

THE GREAT
LEAP SIDWAYS





FIRES: A CONVERSATION WITH RON JUDE

Anxiety about the instability of meaning in the photographic image has been a well travelled stage of the overall maturation of critical discourse about photography, and seems at least within the circles of practitioners and academics to represent a point of perpetually imminent crisis. This state of anxiety persists despite the immeasurable volume of images created by non-academic/non-professional users of photography on an hourly basis – an activity that would seem to be entirely at odds with the prognosis set forth in much contemporary critical discourse. Moreover despite the structural challenges of a faltering economy, advertisements that depend on literal readings of photographic images proliferate at ever greater rates, and seemingly on every surface capable of sustaining a visual image. All of which is to say that if there is a crisis of meaning in the fundamental nature of the photographic image, only an esoteric coterie of avid enthusiasts have yet to reconcile themselves to an apparent contradiction that the wider community of users of photographic images have already moved beyond.

Ron Jude's work plays deliberately and freely with the elastic nature of the photographic image, and with the complexities of meaning that arise when those images are grouped and sequenced in oblique and yet insistent ways. In order for this type of photographic work to have any palpable effect, it must (perversely) take advantage of the fact that we as viewers unavoidably decipher specific meanings in the images that he creates, however immune such meanings are to objective proof. Working in the formal tradition of straight photography, Jude's foreshortened landscapes and elliptical abstracts are frequently blunt, and often lacking in apparent ostentation. For him, the straight photograph is already "powerfully dream-like," and yet it is in the elusive cadence of the sequencing of his images that their individual meanings come unmoored, and our conventional expectations are subverted. Jude makes the interpretive activity of reading 'straight' photographs a visible part of the rubric of his work, and he does this by exposing the inscrutable nature of the most matter-of-fact forms of images.

"We build linear narratives about our lives, our relationships — our entire sense of ourselves — out of incomplete fragments. Photographs not only give us a false sense of the past, but they get in the way of deeper reflection. They act as verifiable, sentimentalized proof of something that doesn't exist."

— Ron Jude, quoted in *Backstory* by **Karen Irvine**.

As part of the group show *Backstory* at the **Museum of Contemporary Photography** in Chicago, Jude assembled work from three book projects set in his home state of Idaho, and produced a newsprint catalogue from the show that combined these works together under the title *Fires*. Looking at this latest publication, it quickly becomes apparent that Jude's experiments with the potential of an image to reduce rather than

increase information reflect something meaningful about our culture, and its habits of working with photographic images. In the absence of some guiding instruction, his images suggest to me that we see ourselves, our absence, or our counterparts in terms wholly circumscribed by the two-dimensional logic of images, and we are able to construct a palpable sense of identity and experience solely on that fragmentary basis. For as much as photography is a remarkably young invention on any significant historical scale, our comfort with the notion that it can account for meaning is as profound as is our facility for projecting ourselves into its illusory depths. In the age of the selfie, as in the story of Narcissus, when looking through the surface of the image it is our selves that we most clearly see.

What follows is a conversation with Jude about the interrelationships between the three bodies of work that make up *Fires*, touching on the development of the language he has used to conduct this lengthy program of experimentation with the straight photographic image, and also the early shape of his new project, *Lago*.

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The Great Leap Sideways (TGLS): *Lick Creek Line* seems the first book of photographs of yours that opens out from your interior world to engage more extensively with the world/landscape of other people as they traverse, change it and are changed by it. What motivated this shift in address or register? What motivated your interest in mapping (in however arbitrary and attenuated a way) the terrain of two intersecting uses of a specific landscape in such a specific place?



Ron Jude (RJ): Although the structure of this book has more of a traditional



narrative arc, my intended function for the fur trapper in *Lick Creek Line* isn't altogether unlike that of the young man in *emmett*. They both allow us to access to the landscape with a certain level of familiarity and intimacy. We enter the landscape *through* them. In that sense, although *Lick Creek Line* may relate structurally to a particular type of outward-looking photo essay, I still think it finds its footing in an interior world.

The act of checking a trap line is a device that's meant to engage the reader in the landscape in the first person. The trapper walks through the landscape in a surreptitious, quiet way, checking his line, over and over again, sometimes catching his prey, sometimes coming up empty, and sometimes catching the wrong animal. Through this activity, we gain an almost tactile, first-hand sense of this space, one where dark romanticism is kept in check by the emotional coldness of the task.

TGLS: In his written accompaniment to the book, **Nicholas Muellner** writes about "scraps of fact and bits of story from the increasingly interconnected lore of the town". Your landscape photographs so often telescope in on minute but eloquent detail views that intimate a sense of the broader geography without delivering a totalising view of it (I'm thinking here an O'Sullivan landscape for example). By their attenuated form these telescoped views entice us to extrapolate a larger field, and simultaneously drive us to contend with the muteness of the fragments your lens describes, suggesting that the whole thing lies elsewhere. This way of photographing landscape recurs in *Lick Creek Line*, but it is refined and changed by other broader views, and I'm wondering why you felt that this different pictorial dynamic was necessary for this work, and how it functions?

RJ: In the most basic sense, occasionally stepping out of the details to have a look at the broader view has to do with the rhythm and pacing of a book. I used the same strategy in *Alpine Star* and *emmett* – returning to the landscape as a means to reboot the narrative flow of things and to refresh the tempo of the sequence.

I'm reluctant to draw too much of a comparison to cinematic structure because I really do feel that the experience of watching a film is an altogether different beast than looking at a sequence of still images, but in this instance I suppose it's fair to liken the broader views to second unit scenery shots in film productions. They're there to help with pacing, and, on the surface, to help establish a broader context for the narrative. If you compare these landscapes to the landscapes in my earlier books, you'll notice how similar they are, and how unhelpful they ultimately are in defining a larger view. It's still very difficult to orient yourself in the landscape. Just because you can see the sky, doesn't mean you know where you are.

TGLS: I'm curious as to whether you're familiar with *Roads and Paths*, by **Bernhard Fuchs**? Although his work in that book and elsewhere is clearly typological in its structure, in that book we are drawn toward and around a landscape no single picture seeks to describe, so that to some extent the geography builds cumulatively from our apprehension of, or our construction of a whole made out of eloquent fragments. You've said that "*[m]eaninglessness – or a lack of orientation, if I understand you correctly – can liberate you from the determinism (and false comfort) that comes with the notion of cosmic order*", so I wonder whether you think that a peripatetic and partial way of broaching landscape can be freeing for the viewer? Is it your intention to leave them more free room to engage their imagination?

RJ: I am quite familiar with *Roads and Paths*, and I would argue that an even clearer relationship exists between Bernhard's newer work, *Farms*, and what I've been up to. This idea of accumulation is essential to how I want this work to function, so yes, even though there are clear differences in our programs, I think that fundamentally the reader might derive a similar experience with that aspect our work. And yes, it is my intention to open the door and let people wander around in this world on their own terms. My job is to simply set the tone and parameters, while leaving plenty of latitude for unique interactions with the work. This can be difficult for some readers, and seen as vague or noncommittal, but this freedom (or acknowledgement of the unknowable) is at the heart of what I'm trying to do, and not a position arrived at by default.



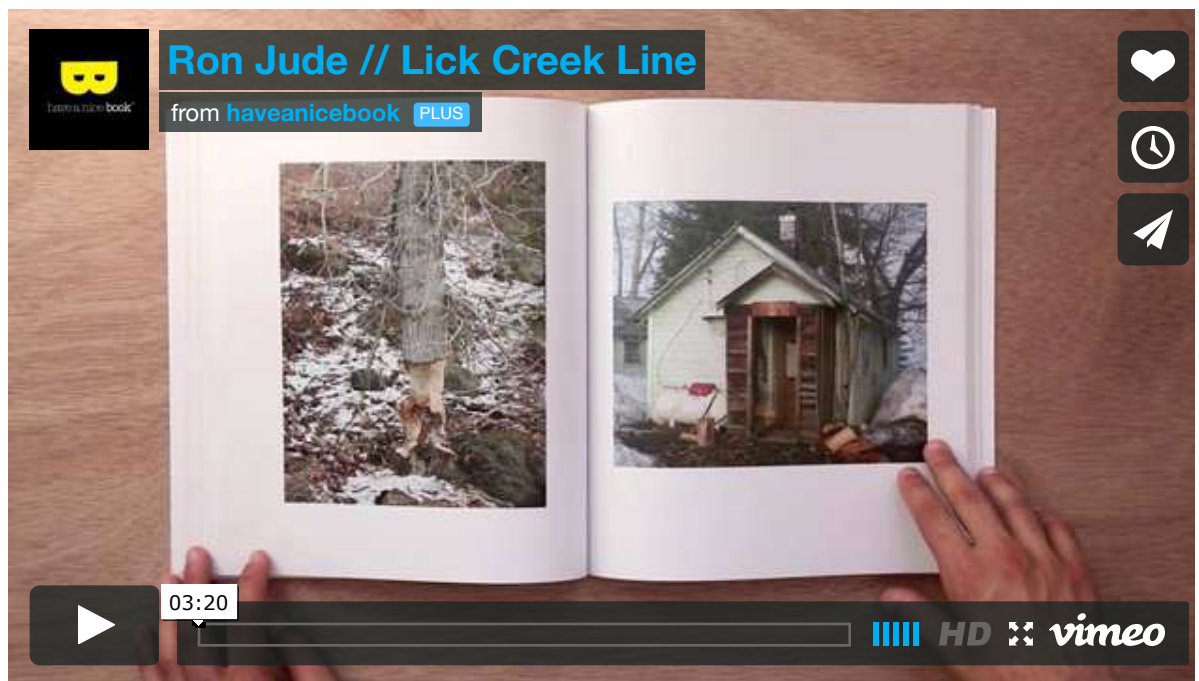
TGLS: The text on the interior front cover of the book, added to Muellner's accompanying written piece *No Such Place* seem to be intended to play with the imprecision of fact and fiction in their relation to the pictures, and to the actual place of their making. The recurring figure of the map obviously enriches this ambiguity – particularly as all of this is compounded by the opening stanzas of images, which seem to operate along the precepts of conventional cinematic sequence to deliver to us person, place, and action. The newsprint nature of the insert, and the matter-of-fact nature of the text on the interior front cover point to

a certain kind of factual tone, one that is subverted by the growing elusiveness of the photographic sequence. Why were you so interested in blurring these lines, in intimating a veracity that the form of the overall book works consistently to subvert? And how did you understand text functioning in the context of this effort?

RJ: This has been an ongoing concern of mine for quite a long time. The idea that photographs, no matter how matter-of-fact they look, can tell you much of anything beyond the narrative that one brings to them, or the shifting meaning they derive through context, has always seemed naïve to me. The more factually toned the image, the more likely one will take it at face value and be misled by it. (This is not a private epiphany or a newsflash, yet it's surprising how tightly many people still cling to the notion of photography-as-fact.) I have an ongoing interest not just in undermining this false sense of veracity, but also (mainly) in redirecting those expectations. To be honest, it's been a losing battle until just recently. Books have allowed me to more aggressively tap into this program and make it much more readable.

Lick Creek Line was the first time I used text to help reinforce how I wanted the photographic experience to work. It used to be that if you were publishing a book with a major publisher, it was almost a given that one important element of the book would be the essay, in the form of an introduction, an afterword, or both. Although I'm certainly not opposed to the idea of smart writing about photography (where would we be without it?), I generally think it's out of place in photobooks. That is, if a photobook is meant to function as a stand-alone work, with its own meanings and difficulties, it seems that an essay at the beginning or end of the sequence of photographs is at best a short-cut road map for the reader (undermining the process of engaging the work on its own terms) and at worst a device that hinders multiple entry points and layered

meaning. However, I didn't want to automatically exclude text as an option for *Lick Creek Line* without first considering how it might enhance the book without falling into these traps. My impulse, if an essay came into play, was to include it as an insert, rather than physically tethering it to the book, and to have it run parallel to the photographs, without ever actually intersecting with them. I wanted the piece to deliver something that was as stubborn as the photographs, but also entirely illuminating in terms of how the book functions. This was a tall order, but I think Nick delivered perfectly with *No Such Place*.



My intention with the newsprint insert, along with the accompanying newspaper images of distressed landscapes, were twofold: I wanted a clear reference to be made back to the *Alpine Star* book, which was composed entirely of images from the same source as the insert (*The Star News*), and to further underscore my desire to have a poetic encounter with utilitarian, descriptive photography.

The text on the inside cover of the book mimics an erratum sheet from a trail guide I have for the Finger Lakes region in upstate New York. It fell

out of the trail guide in my house years ago, and I picked it up and read it without knowing where it came from. On its own, the details are so specific that they assume a known starting point. I finally figured out where the correction came from, and I put it back into the guide, but that initial experience stuck with me. I would pull it out and look at it occasionally and think about how descriptively rich the directions were, yet utterly amorphous seeming when you dive right into the middle of the landscape, without orienting yourself to an original starting point. The front cover text is meant to foreshadow the experience with the pictures — highly descriptive, but useless as something to be read literally, in the hopes of locating a destination. My hope is that this element is one more nudge to help the reader find another way to enter the work (or confuse matters further!).

TGLS: To continue with the word/image relation in photobooks, I think there's an interesting lineage (to which Muellner's piece certainly belongs/contributes) of a more elliptical and parallel relationship between essay or story and photographic sequence, as in say Jack Kerouac's text for Robert Franks *The Americans*, or more recently Toni Morrison's text for Robert Bergman's *A Kind of Rapture*, or very recently Gerry Badger's wonderful short fiction text for Michael Abrams's *Welcome to Springfield*. All of these texts to my mind open up the imaginary space or narrative tone of the work without exhausting or fixing it, and so I wonder for you what are some successful instances of word/image combinations in recent or contemporary photobooks? More broadly, how do you see the function of criticism in relation to contemporary photography and contemporary photobooks?

RJ: Just to be clear: my distaste for academic essays in photobooks is not an affront to an intellectual approach to photography. This is not my point at all. I had a blogger once attend a lecture of mine and then take

me to task (on his blog) for encouraging the students in the audience to be intellectually lazy and apathetic about writing about their own work. This is absolutely not what I'm advocating. I think reading criticism and theory and writing about one's own work is one of the most important things an artist (particularly a young artist) can do in terms of situating his or her work in the larger conversation, and bringing depth to their program. However, I think there is a distinct difference between the role of criticism for the overall field of photography (and art), and the role of text in a photobook, which, in my mind, is an artwork in and of itself. Photobooks in their first printing aren't relics or artifacts, they are alive and imperfect, and should be dealt with on their own terms. That being said, essays or critical pieces written about photobooks that are to be read outside of the experience of the book are utterly essential and important.

In terms of the role of criticism in relation to contemporary photography and photobooks, I don't think we can get enough, especially that which is *actually* criticism (and not blog hyperbole masquerading as criticism). Criticism and theory played an enormous role in the maturing of photography (and photographers) a quarter century ago, and it was essential to my own education. A lot of that criticism was overreaching and sometimes written just to make an academic point, but it was a wake-up call to all of us who wanted to carry on with photography in a way that had continued relevance. Serious criticism was and continues to be an incredibly important part of how we look at and think about new work that's being produced.

There are so many more voices and ideas out there now than when I was first coming up in the late-80s and early-90s. This is due, of course, to the internet as a widely utilized platform. The scholarly and editorial vetting that's naturally absent from this new forum has eroded the

overall rigor of the dialogue (not to mention unleashing an avalanche of uncorrected typos and basic grammatical errors), but on the positive side I think we now have a richer conversation with a more populist tone to it, and far less academic rhetoric. As long as the populist bent doesn't evolve into total drivel, I think this is a good thing. So many of the people writing about photography today seem to care deeply about the medium and aren't just pushing an academic agenda.

As far as text working in parallel to the content of a photobook, the classic example (for me) is the Denise Sines essay in **the 1985 printing of John Gossage's *The Pond***. I think you put it very well when you described these texts as "opening up the imaginary space of the work," which is exactly how this piece of writing functioned. The importance of seeing this book in the university library when I was twenty years old can't be overstated. Not only did I find the visual language of the book challenging, but the essay, when I went to it for some answers, denied me the easy way out. (It was a short story, not an essay.) So I bought my own copy and wrestled with it for years.



TGLS: A clear common thread between *Lick Creek Line* and *emmett* and *Alpine Star* is the inconstancy and unreliability of memory. All three of these books 'take place' in the arena of your childhood, and in *Lick Creek Line* there are numerous photographs

of homes made from relative proximity, so that they stand solitary, like figures in fairy tales. I wonder how you are contending in these pictures with a desire to retrieve that sense of the imaginary landscape of your childhood – the one you might have roamed around and played in in your mind long after you had come back home from being outside? How does

the camera open up memory for you in relation to landscape and childhood, and where have you got to now that you've addressed it in such differing ways through three books?

RJ: There are a couple of different questions here. I'll start with your description of the architecture as having a fairytale-like quality: I would say that this is a characteristic that I wanted to be implicit in all of the pictures, not just the images of houses. The goal was to make photographs that had a fantastic undercurrent to them (think, Brothers Grimm), without ever feeling staged or directed. This is probably not apparent in many of the images, and that's okay — I would rather err on the side of being blunt than to make pictures that seem deliberately fanciful and concocted. I think overstating these qualities would diminish the real power of the work. (I've never understood the impulse, when alluding to dreams or memories in photographs, to make pictures that are "dream-like." Straight-up, uninflected photography is already powerfully dream-like. Rendering an image that's intentionally and overtly blurred, manipulated, or distressed in some way misses the point, I think. That sort of mannerism completely deflates the illusion of the factual, which in turn diminishes the capacity of the image to connect everyday reality to an experience with art.)

With these three books I wanted to see if I could create a similar subconscious space from three different accounts and three different types of photographs. When you enter this world through the perspective of snapshots taken by a nineteen year old in the early 80s, or newspaper images taken and printed with only the most prosaic purpose in mind, or through refined, documentary-style photographs with artistic intent, can you arrive at the same place? Beyond the similarity in tone, if you look closely, there are connecting elements in all three pieces. The epilogue in *emmett* picks up as the prologue in *Lick Creek Line*

and, as I already mentioned, the images in the insert (and on the cover) of *Lick Creek Line*, come from the same weekly newspaper as *Alpine Star*. These are coded links that aren't necessarily meant to illuminate some further meaning in the work, but I like having them in there because they quietly allude to the hidden influence and connective tissue of geography and circumstantial crossover.

Am I trying to retrieve a sense of the imaginary landscape of my childhood? No, that's not my intention, at least not explicitly. I like the idea of alluding to the imagination and how it serves to help us reconstruct the past, but I'm not specifically interested in indulging the fantasies of *my* past for an audience. I've used a fur trapper, a young motorhead and an assortment of random characters from the community as surrogates for my own experience and as means to do this work about my childhood home without inserting myself in a direct way. As much as the projects are tied to me by default (and convenience), they were never really about *me*, at least not as far as the reader needs to be concerned.

TGLS: Could you talk a little about the way that portraits and portraiture function for you in your work to date, and maybe a little about their significance in relation to your current ongoing work *Lago*? I say portraits and portraiture to capture the distinction between those of your images (appropriated or photographed) in which you *show* a portrait image within the photograph, as against those that are themselves in some way portraits...

RJ: I've never really considered myself much of a portrait photographer for a couple of reasons – one practical, one philosophical. The practical reason is that I find it difficult to simultaneously work with people and be in the right frame of mind for shooting. I know this is something that can

be overcome, but I've never felt all that compelled to try. The reason for this is that I don't like what happens to the psychological space of my work when a "portrait" is introduced. (It's not like I've never tried it.) I find it jarring and self-consciously about the dynamic between the photographer (me) and the person being photographed. I want to maintain the illusion that I'm not there.

Of course, there are many examples in my work where a person is the subject of the image, particularly in *Lick Creek Line*, but I typically don't engage in formal "portraiture." The exceptions to that are some of the pictures that I have of my friend Ken, the young man in *emmett*. The distinction I would make is that many of those images weren't taken with artistic intent. They were vernacular snapshots taken by a 19-year-old advanced amateur photographer. So, those pictures are intentionally meant to conjure up the dynamic between the photographer (me), and the subject.

I've been introducing people into the mix in *Lago* much in the same way the trapper is used in *Lick Creek Line*. I want them (kids, in this case) to allow us access to the desert landscape. We're not looking at them as subjects—we become them, and through them we enter the landscape.





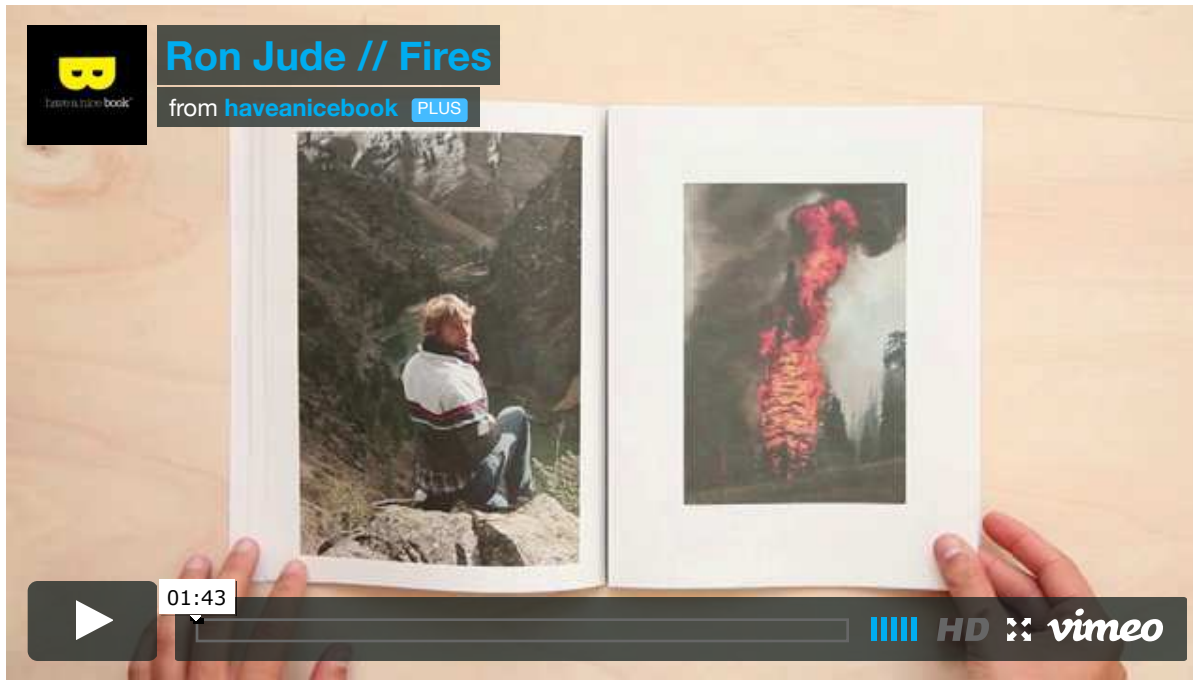
TGLS: Turning for a moment away from photobooks, could you talk a little about how you approached

re-imagining (if this is the right word) and transposing the narrative environments of your books to the walls of the **Museum of Contemporary Photography** in Chicago for your recent show there? Is the notion of re-imagining or transposing reasonable, or was the effort of a different nature or order altogether? My guess would be that you had to invent a new story for the wall in combining all of that work... I'm especially curious given that a physical photobook clearly offers you such a broad variety of visceral, material, ergonomic means of establishing a particular context for images, where the walls of a museum are so heavily freighted with a specific cultural habit of viewing and engaging with art in a manner so distinct from the photographic book...

RJ: The three projects that are being exhibited at MoCP were all originally conceived of as books, so that form is essential to how they function. However, although exhibitions and books are different beasts, I think one can still design an exhibition to operate in the same spirit of a piece that originated as a book. The only real mistake one can make is attempting to recreate the book on the wall. It typically doesn't work that way. (Paul Graham's exhibition of *The Present* worked remarkably well, and very similarly to the book version, so there are some exceptions.) But yes, I think a "re-imagining" is a good way to put it. If it were different altogether, then it would seem pointless to attempt the translation. Fortunately, I worked with a terrific curator (**Karen Irvine**)

who made the whole process very enjoyable and satisfying. I was very happy with the translation from book to wall, and to be given the opportunity to produce a printed piece (*Fires*) that makes the argument that these three projects can co-exist and mingle.

You're right though, the expectations placed on exhibitions tend to be different, due mainly to what you describe as "cultural habits," but also to the bloated value that's assigned to work that appears in the museum or commercial gallery context. This, in turn, can diminish the potential for surprise and experimentation in many exhibitions. Books tend to level the playing field in a way that encourages openness to experimentation and an acceptance (and encouragement) of work that happily risks failure. Even the more established, "mainstream" publishers now recognize this as a necessary indulgence and an essential part of current photobook practice. However, a lot of photography exhibitions in "high-end" venues are simply more conservative (and timid) than their photobook counterparts. They risk less because there seems to be more at stake somehow. It's an interesting phenomenon that stems from the culture of commerce and academia that are embedded in these institutions. Commerce, although present in the book world, doesn't drive the production of books the way it drives many exhibitions, and although curatorial scholarship tags along with books in the form of essays and after-the-fact assessment, it has little to do with the inception of books in the way it does with exhibitions.



TGLS: Looking at the early stages of your new *Lago* work, and reading what you've written about it, I was struck by your concluding lines, which reminded me of the concluding lines from a piece of writing by Georges Perec that I used at the end of my essay on *Lick Creek Line*. First, you write that:

"[a]lthough deeply imbedded in the place itself, what I'm doing has equally to do with my inability to accurately construct (or reconstruct) linear narratives about this harsh environment and the state-of-mind it induces in the people who live there. To put it simply, I'm trying locate the psychological space of this landscape through a poetically driven collection of bluntly descriptive photographs."

I take this to mean that making these photographs is an act of memory (recalled or reconstituted), one that depends equally upon an exterior (physical) and an interior (psychological) landscape for its fullest expression. In this sense, the image would effectively be the hinge or interstice where these two spaces meet. In Perec's piece he closes by saying:

“And with these, the sense of the world’s concreteness, irreducible, immediate, tangible, of something clear and closer to us: of the world, no longer as a journey having constantly to be remade, not as a race without end, a challenge having constantly to be met, not as the one pretext for a despairing acquisitiveness, nor as the illusion of a conquest but as the rediscovery of a meaning, the perceiving that the earth is a form of writing, a geography of which we had forgotten that we ourselves are the authors.”

It seems in your work that the act of photographing the landscape is deeply related to the rediscovery of meaning, so could you maybe talk in closing about the kind of ‘writing’ that is entailed by photographing in this place?

RJ: All of my work plays with our innate desire to find meaning in things. Sometimes the futility of that task becomes the actual subject of the work, as in *Executive Model* and *Other Nature*. But more recently, with the Idaho projects and now *Lago*, the potential for a ‘rediscovery of a meaning’, as slippery as that prospect may be, has entered the work. So yes, if one considers our traces in the landscape to be a coded language of some sort, then the act of photographing those traces and piecing them together becomes a form of cryptography. It’s like a poetic archeology that, rather than attempting to arrive at something conclusive, looks for patterns and rhythms that create congruity out of the stuttering and incomplete utterances that the visible world offers. These harmonies, when we’re lucky enough to find them, are probably the closest we can get to actual ‘meaning’.

WITH MANY THANKS TO RON JUDE.

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