have made in as long as I can remember. He informed Caroline (the co-director of IRL Gallery) that the work was "super metal / black metal, with feelings of isolation and solitude."

I think this small reinforcement of some problems I am having was much needed, and is giving me the courage to try to speak more through the work, and less "about it." I hope that you are ok with a little shift in our exchanges, but I want to send more images and maybe I'll be writing less text. I can't seem to help myself with the writing - but maybe I can shift the tone to be more casual and less academic. I think this is my version of being frank with the limits I am running up against because I often feel like I am (to quote The Family Guy) "hoisted by my own petard."

I'm also retreating from the notion of selling work for "market value" - it seems too burdened, and as you suggested - luxury commodities for the rich. Photography allows for ways around that, and I intend to exploit them.

Anyway, the show is being documented today and I'll send you images. I'm also considering printing our book with white ink on black paper. It seems really metal.

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jordan





4.22.18, 8:01 A.M. PST

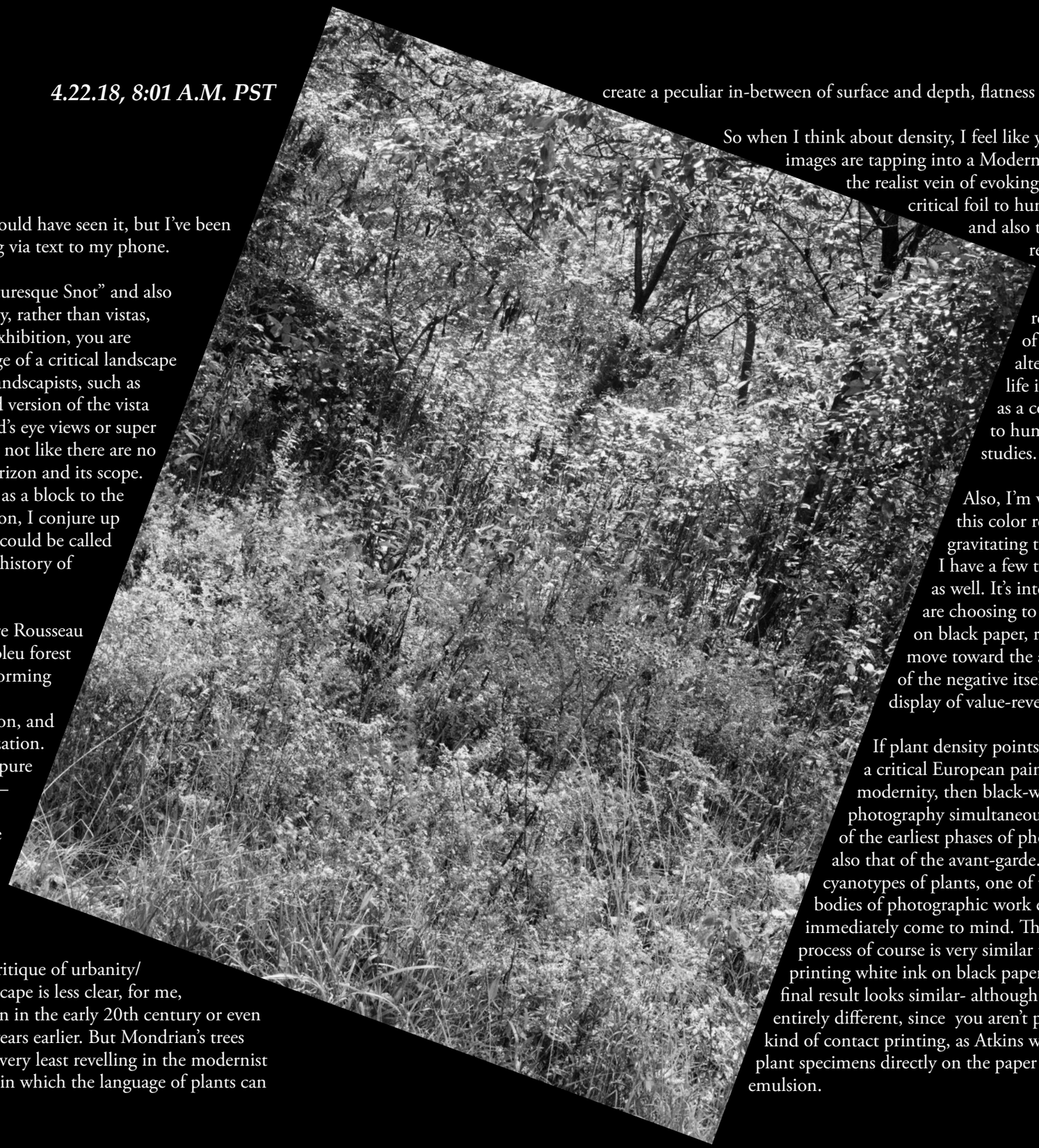
Hi Jordan,

Congratulations on the show! I wish I could have seen it, but I've been enjoying the images you've been sending via text to my phone.

It strikes me that by using the title "Picturesque Snot" and also by allowing more images of plant density, rather than vistas, views, and vignettes, to populate your exhibition, you are moving squarely in to the visual language of a critical landscape tradition. Some contemporary critical landscapists, such as Burtynsky, do in fact still use a modified version of the vista or panorama in the form of extreme bird's eye views or super wide-angle and composite shots—so it's not like there are no critical landscapes engaging with the horizon and its scope. But when I think of the density of flora as a block to the pleasurable recession of perspectival vision, I conjure up a different set of associations with what could be called a critical landscape tradition within the history of European painting.

Some of these painters, such as Théodore Rousseau and his Barbizon paintings of Fontainebleu forest in France (mid-19th century) were performing multi-pronged critique of urban society, academic painting and its depth obsession, and the ecological destruction of industrialization. Some of his paintings of forests are like pure plant-noise music—wild tree feedback—totally unforgiving densities that forbid visual and psychic penetration—- to the extent that they are more like abstract webs or microcosmic images of tiny cellular worlds—rather than a stand of old and twisted oaks.

The presence of such a trident-shaped critique of urbanity/academicism/industrializing using landscape is less clear, for me, with the tangled tree-scapes of Mondrian in the early 20th century or even Henri Rousseau's jungle thickets a few years earlier. But Mondrian's trees and Henri Rousseau's jungles are in the very least revelling in the modernist rejection of depth illusion, and the way in which the language of plants can create a peculiar in-between of surface and depth, flatness and scope.



So when I think about density, I feel like your landscape images are tapping into a Modernist tradition in the realist vein of evoking plant life as a critical foil to human production, and also to some extent recalling the ecological message that representations of plant life, as an alternate form of life itself, can bear as a counterpoint to humanistic figure studies.

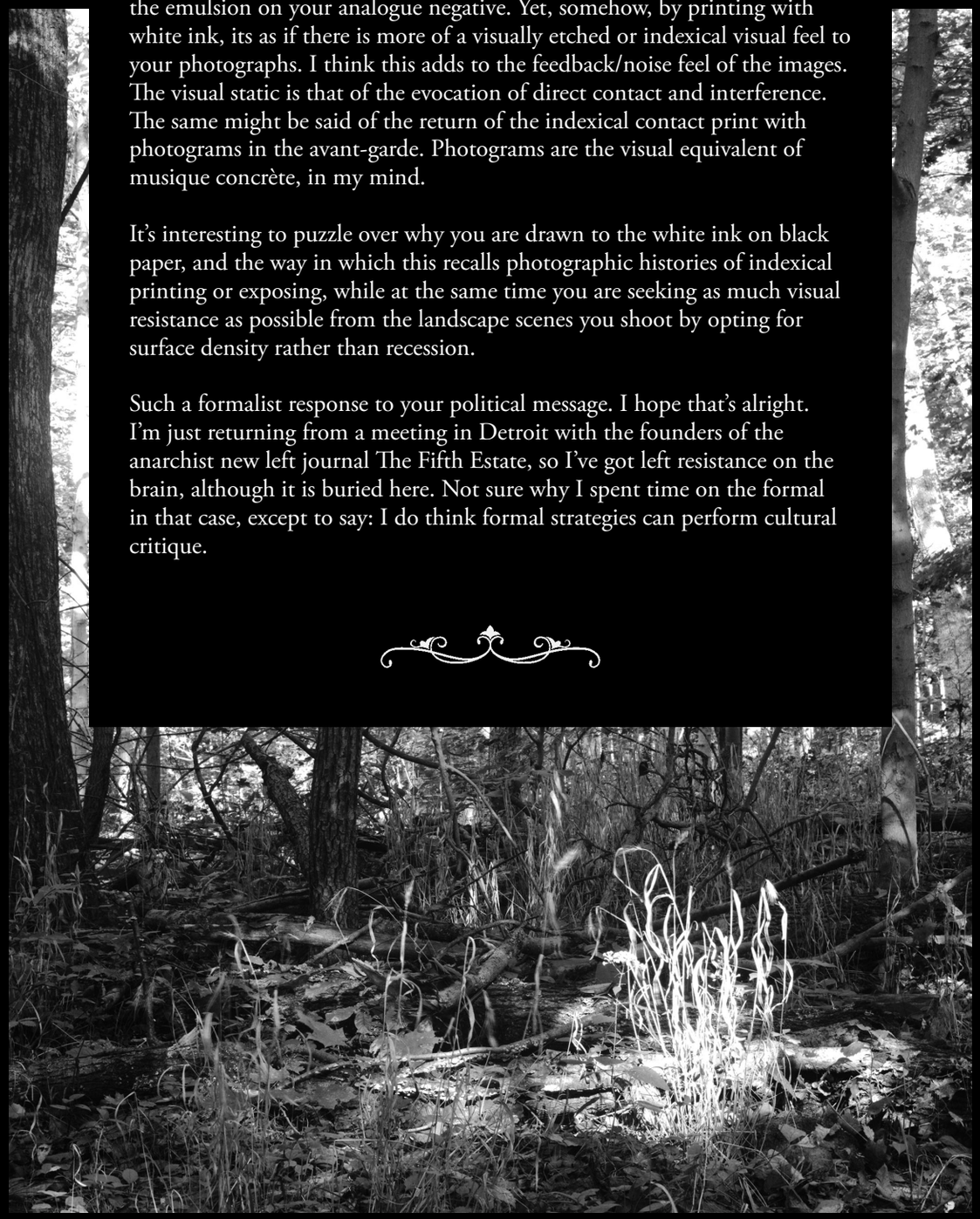
Also, I'm very keen on this color reversal you are gravitating towards now, and I have a few thoughts on that as well. It's interesting that you are choosing to print white ink on black paper, rather than just move toward the analogue use of the negative itself as a form of display of value-reversed imagery.

If plant density points pretty quickly to a critical European painting tradition in modernity, then black-white reversals in photography simultaneously remind me of the earliest phases of photography and also that of the avant-garde. Anna Atkins's cyanotypes of plants, one of the first cohesive bodies of photographic work ever created, immediately come to mind. The cyanotype process of course is very similar to your idea of printing white ink on black paper—at least the final result looks similar- although the process is entirely different, since you aren't performing a kind of contact printing, as Atkins was by laying her plant specimens directly on the paper coated in ferric emulsion.

But in your case, there is no indexical contact with the plant except through the emulsion on your analogue negative. Yet, somehow, by printing with white ink, its as if there is more of a visually etched or indexical visual feel to your photographs. I think this adds to the feedback/noise feel of the images. The visual static is that of the evocation of direct contact and interference. The same might be said of the return of the indexical contact print with photograms in the avant-garde. Photograms are the visual equivalent of musique concrète, in my mind.

It's interesting to puzzle over why you are drawn to the white ink on black paper, and the way in which this recalls photographic histories of indexical printing or exposing, while at the same time you are seeking as much visual resistance as possible from the landscape scenes you shoot by opting for surface density rather than recession.

Such a formalist response to your political message. I hope that's alright. I'm just returning from a meeting in Detroit with the founders of the anarchist new left journal The Fifth Estate, so I've got left resistance on the brain, although it is buried here. Not sure why I spent time on the formal in that case, except to say: I do think formal strategies can perform cultural critique.







4.26.18, 9:20 P.M. EST

Hi Abigail!

I think a formal response is perfectly appropriate, as part of the conflict I have been addressing and wrestling with is the formal notions of "traditional" landscapes. Ironically, I find that my use of the landscape (while appropriately contextualized and informed, as both the market and academy of contemporary art require it to be to justify such explorations) is almost incidental - but also resonant. What I mean by this is that I came to the landscapes out of a rejection of the post meta-photographic wave of the early aughts and a desire for something oppositional. I realized this while spending time with a friend this week and taking to heart his comment that my MO is to argue the premise. What he didn't say (and which I felt deeply) is that comes with it a rejection of positionality. I know this has come up between you and I on a few occasions where I've expressed my approach to this (i.e. post-contemporary) as a opposition without position.

I spent some time with the Théodore Rousseau works - totally gnarly, but even in the densest of forests he gives a breath. Groves that remind me of (sidenote here) The Highlander (TV show rather than movies) and forest groves in the Pacific Northwest. For some reason these (and parking garages, and interior courtyards in Roman villas/Berlin apartment buildings) have always had power to me. They are of both paradigms - inside and outside, open and covered. They have a magic for me.

This flows into your discussion of white ink on black paper, and reminds me again of my history of reversal / opposition. A few years black I did a project called SUPERBLACK (I'll attach a PDF) where I created an idealized black body (essentially an extraordinarily dark hole in a reflective high gloss aluminum cube) as a way of challenging/discussing the schism between enlightenment/romantic thinking. I find that they meet in the darkness and share a sense of wonder (the sublime for one, and curiosity for the other - where both serve as ideologically different appreciations of the same entity).

Your other formal questions are really interesting as well, and thinking of my compositional differences with Rousseau - I actually find his paintings to be much more airy and accessible than I hope to be. Not that I am striving for an an-aesthetic but I want my images to be cacophonous and challenging in the way that a remix of 4'33" is so dissonant and strange. I bought Cage Against the Machine a few years back which is (as you likely would not expect) an album of remixes of 4'33" - many of which are dense and thick as if Rousseau went as hard into the paint as he could with reckless abandon of contemporaneous norms.

I'm fully aware that the complexity of my critique of all of these things is wild, disparate, and lacking specificity but I think the important thing for me (at least at the moment) is that it exists. I'm more open than I ever have been to work this our publicly, collaboratively, and hopefully with a sense of humility that isn't compatible with an art practice as my institution(s) would define it. The irony is that while I question the efficacy of the art object, I am still using the art object to do so.

I just cut and pasted the last sentence so I could have a more dramatic and poetic end but fuck that, I'm going to win this one. Sorry to attach an entire book to this email, but at least it has a rad picture of ~~carbon nanotubes~~ a frog.

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