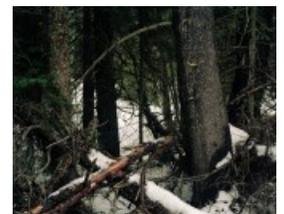


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THE POETRY OF ELSEWHERE: RON JUDE'S LICK CREEK LINE

Not merely in photography or art, but in Western culture more broadly, there is a long tradition of conceiving of the landscape – the natural world – as essentially separate and autonomous, as independent of our agency and epistemologically discrete. A string of modern and postmodern analyses have upturned this orthodoxy and persuasively asserted our fundamental interdependency with the landscape in which we live, as well as others far distant from us but reciprocally defined by our actions. In 1979, American geographer Donald W. Meinig wrote that

Artist(s): **Ron Jude**
Medium: **Photography**
ronjude[at]gmail.com
Site: <http://ronjude.com>

“Landscape is defined by our vision and interpreted by our minds. It is a panorama which continuously changes as we move along any route. Strictly speaking, we are never in it, it lies before our eyes and it becomes real only as we become conscious of it. (...) the landscape is ever with us, and we are ever involved in its creation.”

Photography has for much of its short history participated in the perpetuation of an idea of landscape as discrete and separate, and has in so much of the transformative beauty of its images produced a sense of the independent, autonomous heroism of the photographic view. According to this model, the discrete and integrated formal beauty of a landscape image corresponds to a separate, immense and distant natural space unlinked to the specific actions of our culture or civilisation, and independent of the specific intentions of the photographer who crafted the view. Landscape in this sense can be laid out before us, but exists where we are not, and is approximated and distilled for us in an image from some separate space, or some unaffiliated terrain.

Ron Jude’s photographs proceed from the viewpoint that landscape is very much of our making, determined by the intricate ecosystems produced by our economic norms, but also by the arbitrary particularities of our specific ways of seeing. On this model, landscape is entangled and dynamic, is distinct only on the basis of a particular hierarchy of seeing, is an environment that we substantially create and yet fail fully to apprehend, is a site of disuse and desecration but of discovery and enigma also. It is for this reason that the view he offers us is so consistently opaque or tangential, so imbricated, partial, or truncated: the images mirror not only our way of moving through the landscape, but also reflect our sense of its form. Through an alternating use of line and light, Jude’s images manage at once to be both oblique and direct, descriptive and allegorical. As **Nicholas Muellner** wrote in his essay *The Landscape Game*, on Jude’s *Other Nature* series, they are images “that pass directly into ontological sensation.”

Lick Creek Line is the first book of Jude’s photographs that opens out from an interior world to engage more extensively with the world and the landscape of other people as they traverse, change it and are changed by it. In the two earlier works that focused on the landscape of Jude’s childhood, *Alpine Star* and *emmett*, miniature constellations of vernacular images played upon the symbolism of youth as it is changed by the imprecise intentions of memory, laying out musical sequences filled with object and action that were complicated by an underlying

struggle between intention and recollection. Those works focused on the descriptive and articulate capacities of objects (including photographs), testing the extent to which *things*, which are themselves inanimate, could be activated within an edited sequence so as to enact something of the way that memory functions, and has come to seem so essentially photographic.

What is at work in those books is an attempt to show how objects are in some integral way metonymic – which is to say capable of standing in their smallness and their individuation for something far larger than themselves. Jude has all along been fascinated, it would seem, by the discursive capabilities of things transfigured into images, and by the limitations of photography when it is set to the task of speaking for something as diffuse and complex as childhood, or landscape. In *Alpine Star* and *emmett*, the photographic subject and its seemingly unordered and improvised sequence celebrates an unshakeable sense of possibility, in youth, in memory, in the image and in the landscape.

Just as in *Alpine Star* and *emmett*, where no material supports are provided with which to orientate ourselves in relation to the broader meaning of what the images depict, ambiguity and a certain open imprecision are the structuring force behind the work in *Lick Creek Line*. The text on the interior front cover of the book, and in the written insert, suggest a clarity, an objectivity that the photographs subsequently refuse to provide. Here again, landscape will be a thing of our creation. This sort of indeterminacy as concept is mirrored in the structure of the images, and in their peripatetic and musical sequencing. By way of 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 that the lens describes – the rubric of each landscape constantly suggesting that the *whole thing* lies elsewhere.

In *Lick Creek Line*, we are drawn toward and around a landscape no single picture seeks to describe or encapsulate, so that to some extent the geography builds cumulatively from our apprehension of, or our construction of a whole made out of eloquent pieces. In truth each landscape photograph, however broad and cohesive, is itself fragmentary, but the rhetoric of a sweeping view, and what Paul Graham has described as the ‘false democracy of deep focus’ dissuade us of what we instinctually know to be true. Jude has said that “[m]eaninglessness – or a lack of orientation (...) – can liberate you from the determinism (and false comfort) that comes with the notion of cosmic order”, indicating

what I take to be a firmly held belief that an unsettled and partial way of broaching landscape can be liberating for the reader of the photographic image. The recurring figure of the map in various photographs enriches this broader sense of ambiguity, especially as all of this is compounded by two opening stanzas of images that seem to operate along the precepts of conventional cinematic sequence, delivering to us person, place, and action.



Ron Jude // Lick Creek Line

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Jude so frequently composes images that invite the act of discovery in their elegant intimation of a space beyond the frame, in their tendency to point toward an elsewhere deeper in, or ever so slightly out of reach. His grasp of the landscape expresses itself in the poetics of an *elsewhere*, a recognition of the tendency in our view of the landscape always to be drawn toward a point in its arrangement before us that we may never reach – a vibrant magnetic life within the view we cannot touch. His photographs continually illustrate the inevitable insufficiency of the image to the appetites of desire by refusing at every turn to give us at least the sense of having got it all, by insisting formally on their fragmentary nature.

The 'scene' in all his images is given to us in terms that underscore their provisionality, a way of working in the landscape diametrically opposed to the stentorian register of the King Survey photographs that first inscribed American geography onto popular consciousness. As a consequence, in Jude's landscapes we have a sense of the temporary, the contingent, the ephemeral – a sense of the inevitable dissolution of the fixed boundaries of the frame. Everything everywhere is slipping, altered, faded, changing. Rather than provoke anxiety this can induce a kind of reverie, urge an improvised response, one which depends upon no

absolute truths: the pleasures of the search being such that they outweigh the comforts of certainty. The iterative evolution of this way of working has always been wedded to the complexities of the subject matter at hand, and is in that sense never purely incidental. In *Lick Creek Line*, this elliptical rhythm results in a resonant interplay between form and content, one that leaves the viewer with the kind of retinal afterglow of a photographic sequence that feels impermanent enough to seem afterward merely to shimmer.



There is unquestionably an inevitable feeling of pronounced interiority to these images, that issues, I think, from their habit of restating their discontinuity. The photographs build up an opaque single-point perspective that can, at least in isolation from other elements, seem close to solipsistic. However there is a counterweight to the interior nature of the formal qualities of the work, which arises from the morally complex set of circumstances at work in what the images themselves depict – from the nature of their content. These attendant issues are themselves far larger than the minor question of form in photography, but nevertheless inescapably and elegantly wedded to it.

Looking in and looking out through many of these photographs recalls the effort and serendipitous joy of discovery to be found on any purposeless walk through the woods. However, this sense of discovery is complicated both by irrepressible, recurring allusions to a conflict

between trapper and prey, and by the pointedly contrasting living conditions of the homes we circle around and enter. While we are invited to lightly circumnavigate intersecting trails, shorelines and riverbanks, treading here and there almost on the footsteps of the trapper who frequently serves as our guide, tracking his movement and the traces of the prey he seeks to snare, the reverie of the hunt is foreshortened by images that pointedly question human efforts to control the workings of this landscape. The calibrated measurements of wilderness laid out in maps are contrasted with the opacity of the forests themselves, the numbering of trees contrasted with the impermanent traces of feet trudging through snow, the elegant carvings of miniature bird figures, the orderly arrangement of wooden logs and cabin walls counterpointed by the riotous inconsistencies of trees... All indices of human intervention in the wilderness here seem in constant need of renewal and care, as measured against the irrepressible cycles of growth that give life to the landscape. Those visible remnants of violence which we are given to see have been introduced by human interventions, and the orderliness of a folded sable coat perched on a cushioned seat, or the elegant procession of ski lifts seem absurd and anachronistic when they are set against the incidental beauties of a canopy of trees.

Lick Creek Line is cognisant of the ecological anxiety that characterises the historical moment of its making, and is not only aware of but willing to engage with the contest for moral supremacy that so often frames discussion of humanity's extractive relationship to nature, but the work is utterly uninterested in the traditional opposition of archetypes. Sable fur serves the vicissitudes of fashion, which is almost exclusively the preserve of a wealth that distances itself from the blood and guts that its demand requires. Luxury is always bloodless in its ornament, but has never been produced without the spilling of it, and these images argue that no honest accounting of this complex moral terrain is complete that does not implicate us all in the balance. The images clarify the differentiated kinds of ownership that regulate the terrain in which they were made, and suggest that even our romantic engagement with the wilderness is in some sense complicit in the difficulty of our present relations to it. Even in this remote parcel of land – enormous as we enter into it, but small against the breadth of the nation – the old familiar adages of capital and commodity have reached in from without, rendering wilderness into neatly terraced views, turning animal into commodity. The narrow provisions of purely functional homes give way to the luxuries of plush, carpeted space; pine cones like relics of a natural order are arranged as centrepieces on coffee tables, while the doorways

to humbler houses are carpeted in wood chips and mud. The ornate interiors of resorts and well appointed cabins are filled with trophies of the wild, lacquered in wood and velvety fabric – seeming tame, almost antiseptic. These stand at odds with the meagre provisions of the woodsmen’s cabins, which have the improvised air of homes for which each renovation is necessarily provisional and inevitably incomplete.

The formal qualities of this approach to documentary photography are interesting to consider in the light of the self-consciousness that postmodern critique introduced into so much contemporary artistic practice. What these intentionally elliptical images produce is in fact self-awareness, a recognition that the work of making narrative meaningful is and was always ours to accept. If the traditional photographic address of documentary photography depended on fixed moral positions within an ostensibly objective framework, Jude’s photographs refuse to situate the viewer in the fixed position of moral superiority from which space and clarity can be neatly mapped. An effort of imaginative sympathy, and of interrogation is required to disentangle the interweaving themes at play in the work. Whatever conclusions we might draw will necessarily be provisional, but might be sufficient to persuade us to make such a way of reading images the grounds for a way of engaging with the world.

In discarding the seductions of a totalising photographic register, in dismissing an ostensibly all-encompassing objective form of photographic composition, Jude’s images reiterate and persuade us to repossess the original strangeness of perception: they illustrate in their completion and their partiality the always synthetic nature of perception, which is revealed to be a shifting exchange between intention and presence, between the I that sees and the complex of fragments that constitute the place (and time) of vision. In the end, I think that the intended result of these images is not something as objective as knowledge, but incantation – a calling into being, an effort at retrieving some articulate fragment of the place of the work’s making, a bringing into presence of the world of the work itself. The photographs in sequence are a form of negotiation between the photographer’s recollection of home, the inexhaustible limitations of the photographic image, and the irresistible temptation through both to tell a story.

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To cover the world, to cross it in every direction, will only ever be to know a few square metres of it, a few acres, tiny incursions into disembodied vestiges, small, incidental excitements, improbable quests congealed in a

mawkish haze a few details of which will remain in our memory: out beyond the railway stations and the roads, and the gleaming runways of airports, and the narrow strips of land illuminated for a brief moment by an overnight express, out beyond the panoramas too long anticipated and discovered too late, and the accumulations of stones and the accumulations of works of art, it will be three children perhaps running along a bright white road, or else a small house on the way out of Avignon, with a wooden lattice door once painted green, the silhouetted outline of trees on top of a hill near Saarbrücken, four uproarious fat men on the terrace of a café in the outskirts of Naples, the main street of Brionne, in the Eure, two days before Christmas, around six in the evening, the coolness of a covered gallery in the souk at Sfax, a tiny dam across a Scottish loch, the hairpin bends of a road near Corvol-l'Orgueilleux. 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.

– **Georges Perec** “The World” in *Species of Spaces*

