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Portraits of Vulnerable Ghosts: Contemporary Landscape Photography in Context

By Christopher Matthew Orchard

In this paper creative immortality and experiential transcendence as forms of symbolic immortality are placed within a historical and contemporary landscape context. The paper sets forward the argument that despite the best intentions for schematics of remembrance, these forms remain elusive and inherently mutable. Investigations into the sense of loss of self-inherent in the landscape are defined as a sort of experiential transcendence and approaches the sublime from a position of perceived narrative and yearning for connection with the greater movements of the earth and sky. An argument is made for the return to a level of reverence and understanding of our place within the role of the landscape system and to increase our understanding and awareness of its melancholic beauty.

Towards a (contextual) Definition of Landscape

All photographs contain within their frameworks a complex dual nature, being simultaneously representative of the opposing forces of creation and destruction. In this developmental state the creative spirit of the photographer becomes a microcosm for the forces of universal change and are subject to the same mutability and flux. Just as time ebbs and flows in indeterminate paths, to an equally indeterminate end, so bends the will of the artisan, and with it, that of the creative work. Here the symbolic immortality of the creative and the artisan, plays out in the most self-evident of ways.

In all photography several paths cross, often for a mere fraction of a second and then pass each other in time's endless procession. It is precisely this transience of self and site that the landscape photographer must inevitably engage. As art critic and historian Lewis Baltz writes:

The landscape... seems more a set of conditions, a location where things and events might transpire rather than a given thing or event in itself; an arena or circumstance within which an open set of possibilities might be induced to play themselves out.¹

Baltz is referring to the vast potential of the natural world, the complex interplay of elements that causally generate limitless results. The photographer is responsible for noticing a fleeting instant; this moment is a transition where elements of strength are rendered powerless and the weak gain might by proximity. It is documentation of moments when all things illuminate their vulnerability equally, and reflect critically through the camera's lens.

Sadakichi Hartman wrote in 1910 on the possibility of new laws of composition that: 'The painter composes by an effort of imagination. The photographer interprets by spontaneity of judgement. He practices composition by the eye'². This quotation sits within a historical context of a new 'straight photography' as linked to the traditions of 'pictorialism'. It is precisely this nexus of photographic style that generated a desire for me to create and

produce a series of; ‘photographs that look like photographs’³. It is also necessary to understand the viewpoint of Sadakichi Hartman in determining the context and definition of what constitutes a straight photograph, a definition that informs the working methodology of this body of work.

Rely on your camera, on your eye, on your good taste and knowledge of composition, consider every fluctuation of color, light and shade, study lines and values and space division, patiently wait until the scene or object of your pictured vision reveals itself in its supremest moment of beauty, in short, compose the picture you intend to take so well that the negative will be absolutely perfect and in need of no or but slight manipulation.⁴

I utilise this quotation within a specific context and not to demean or to devalue one technique in preference for another. The common acceptance of photography amongst the arts has progressed exponentially since Hartmann’s writing and indeed Alfred Stieglitz wrote in November of 1899 for Scribner’s Magazine of pictorialist technique:

As it has never been possible to establish a scientifically correct scale of values between the high lights and deep shadows, the photographer, like the painter, has to depend on his observation of and feeling for nature in the production of a picture.⁵

The digital camera, stripped of its unnecessary modern functions operates in much the same way as the camera apparatus has since its inception. Inspired by an authentic attention to detail in individual framing and a desire to experience a measured approach to practice, the effective capturing of these more *traditional landscapes* required a discarding of the excesses of digital photography. These indulgences were replaced with a carefully considered and analogue-inspired system forcing a resultant simplification of process whilst still remaining digital.

In Edward Weston’s essay *Seeing Photographically* the act of recording images is described through the statement that the ‘...very richness of control facilities often acts as a barrier to creative work’.⁶ Weston continues on to say that:

...Relatively few photographers ever master their medium. Instead they allow the medium to master them... learning to see in terms of the field of one lens, the scale of one film and one paper, will accomplish a good deal more than gathering a smattering of knowledge about several different sets of tools.⁷

Setting strict limitations on the tools available allowed for an increased level of consideration and re-enforced a necessity to regard the “process as a whole”⁸, previsualizing the outcome at the point of capturing a scene. This focus on the artisan maker as practiced within one field of expertise in lieu of others is of particular relevance in supporting notional ideas towards the creative symbolic immortality, and attaching one’s own name and memory to a specific object or image technique. Utilizing one camera, one lens, and knowing the paper stock allowed for improved clarity of thought, in turn generating a faithful engagement of subject and site.

This simplicity of practice is evidenced in Edward Weston’s later works particularly the series of works of twisted *Cypress from Point Lobos* from 1946. In these images there is an

unsurpassed eye for photographic detail, particularly within the rich shadow tapestries of matted forest floors that give rise to gnarled and wizen cypress groves. Weston had mastered his medium, utilising the same Seneca and Graflex Cameras that had seen use throughout most of his working life.

Each shot in Edward Westons work was meticulously framed and given careful consideration in the camera's recording mechanisms. This practice is the resultant outcome of patience and investment in minor detail, where some images would require several days for the correct light to fall, the skies to co-operate and the artist's vision to be revealed. This is the level of dedication to which I would desire of my own practice. In discussion with Stephen Payne, Manager of the Wagga Wagga Art Gallery, on the act of photographic pre-visualization, my own exhibition images were expressed as:

... seen or visualized in the mind's eye before taking the photograph, with the goal of achieving, all together, the aesthetic, intellectual, spiritual and mechanical effects desired.⁹

This penchant for pre-visualisation in the body of work for 15DAYS is influenced in no small part from Edward Weston's approach to the photographic medium in line with Hartman's earlier assessment of Steiglitz and observations on straight photography. In a letter dated June 7th 1922, Weston wrote to his colleague Frank Roy Fraperie that:

The real test of not only technical proficiency, but intelligent conception, is not in the use of some indifferent negative as a basis to work from, but in the ability to see one's finished print on the ground glass in all its desired qualities and values before exposure.¹⁰

Stieglitz's predilection to the perfect negative was evident from the earliest works of his photographic career; of particular relevance are those completed during his time as co-editor of *The American Amateur Photographer*. In Sue Davidson Lowe's *Stieglitz: A Memoir/Biography*: Lowe (Stieglitz's grandniece) describes Stieglitz as 'demanding such high quality in the production and paid his employee such high wages that the (Photochrome Engraving Company) business rarely made a profit'¹¹.

The incredible eye for detail and preference for clarity exhibited by Alfred Stieglitz own photographs is no more evident than in the works encompassed in the earliest New York images *The Terminal*, and the series *Winter on Fifth Avenue* (1893). These works completed for joint exhibition between the Boston Camera Club, Photographic Society of Philadelphia and the Society of Amateur Photographers of New York act as evidence towards the direction much of Steiglitz's writings for *The American Amateur Photographer* would take; particularly the photograph's role within the context of the competing spheres of influence within the arts and sciences of the time. A considerable proportion of his career, and indeed writing for the journal, would be devoted to the fight for photography's recognition as a fine art. It is in this period in Stieglitz's career that he describes the medium of photography as 'an entire philosophy and way of life – a religion'¹². Stieglitz is similarly quoted as saying during this period that:

People think that I am interested only in art. That is not true... Whether it is scrubbing a floor or painting a picture – only the best work of which man is capable will finally satisfy him... only work born from a sacred feeling... and what interests me is whether a man will

fight for the opportunity of doing the best work of which he is capable. It seems to me that people will fight for almost anything except that right. And yet nothing else will fulfil in the end.¹³

Stieglitz's ability to utilise his Folmer and Schwing 4x5 plate film camera, with his critical eye challenged the perceptions of photography's relationship with the real and developed an ardent concern for image and representation. In *Winter on Fifth Avenue* (1893) the capacity to retain exceptionally minute details and fluctuations of tone within the snow filled New York streets is testament to Stieglitz's technical skills and patience as a photographic practitioner. Whilst the inclusion of people in these earlier works are later reconciled through an analysis of interpersonal relationships in Stieglitz's *Music: A Sequence of Ten Cloud Photographs* (1922) and *Equivalentents* (1927), particularly the relationship of photographer and sitter (described later in this paper), the immaculate detail of these earliest works are of considerable note for it is in this obsession for Stieglitz to capture detail that much of the later American Formalist ideals would be developed and re-envisioned, and indeed the philosophical underpinnings of my own photographic directional change.

American Formalism and its Modern Equivalentents

In order to generate a modern equivalency it became necessary to my practice that all automatic functions of the camera be rejected in favour of maximum user control (as had been the case in many of my earlier series of works). RAW images; the modern equivalent to the negative are controlled closely and chosen for their capacity to render a particular viewing; this editing process is described by Jamie Holcombe in the catalogue essay *Ephemeral Presence, Indelible View* (2012):

Much as Adams calculated his exposure measurements to produce the perfect negative, then took meticulous care in the darkroom to produce the perfect print, Orchard nurses and coaxes his digital data to represent his own unique vision of the space, or perhaps place he felt drawn to document.¹⁴

This nursing, or coaxing as Holcombe refers serves to more accurately represent a unique vision of the space. These digital negatives, a modern archival format, are developed by the photographer with the same care and attention to detail required of a traditional negative, however benefiting from the added flexibility, unlike traditional negatives, of being capable of infinite redevelopment should the initial process have resultant errors and flaws in its treatment.

Edward Weston in *Seeing Photographically* refers to the *perfect negative* by concluding that 'such notions are mere products of advertising mythology'¹⁵ explaining that a negative that contains the true aspects of *perfection* would be a negative shot with the knowledge and forethought of the applicable development process to achieve the print required. In this way the nursing and coaxing referred to by Holcombe is again reference to inspiration drawn from Weston's ideals that a solid understanding of how colours translate to monochromatic values, and how to 'judge the strength and quality of light'¹⁶ form key component to the development process.

It would become critical to the working process of 15Days to edit systematically and develop a coherent black and white conversion process across the entire body of works. By assessing the individual works alongside the works of Edward Weston, Ansel Adams and Minor White to achieve a richness of tone that would adequately allow the work to borrow from the American Formalist traditions through an explicitly implied historical narrative. Drawing from these traditions the works could utilise the existent psychological structures of the photographic landscape tradition, imbuing a sense of historic and cultural value that clearly borrows from our individual histories of reading photographic works. There is some latent sense of melancholy in the reading of these works as they reference very clearly the passage of time and through the borrowed histories, times past. In this way the absence of colour information is a critical component to implying a certain psychological expectation of the photograph's history and provenance.

When assessing the development of these digital negatives the suitability of composition and framing was a critical consideration. In the *Daybooks of Edward Weston*, edited by Nancy Newhall, Weston is quoted as saying 'Unless I pull a technically fine negative, the emotional or intellectual value of the photograph is almost negated'.¹⁷ It is exactly this predilection for precision that seems to be a forgotten, or neglected aspect of the digital process, and indeed much modern hybridised digital-analogue process in the vast expanse of the increasingly democratized medium of photography. There is always a risk when photographing landscapes that the work could fall into the realm of commercial photographic practice; described by Jamie Holcombe as 'an endless array of cheesy calendars and coffee table books'.¹⁸

It is an unfortunate affront to the natural world that many modern commercial landscape photographers feel the need to overtly mechanise the process of recording nature's innate beauty. There has been an influx in technical capacity, speaking particularly of the sudden inundation of decorative high dynamic range (HDR) renditions of cloud and sea that impose a digital soullessness, which at its core is a commercial reluctance to wait. The landscape and the time in which we are willing to engage in these images is determined by profit margin in place of allowing the natural to speak for itself. I am of course referring here to the proliferation of decorative wall-art, calendars, greeting cards and desktop wallpapers and their subsequent separation from the fine arts. The crossing of two spirits; the photographer and the transient world are no longer a viable meeting place in a commercial reality; it is coming before nature and imposing the artist's own vision upon it. In this way I feel compelled further towards amateurism, as to photograph a landscape as an act of love and revelation is far more enticing for me than to photograph a landscape for any economic imperative. This is likely due to a specific creative requirement for the maker's mark to be apparent above and beyond that of the corporate brand it might support; further attribution towards the will of the creative immortal.

It is as Paul Strand wrote in *Photography & Photography and the New God* that:

When it became apparent that craftsmanship as a means to trade growth was insufficient, that quantity and not quality of production was the essential problem in the acquisition of wealth, it was the scientist and his interpreter, the inventor who jumped into the breach.¹⁹

This is not to say that I am not appreciative of the scientific advances, or to say one medium or way to photograph is better than another as Paul Strand illustrates; ‘...to have to despise something in order to respect something else is a thing of impotence’.²⁰ It is not that I despise in order to re-affirm my own practice, but that I am not adequately convinced that the proliferation of highly digitised landscapes, those where the digital is most evident and that bear no or little resemblance to reality can support the acceptance of the strength of the natural world.

Paul Strand says of creative control of the camera that; ‘For he it is who, despite his social maladjustment, has taken to himself a dead thing unwittingly contributed by a scientist, and through its conscious use, is revealing a new and living act of vision’²¹. The terminology; living; within this context feels to me to be a missing aspect of the calendar photographer’s equation in what has become a mass production pipeline. As Paul Strand ends *Photography & Photography and the New God* with a line, which at its centre still resonates true that:

What is the relationship between science and expression? Are they both not vital manifestations of energy, whose reciprocal hostility turns the one into the destructive tool of materialism, the other into anemic phantasy, whose coming together might integrate a new religious impulse? Must not these two forms of energy converge before a living future can be born of both.²²

This concept is also arrived at in Neill Overton’s foreword *Disappearances* through the terminology of photographic image viewership; ‘We are no longer connoisseurs of photography’s rarity; we are in fact lost in a sea of images of all kinds, colliding on the unmapped flotsam of the Internet’.²³

In previous articles, I have written about the detritus we leave behind as an ethereal pixel and byte wasteland; that each interaction and network through our own engagement becomes an extension of self, a meta-prosthetic existence. It was necessary to remove these images from the digital realm to create an item in physicality that was as true a representation of the object photographed as my photographic skills allowed. To engage the technological but only where as an artist I felt the resultant expressions contained the spirit and life of the original source.

Shooting in *RAW* allowed for a significantly increased retention of detail over other compressed formats. In fact many shots contained the same ‘bracketed’ High Dynamic Range system of process that I had come to reject. This bracketed system meant that in all images, all shadow, and all highlight detail could be retained, but through their processing would not suffer from the whimsically garish colour that much early 21st century HDR suffers from. It was a quote from Beaumont Newhall in the *History of Photography* that describes Weston’s attentiveness to photographic detail that inspired the fundamentals of my photographic system through saying:

Developed... ..to the point of virtuosity. He demanded clarity of form, he wanted every area of his picture clear cut, with the substances and textures of things appreciable to the point of illusion.²⁴

Newhall continues to say that; 'In a Weston landscape, everything is sharp from the immediate foreground to the extreme distance...'²⁵. Weston was intimately aware in his photographic works that utilisation of shallow depth of field; the throwing of foreground or background elements out of focus; would suspend belief in the reality of the landscape, reference painterly technique and work against the realism of the unaltered photograph. Liz Wells in *Photography: A Critical Introduction* notes that:

For Edward Weston, the trademark of photography lies in precision of definition, the fine detail that can be recorded, in the continuity of tonal gradings (black to white), and in the qualities of the surface of the paper used for print.²⁶

This proclivity for infinite detail particular to a *Weston* landscape is no more evident than in the work *White Dunes, Oceano, California* (1936). David Peeler writes of Weston in *The Art of Disengagement* that; 'Weston brought a deep timelessness to his photographs'.²⁷ It is this timeless quality referred to by Peeler that I suggest is a suspension of reality that operates as a proxy for the real: as substitution of *memory*, as *monument or memorial* and as a *falsehood* simultaneously.

Paul Strand writes about Stieglitz; although equally appropriate to the work of Weston in *Photography and the New God* about notions of memory that:

The camera can hold in a unique way, a moment. If the moment be a living one for the photographer, that is, if it be significantly related to other moments of his experience, and he knows how to put that relativity into form, he may do with a machine, what human brain and hand, through the act of memory cannot do.²⁸

An Argument for the Melancholic Landscape

Memory through the photographic process becomes an illustration, an indifferent image with an inescapability from commemoration and a creation/destruction cycle. The shifting sands of *White Dunes, Oceano, California* (1936) in this instance whilst perfectly rendered only eventuate in representing ephemerality; and through the critical gaze of anachronism this ephemerality becomes melancholic. As time forces engagement with the works from an increasing level of remoteness, moments of experience become a shared and collective memorialisation through the only remaining common vantage point of viewership: loss and mourning. In the *Daybooks of Edward Weston*, Weston is quoted as saying;

The camera should be used for the recording of life, for rendering the very substance and quintessence of the thing itself, whether it be polished steel or palpitating flesh... I shall let no chance pass to record interesting abstraction but I feel definite in my belief that the approach to photography is through realism.²⁹

As ultimately life hurtles irretrievably and irreversibly towards death, the recording of *life* Weston refers to is also imbued with an ever-present melancholia. The perfectly rendered stillness and timelessness of the image becomes a vestige of mortality; is a monument to *time's relentless melt*; and subsequently becomes somewhat disingenuous as an authentic

reality. Whilst the technique of rendering infinite detail may reference the real, the truth of the real is in its proclivity to uncertainty and fluctuation.

Even in this state of insecurity I argue that formalist landscape photography is a searching for equilibrium through psychic balancing in what Robert Jay Lifton refers to as an experiential transcendence, a shared understanding of sad beauty or suchness³⁰. In Zen Buddhism Robert Lifton highlights the state of sad beauty as ‘...often used to express one’s involvement in and, in a sense, passive acceptance of the slow, sad truth of life and nature’.³¹

This becomes further evidenced in Weston’s attraction to detail in which we may investigate and experience environmental volatility, and approximate the change of landscape as a change of self. This volatility, whilst rendered static in print, nevertheless contains a fluidity and intangibility that is analogous with loss.

Robert Lifton writes on life; the inherent sadness of change, loss and death; as having ‘...to do with one’s sense of being part of the cosmic and the eternal.’³² Something I argue in much of Weston’s work, and other of Group f64 as a temporary suspension of the death symbol, whilst simultaneously evoking notions of the same.

Death tinged sadness–lover’s parting, life ending, cherry blossoms falling–is inseparable from and an evocation of the larger life process as manifested by beauty. Beauty and loss become a single constellation, which, in unending cycles and variations, provides a means of psychologically realizing death while affirming an aesthetically dominated culture’s imagery of continuing life.³³

Paul Strand wrote in *Photography and the New God*; ‘Photography is only a new road from a different direction, but moving toward the common goal, which is Life’.³⁴ Analysing further on the photographic act as memorial; particular to the landscape genre; in the chapter *The Changing Psychological Landscape* the terminology life referred to in both Strand’s and Weston’s writings also contains an acknowledgement of death. This life and death nexus is the transitory soul of the scene, the very sensation Strand and Weston sought to capture. The *spirit* of an object, scene or individual is shown by illuminating both states, life and death, simultaneously.

Regardless of the differing view of the psychology of landscape photography, this attraction and fixation with form and accuracy would become the keystone terms that would define American Formalism (*a retrospectively given expression*) and some of the most influential concepts towards the body of work in 15DAYS. John Szarkowski wrote of Edward Weston’s, *Dunes* and the *specificity of photographic seeing*³⁵ in his discussion of the photograph’s properties stating:

The facticity of [a] photographs detail, framing, exposure time and vantage point (literally, point of view) come together in the image³⁶, [it was] ‘photographic seeing with emphasis on the rhythm and form.’³⁷

Liz Wells describes the specific work of *Dunes*, *Oceano*, and Weston’s work as a whole by saying: ‘Weston sought clarity of form and extolled the camera for its depth of focus and its ability to see more than the human eye’.³⁸ This *clarity of form* would be a major point for

reaction against the work I had completed previously through the bulk of my previous studies.

In many ways, the reaction of straight photography and American formalism to imitation of painterly techniques is directly mirrored in a personal desire to react against the expectation of excess digitisation and manipulation placed upon the modern photographer. As Peter Wollen noted about pictorialism:

During the 1910's the pictorialist paradigm began to crack. It moved however, not towards greater intervention, but towards less. The straight print triumphed, shedding at the same time its fin-de-siecle aesthetic pretensions and overcoming its resistance to photography of record.³⁹

Where American Formalism and indeed Pictorialism before it reacted against the placement of photographic practice between the arts and sciences highlighted in *Camera Work* by Alfred Stieglitz; '...photography, as the term was then understood, was looked upon as the bastard of science and art, hampered and held back by one, ridiculed by the other', *15Days* would not react against the scientific per se or yield to the strictly artistic, it would necessitate use of scientific advances but mimic or simulate Formalist tradition to create work that was predominantly artistic in its generation. Beaumont Newhall is paraphrased in Liz Wells's *Photography: A Critical Introduction* as commenting on Edward Weston's work that 'there was an interdependence of the technological and the aesthetic'⁴⁰, this is the no-man's-land to which Stieglitz was alluding.

The common acceptance of photography as an artistic practice in 21st Century society allowed for the twin acceptance of scientific methodology and artistic methodology without hesitation, and indeed American Formalist photographers like Edward Weston, Ansel Adams and Imogen Cunningham, as written by Liz Wells in *Photography: A Critical Introduction*; 'actively sought exhibition of their works'⁴¹ and laid to a certain extent the ground work for the ease with which this body of work is accepted by gallery culture. The latter of these artists would be a predominant influence technically in the work that would follow *15Days* entitled *Heirlooms*.

On the Rejection of Portraiture

Up until the point of engaging in *15Days*, all of my work has made an actively deliberate use of digital excess. In the photographic works of *Programming Thanatos* (2009) for the then Charles Sturt University, School of Visual and Performing Arts staff exhibition the limitations of sensor capacity in regards to recorded light wavelengths were experimented with. The result was a methodology for capturing ultraviolet light alongside visible light spectrums and rendering a curious hybridised ethereal digital image set up for large format print.

Similarly in *'The Unknowns'* (2010) the WWAG exhibition *'Beneath the Skin'* digital studio lighting is employed to generate otherwise improbable tonal effects. Each of these exhibitions including a self-imposed premise of pushing the limitations of digital technologies to generate new expressive results, both in terms of their technique and content, including the use of large-format, modern, archival digital prints.

In *The Art of Disengagement* art-historian David Peeler writes of Edward Weston and Ansel Adams:

Like other visual modernists they sought an art that was authentic as well as innovative, and accordingly rejected their Victorian predecessors for having burdened photography with convoluted compositions and overwrought symbolism.⁴²

Albeit unwittingly at first, my own practice moved in a direct correlation with that of Weston and Adams. The series *The Unknowns* borrowed heavily from Victorian symbolism whilst also being suitably manipulated by digital painterly techniques. It would be my own traditions and behaviours as a digital-photographer; new media & multimedia artist that I felt compelled to react against. This ideal combined equally with a concern for the contemporary state of photographic practice, with particular regards to understanding and analysis of visual truth and contemporary photo-literacy in an age of almost infinite digital reproduction. There is necessity to answer the question, albeit with a sense of aversion, as to how much of the work for 15Days has been manipulated digitally. It is a question western society has become obsessed with in a misguided search for visual truth.

The honest answer is that to some degree, digital interruption is almost unavoidable, but to the trained photographer this disruption or intrusion can be minimised or even re-appropriated to fit an analogue aesthetic without compromising the artistic integrity of the work. Whilst in some ways limited by the lens optics of a digital SLR camera, particularly cheap plastic lenses, with a minimum aperture of f22; three stops removed from Ansel Adams, Minor White, and other influential photographers of "*Group f64*"⁴³ and even further from Weston's favoured rectilinear f256 lens I nevertheless operated as often as possible at minimum aperture to ensure the greatest level of sharpness across the entire image plane without sacrificing sharpness in detail through increased ISO. The superior capacity for optical engineering in modern camera design and development where glass is concerned has, it must be clarified, allowed for f22 to adequately operate in portraying the required clarity and detail expected of the American Formalist tradition. Ron Rosenstock's own choice of Canon Digital SLR as well as that of George de Wolfe and other contemporary photographers following the formalist tradition only secures my belief that in a contemporary context it provides the necessary detail to remain honest to the subject. By following the traditions of the American Formalist photographers, it would be acting as a proxy genetic lineage through attaching one's own self to a creative lineage of tried and tested methodology. It is as Paul Strand wrote in 1917:

The photographer's problem is to see clearly the limitations and at the same time potential qualities of his medium, for it is here that honesty, no less than intensity of vision is the prerequisite of a living expression.⁴⁴

The realization of maximum *sharpness* provided technical obstacles beyond lens optics, in this digital practice the nanowires that send data from the sensor to the Digital SLR's processor run like a grid framework across the front of the sensor creating a slight blur in any image. Similarly as light must be split into separate color channels to be recorded effectively by the sensor, with only 1/3rd of incoming light captured by the array a level of approximation has to take place, leaving some resultant blur. To achieve the desired

outcome, a minimal level of digital editing was required to sharpen each image. To do this in a non-intrusive manner, a filmic technique of producing a manual *unsharp mask* in Adobe Photoshop was required. It would be however, a case as Ansel Adams, also an accomplished musician proposed; ‘... *the negative is the score, but the print is the performance*’.

Art critic Sadakichi Hartmann wrote in a 1904 review of the Photo-Secession exhibition at the Carnegie Institute on printing that:

I do not object to retouching, dodging or accentuation as long as they do not interfere with the natural qualities of photographic technique. Brush marks and lines, on the other hand, are not natural to photography, and I object to the use of the brush, to finger daubs, to scrawling, scratching and scribbling on the plate...⁴⁵

To follow Hartmann’s prescribed techniques of a *straight photograph* meant that, removing colour information, sharpening, dodging, burning and cropping would be the limitations placed upon any enlargements I would make. Having visited the National Gallery of Australia in early 2010 and having the incredible fortune and opportunity to view the Gallery’s collection of original Ansel Adams and Minor White prints in the archive rooms, I was inspired to no small amount to limit my post-production to a minimum of techniques, those replicable by analogue means by a professional darkroom printer.

Paul Strand illustrates this necessity both in print and in negative development by saying a photographer requires:

... real respect for the thing in front of him expressed in terms of chiaroscuro... through a range of infinite tonal values which lie beyond the skill of the human hand. The fullest realizations of this is achieved without tricks of process or manipulation...⁴⁶

Drawing upon this, and utilizing Ansel Adams’s and Fred Archer’s zone system, each image is edited digitally to generate the necessary outcomes with eleven common tonal spaces. Far from being a system strictly for filmic techniques with uses restricted to particular mediums, Ansel Adams described the flexibility of the system and its future use by saying:

I believe the electronic image will be the next major advance. Such systems will have their own inherent and inescapable structural characteristics, and the artist and functional practitioner will again strive to comprehend and control them.⁴⁷

This meant analysing Adams’s words and trying to re-appropriate the terminology by digital means. Being careful in the importing of the digital negative and editing the file the first requirement is to pre-visualize the darkest area of the subject in which detail is required. This step should have been carefully considered and pre-visualized when shooting the original image. Minor White would describe this pre-visualization of shadow details in the zone-system in his symposium *Consciousness in Photography* in 1967 collectively as basic craftsmanship.

This craftsmanship is no more evident than in the impressive vista provided by Ansel Adams in *The Tetons and the Snake River (1942)*. With its lush shadows rich with detail, the viewer

is allowed ample opportunity to investigate and scrutinize each carefully considered tonal variation, from the light gently playing across the pines of the foreground, the rich rock of the Tetons and swirling mass of cloud that stretches across the upper third of the image. There is slowness in this immensity and profundity born from immaculate detail, each area itself allowing time to rest and relax before being punctuated by a movement towards a new frame of viewership. The infinite detail of Adams lays bare a deeper longing, a yearning to become a part of the restrained movements of the natural world. As the world is rendered still, so are we in awe of the sights we are given to behold. This eye for detail, this craftsmanship is necessity in rendering the truth of the natural world, and to not overcome the natural with unnecessary mechanization and automation.

Ron Rosenstock, a student at the Consciousness in Photography symposium writes in his critical essay *Iomann don Domhan* to accompany his 40 year retrospective that Minor White saw the zone system as a:

... Method for planning a photograph by translating the hues, forms and light effects of a subject at hand into monochromatic shapes and tones in a black and white print... In the field the photographer considers how this transmutation would occur, and can use tools and techniques to facilitate and refine the plan.⁴⁸

Rather than crush shadows to a flat black, shadows must be placed in the third tonal zone, roughly equivalent of the hexadecimal #4d4d4d or 10% of total luminance; represented as the darkest part of the image in which slightly darker shadow detail should still be recorded. The exposure for this zone is important, because if the exposure is insufficient, the image may not have satisfactory shadow detail. If the shadow detail is not recorded at the time of exposure, nothing can be done to add it later. A piece of hardware known as a spider colour calibrator proved a useful tool in negotiating image luminance, allowing specificity of tone across regions of an image. By converting traditional tonal zones into measures of screen luminance, combined with knowledge that the monitor calibration matched the ink and paper output, an accurate representation of each photographic print could be visualised before actually printing.

If I return to Hartmann's notions on photographic printing, each of these things; brush marks, scratching, scrawling and other techniques, now commonplace in digital photography have in actuality, contrary to Hartmann's writing been natural to mine, and many other modern digital imagers photographic process. It is an artefact of digital progression; that the pushing of digital technology has become a self-perpetuating machine. Whilst simultaneously attempting to reject the excess of the digital medium, I have in actuality embraced the digital medium to re-appropriate the past, in a strictly referential fashion.

Returning to the Frameworks of Symbolic Immortality

Similarly reactionary to my previous practice, I was influenced by viewing several of Alfred Stieglitz's works from the 1927 series *Equivalents*. On this series of works Beaumont Newhall writes; 'Stieglitz chose subject matter over which he could not possibly have any control: the sky and clouds'. The simplicity of the subject matter, coupled with the artist's clear capacity

to render the transient spirit in incredible detail was testament to the photographer's technique and critical understanding of his medium.

Conversely in Olive Cotton's late career rendering *Vapor Trail* (1991) the camera is also tilted upward towards the heavens. The transience here is a metaphor for the human mark on the landscape, the vapour trail disappearing from collective memory as quickly as it appeared. Whilst *15Days* includes very limited human intervention upon the landscape the sense of transience and insignificance is borrowed, mirrored and experimented with. It was this simplification of subject and metaphor coupled with a deep understanding of the photographic process that lured me to viewing image generation in a different light. Stieglitz wrote on the series *Equivalent*s saying that:

I wanted to photograph clouds to find out what I had learned in forty years about photography. Through clouds to put down my philosophy of life-to show that my photographs were not due to subject matter-nor to special privileges, clouds were there for everyone-no tax on them yet-free. ⁴⁹

Similarly to Stieglitz, the vast majority of critical reflection of my prior work has been of the photographer's power over the sitter, referred to by Newhall on Stieglitz's work as 'force of personality' or 'power over his sitters'. Each portrait of my previous works is a carefully considered rendering, more attributable to photographer than sitter; the concept of coming before reality and acting was a foreign and daunting concept. To approach this I drew from Minor White's teachings; an improbable meeting of Edward Weston's and Stieglitz's American Formalist ideals with a calmness of thought that came from being a Zen Buddhist. Minor White believed that:

... A photographer should devote careful time and attention to pre-visualization. He taught that he or she should begin their work by purposely taking time to separate themselves and their creative minds from [the] mundane concerns and activities. Once a state of clear concentration had been achieved, he advocated careful consideration of whether the image to be captured could transcend its transitory subject, and reflect some essential quality of the personality of the photographer themselves.⁵⁰

Ansel Adams described these improbable meetings between photographer and landscape through the rhetoric 'chance favours the prepared mind'⁵¹; this is to say we must be practiced in the traditions of seeing, but more-over, knowing. With immeasurable luck we occasion upon the infinite beauty of the natural, where to observe is to witness but to document is to participate. It is in this environmental volatility, the power to manufacture or devastate that resonates with our own designed world, often forgetting that we abide by the same mechanics and laws. Our knowledge and our willingness to learn define the outcomes of our participation.

Adams writes: 'Some photographers take reality... and impose the domination of their own thought and spirit. Others come before reality more tenderly and a photograph to them is an instrument of love and revelation.'⁵² This creates a distinctive separation between the landscape photograph as *tourist*, and the landscape photograph as *spiritual sojourner*, the latter of which these images aspire towards.

By removing myself from the concept of needing to create. By removing myself from all forms of electronic communication. By allowing myself to simply embrace the environment and to be lost amongst the awe of the natural world, the creativity simply flowed.

A photograph's meaning may begin in quintessential ambivalence through its underlying, characteristically blank emotional state in which co-existing and contradictory impulses; excitement and fear, are resonated. It is often fear however that with time ultimately dominates, and results in a succeeding sense of the melancholic, an irrefutable sadness to the passing of time. Susan Sontag writes in her body of critical essays *On Photography*: 'All photographs are memento mori. To take a photograph is to participate in another person's (or thing's) mortality, vulnerability and mutability. Precisely by slicing out this moment and freezing it, all photographs testify to time's relentless melt'.⁵³ In this way each landscape becomes an instrument of sadness, consumed with latent melancholy and an untameable mourning for an irretrievable truth.

It is this inescapable trend towards the mortal to which I refer rather poetically and with a growing sense of sorrow to the landscapes in *15DAYS* as *portraits of vulnerable ghosts*. It is also through this incredible sense of loss that my previous portrait work and this landscape work become inextricably linked.

Ghosts in the traditional fictional sense are described as ethereal manifestations of the soul, typically attributed with the once living, a transient being locked in an emotional state and rendered visible only to those who are chosen to see. In this way, photographs and ghosts share a temporary existence, a trapped, helpless and lost soul with perpetually unfinished business. In the realm of landscape photography the clashing of continental plates, shifting ocean currents, cold polar winds, volcanic eruptions and innumerable other physical forces reshape the soul of the land with each passing second. *15DAYS* becomes a documentation of spirits in transit where both the photographer and the land are asked to reach an uneasy equilibrium.

I make no apologies for the shifting from formal language to the colloquial when discussing this uncertain relationship between travelling souls. It becomes of utmost importance to understand the journey of the *15DAYS* as a critical aspect in the reflection on the photographic outcomes, for not one, but all aforementioned physical forces interacted in a singular two-week period. These forces form a framework from which critical analysis of the photographic medium can take place and indeed make manifest the physical outcomes of the exhibition *15Days*.

We can see that there is clearly a necessity for connectedness with landscape, through a sensation of externalization of self. These externalizations can take the shape of experiences or, for the creative practitioner, the junction of two symbolic immortalities: experiential transcendence and creative immortality. In fact in many ways each act of photographing can be seen to be a meeting place for these two requisites for mental health in the mind of the practitioner. A good photograph should as with any work of fine art create a sense of experiential transcendence in subsequent viewings. It is then the quality of rendering (in any medium) in which experience is rendered for further experience that provides a work with the best opportunity to be maintained on its significant cultural value. A work that can

allow you to experience without knowing, whilst still capable of being destroyed, is the best chance at preserving the memories of one's own life, and the experiences within it.

Notes

- ¹ Lewis Baltz, "Landscape Problems," *Aperture* 98 (Spring 1985).
- ² Sadakichi Hartman, On the Possibility of New Laws of Composition, *Camera Work* No.30, (1910), pp. 23-26.
- ³ Beaumont Newhall, *This History of Photography 1839 to Present*. The Museum of Modern Art, New York.
- ⁴ Sadakichi Hartmann, 'A Plea for Straight Photography', *American Amateur Photographer*, Vol.16 (1904) pp. 101-109.
- ⁵ Alfred Stieglitz, Pictorial Photography, *Scribner's Magazine*, Nov. 1899
- ⁶ Edward Weston, *Seeing Photographically, Encyclopedia of Photography*, Volume 18, Singer Communications Group.
- ⁷ Ibid.
- ⁸ Ibid.
- ⁹ Stephen Payne, Manager's Statement, *15Days* (2012)
- ¹⁰ Edward Weston to Frank Roy Fraperie, June 7, 1922, The Centre for Creative Photography, University of Arizona, Tucson.
- ¹¹ Sue Davidson Lowe (1983). *Stieglitz: A Memoir/Biography*. NY: Farrar Stround Giroux.
- ¹² Katherine Hoffman, *Alfred Stieglitz, A legacy of Light*, Yale University Press.
- ¹³ Dorothy Norman, *Writings and Conversations of Alfred Stieglitz*, Twice a Year, Fall-Winter 1938.
- ¹⁴ Jamie Holcombe, Ephemeral Presence, Indelible View, *15Days* (2012)
- ¹⁵ Edward Weston, *Seeing Photographically, Encyclopedia of Photography*, Volume 18, Singer Communications Group.
- ¹⁶ Ibid.
- ¹⁷ Nancy Newhall (ed.), *The Daybooks of Edward Weston*, Vol. 1, Mexico, 1973
- ¹⁸ Jamie Holcombe, Ephemeral Presence, Indelible View, *15Days* (2012)
- ¹⁹ Paul Strand, Photography-Photography and the New God, *Seven Arts*, (Aug. 1917), pp.524
- ²⁰ Paul Strand, Photography-Photography and the New God, *Seven Arts*, (Aug. 1917), pp.524
- ²¹ Ibid.
- ²² Ibid.
- ²³ Neill Overton, Disappearances, *15Days* (2012)
- ²⁴ Beaumont Newhall, *This History of Photography 1839 to Present*. The Museum of Modern Art, New York.
- ²⁵ Ibid.
- ²⁶ Liz Wells, *Photography: A Critical Introduction*
- ²⁷ David P. Peeler, The Art of Disengagement: Edward Weston and Ansel Adams, *Journal Of American Studies*, Vol. 27, No.3 American Art and Music. (1993)
- ²⁸ Paul Strand, Photography-Photography and the New God, *Seven Arts*, (Aug. 1917), pp.524
- ²⁹ Nancy Newhall (ed.), *The Daybooks of Edward Weston*, Vol. 1, Mexico, 1973
- ³⁰ Lifton, R. J. (1983). *The Broken Connection: On Death and the Continuity of Life*. New York: The American Psychiatric Press Inc.
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- ³² Ibid.
- ³³ Ibid.
- ³⁴ Paul Strand, Photography-Photography and the New God, *Seven Arts*, (Aug. 1917), pp.524
- ³⁵ Liz Wells, *Photography: A Critical Introduction... p268*
- ³⁶ Ibid.
- ³⁷ Ibid.
- ³⁸ Ibid.
- ³⁹ Peter Wollen, *Photography and Aesthetics*. Verso Books: London.
- ⁴⁰ Liz Wells, *Photography: A Critical Introduction... p268*
- ⁴¹ Ibid.
- ⁴² David P. Peeler, The Art of Disengagement: Edward Weston and Ansel Adams, *Journal Of American Studies*, Vol. 27, No.3 American Art and Music. (1993)
- ⁴³ John Paul Edwards, "Group f.64", *Camera Craft*, Vol.42 (1935) pp. 107-08
- ⁴⁴ Paul Strand, *Photography*, *Seven Arts*, Vol.2 (1917)

⁴⁵ Alfred Stieglitz, *Pictorial Photography*, Scribner's Magazine, Nov. 1899

⁴⁶ Paul Strand, *Photography*, *Seven Arts*, Vol.2 (1917)

⁴⁷ Ron Rosenstock, *Iomann don Domhan*; Photographs by Ron Rosenstock, Worcester Art Museum Press.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

⁴⁹ Beaumont Newhall, *This History of Photography 1839 to Present*. The Museum of Modern Art, New York.

⁵⁰ Ron Rosenstock, *Iomann don Domhan*; Photographs by Ron Rosenstock, Worcester Art Museum Press.

⁵¹ David P. Peeler, *The Art of Disengagement: Edward Weston and Ansel Adams*, *Journal Of American Studies*, Vol. 27, No.3 *American Art and Music*. (1993)

⁵² Lewis Baltz, "Landscape Problems," *Aperture* 98 (Spring 1985).

⁵³ Susan Sontag. *On Photography*. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1979, p.15.