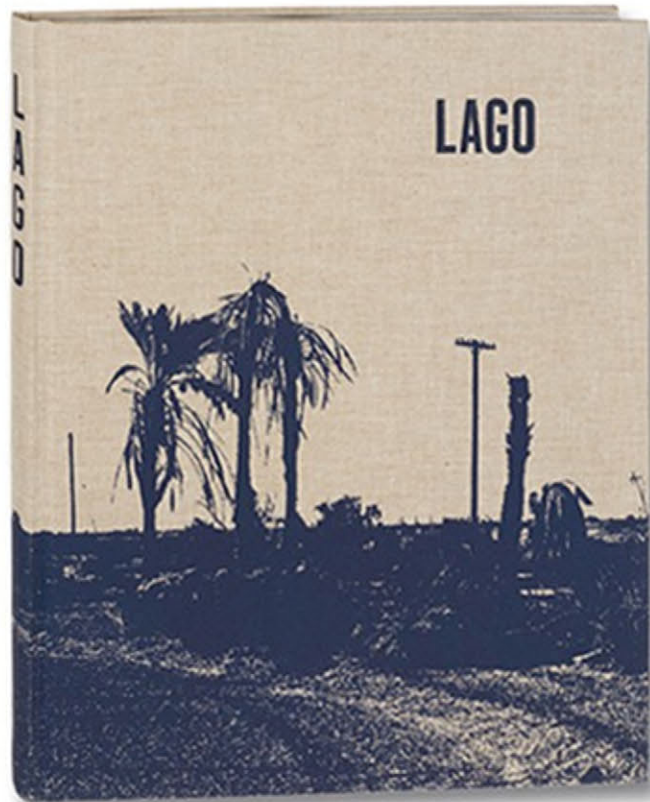


PAPER JOURNAL

Ron Jude – Lago



Book spreads courtesy of the publisher

LAGO by Ron Jude (MACK, 2015), [BUY](#)

The heat of the desert has a psychological register—either burning away or searing a mark. Although far from empty, the desert has long been a stage against which we stand in relief—failed settlements, nuclear tests, dumping grounds, and religious yearnings. We look for answers or build our own under the expansive sky and endless terrain. The landscape photography of Ron Jude has always

steered a middle path between the evidentiary and metaphoric towards something that is both ontological and autobiographical.

Lago, Jude's latest book, joins both *Lick Creek Line* and *Other Nature* in exploring this fertile terrain. Comprised of photographs taken in Southern California near the Salton Sea, *Lago* is as much a journey into Jude's past as it is an invitation for the viewer to explore alongside him, probing the dirt, standing in the heat, and feeling ones presence in the sun.

If much of Jude's recent work can be considered autobiographical in the loosest sense, *Lago* is perhaps the furthest removed. As a young boy Jude lived briefly in Southern California, but then moved to rural Idaho. Returning years later, Jude is more interested in memory than fact. It's the heat that matters. After all, *Lago* is not a real place; it's a psychological tableau. Jude's peripatetic images lead us through a desiccated landscape filled with broken fences, parched arroyos, concrete slabs, corrugated metal sheets, and wilting palms. Although there is a human presence, both in the remaining dwellings, cars, and occasional young male hovering on the outskirts, everyone, and everything, is indoors or gone. Animals do appear, like the occasional stray dog or meandering tarantula, but in most cases it's too hot. The young man can neither be read as a stand in for Jude nor the viewer. Instead, his presence breaks the solitary gaze of the photographer, the unspoken relation between him and the viewer, and reminds us we're not alone.

Heat plays a central role, as does the sun. Revealed in both the abundant camera flares as well as the bleached items discarded in the dirt, the sun is inescapable and continually forces us to look with squinted eyes at what lies around us. The heat is a mirror, blinding and forcing us to look back at ourselves. Although Jude's work explores what is commonly referred to as *terrain vague*, seeing the work in this manner only reveals part of the story. Instead, perhaps Jude's work can be more aptly seen as what Gus Blaisdell once called the "underbelly of the sublime"—a place where the "wasted challenges the composed." Whereas the sublime traditionally provokes awe by setting our vulnerable human state against the grandeur of the natural world, Jude's underbelly probes below that surface, beneath the expansive sky and away from the limitless horizon, the stars and cool blue waters. Here on the ground, under the blazing sun, the trash and detritus is left to wallow, scorched by the sun and crushed beneath our careless feet. *Pick up the pieces and move on.*

Pitting the transparent and silent facts of his photographs against the enigmatic surface of the world, Jude's work asks us philosophical or psychological questions. The facts pile up, but often lead us astray. We're asked to sift in the sand and dirt, gleaning what we can from the abandoned shoe, the deflated ball, or wind-blown pornography stuck to the fence. We're asked to measure what remains against what we know, remember, and believe, and to participate in the creation and retrieval of the landscape. Adept at the tangential view, Jude elegantly composes his images, but they often feel like outtakes, or secondary glances towards an empty stage. This aversion is also a challenge, compelling us to follow and continue in our search. This pathway is assisted by the carefully sequencing of images and the subtle repetitions that appears throughout the book: fences, walls and concrete slabs; ramps and doors; circles, as seen in holes, abandoned records, tires, cans and jars, as well as skid marks and crudely drawn targets; and shoes, left behind. These repeated subjects may not tell us much, but they lead us along a pathway and form leitmotifs within the work, keeping us on target.

Towards the end of Jude's book there is a break, a blank sequence and then a vision of water, a flood, muddy and dark rushing towards us. In *Lick Creek Line*, Jude used a similar visual device of water at the beginning of the book. Rapids formed a curtain through which we passed and then entered the woods of his trapper. Unlike the white waters of *Lick Creek Line*, the flash flood in *Lago* briefly takes us out of the desert and offers an escape from the heat. Unfortunately, our respite is brief. The heat quickly returns. Although the water washed away much of the debris, we're forced to start over. The dust has moved, objects have disappeared, but new ones have taken their place, and our sifting begins anew.

Interestingly, there have been a spate of recent books exploring the incongruously fertile region surrounding the Salton Sea, like Nicholas Albrecht's *One No One One Hundred Thousand* and Heikki Kaski's *Tranquility*. Although much older, Richard Misrach also devoted a whole section to the region in his *Desert Cantos* series. Jude is no doubt aware he is treading on well-worn ground, but has found his own course and avoids the region's clichés. The desert may be familiar, but it's far from exhausted. Less mannerist than recent examples, Jude's work is as he's stated, "bluntly descriptive." It's this very approach that produces such an unsettling effect on the viewer. Although not readily accessible, two recordings accompany the book and can be downloaded from the publisher's website. Recorded and composed by Joshua Bonnetta, the pieces combine field recordings, dialog, and ambient sound affects enhancing the book's tense mood. Most readers will not bother to look at the book and listen to the recordings, but it's worth doing at least once.

Although Jude is not interested in the specifics of the landscape or what's happened since he left, something has happened. Perhaps when Jude was a boy the town he lived in was an aspiring California suburb full of promise, but those dreams have faded. *Lago* asks us to deal with an aftermath that is as much physical as it is mnemonic and ontological. What remains is as important as what we struggle and fail to glean. We may come up short, or have to start all over again. But isn't that always the point.

www.ronjude.com