



PHANTOMS IN THE DIRT

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MoCP
Museum of
Contemporary Photography

“EVEN IF ONE NO LONGER SPEAKS OF PAINTING AS A WINDOW OPENED ONTO THE WORLD, THE MODERNIST PICTURE IS STILL CONCEIVED AS A VERTICAL SECTION THAT PRESUPPOSES THE VIEWER’S HAVING FORGOTTEN THAT HIS OR HER FEET ARE IN THE DIRT.”¹

This remark is just a passing observation in *Formless: A User’s Guide*, Yve-Alain Bois and Rosalind Krauss’s polemical book inspired by Georges Bataille, but one might take it as an open doorway leading onto a gritty path of its own. The authors remind us that we all exist in a physical world in our all-too-material bodies, while artworks tend to be held apart from the stuff of the earth—in both mind and practice. This assertion still holds true today with some notable exceptions, looking beyond modernist pictures to more recent artworks, but it’s worth remembering that the ground beneath our feet isn’t

necessarily neutral or inert; like so many things, dirt can contain and carry much more than one can see.

The exhibition *Phantoms in the Dirt* brings together artworks that scrutinize and make use of the rough world of matter (the dirt beneath our feet, so to speak), but the artists whose works are presented here are also equally attuned to the mutability of photographic meaning and to the equivocal presence of remnants and traces. While that brief synopsis might suffice as an abridged introduction to the show, the photographs and

sculptures in the exhibition are hardly so quick to declare their aims; instead each one offers a more enigmatic face to the viewer, at least initially. These works, above all, stand on their own as a set of clues to various mysteries still being written. Consider a few of the features in these works: an endless plume of smoke rising out of the ground, a wall covered in blackened eucalyptus bark, rolling hills infused with a vivid pink, a sliver of light beside a golden pyramid, the marks of radiation left behind on buried rolls of film, a jumble of sticks and a bees' nest and what appears to be a human hand in a corner, a swarm of locusts that breaks down into particles as you approach, and an empty ranch at the edge of the desert where it turns out Charles

Manson hid out years ago. Rather than rallying artists around a familiar theme or pinning them to a predetermined idea, *Phantoms in the Dirt* took shape more inquisitively from these cryptic beginnings. So one might reasonably start with more essential questions: what are you seeing here, and what do you make of it? From there one might think about the qualities, or the underlying outlooks or operations, that these sometimes very different artworks have in common.

A few things become clearer as one keeps looking. All the works embody certain ways of grappling with the rough material world, directing attention to elemental matter—wood and iron, water and dirt, or rugged, sparsely inhabited

landscapes—while also dealing with more elusive things, whether a sense of atmosphere, latent apparitions, or the subtle transmutations occurring in a photographic image. These artists present their subjects in calm, matter-of-fact ways, and yet their works are steeped in an ineffable quality that seems to radiate from material stuff itself, from the mute facts of matter. It's an unusual combination, this sensitivity to both the substantial and the ephemeral, to the immediacy of physical things and to the ways that visual evidence can also point to what isn't so easily perceived or deciphered.

Notably, certain works here allude to types of photography that place a pre-

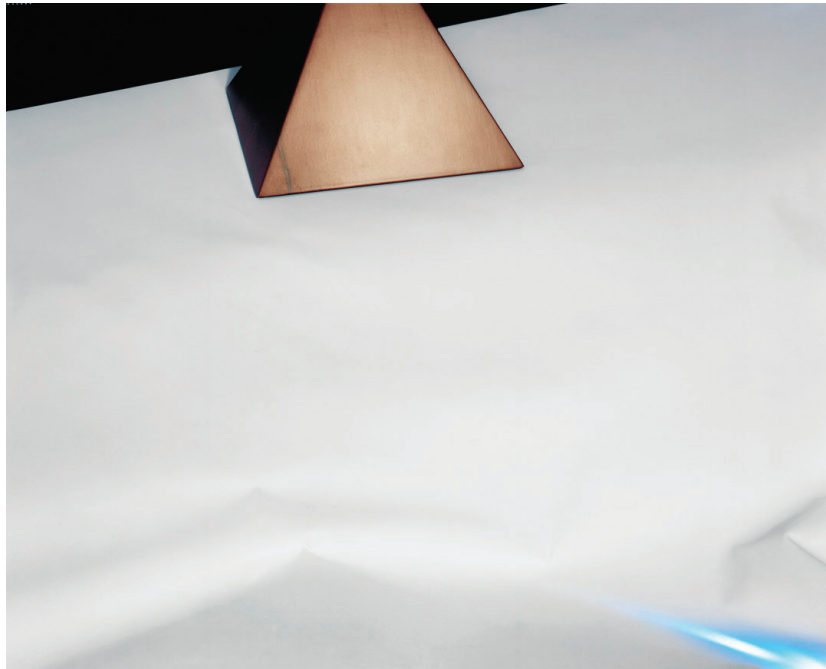


mium on the medium's empirical capacities, such as scientific microscopy, forensics, and social documentary photography. Those particular discourses hinge on the notion of visual proof. Even styles and analytical methods, the artists in question also deliberately arouse subjective readings and second guesses. They build improbable edifices on factual foundations, one might say, yet they do so without denying what is plainly there to see. For instance, detailed photographs of dirt particles seem to transform rudimentary matter into expansive moonscapes. In another work, a humanoid form with sticks for bones looks like the remnants of a crime scene while also invoking a kind of inanimate life. Other artists here explicitly transform their imagery or generate more surreal effects, and yet they do so through basic operations that are matter-of-fact in their own right. Producing an endless column

of smoke can be as simple as inverting the colors of a looped video clip. A monumental landscape takes on an arresting pink complexion, the byproduct of an infrared film capable of registering a spectrum of light normally invisible to the human eye. The elemental world of matter, as it comes to the fore in these works, starts looking otherworldly, but no one seems to be blinking.

These observations potentially recall classic dichotomies between the earthly and the supernatural, or the corporeal and the spiritual. But phantoms in the dirt don't have to be ghosts floating among us; the phrase could

also describe any number of worldly occurrences or sublunary phenomena. Pollution spreads unseen through the waterways, and radiation lingers in the ground. Invisible things have tangible effects (and often tangible sources). At the very least, what appears most ghostlike in a photograph can sometimes be explained by the ripple effects of matter or the interaction between the organic and the photochemical: a glitch in the camera apparatus, perhaps, or the outcome when photograph-



ic paper is exposed to, say, lake water or mold. *Phantoms in the Dirt* also includes sculptures by four artists, a distinctive presence in a museum devoted to photography. These rusty objects, apparently extracted from some other place in the world, are a different kind of remnant or trace, serving as a counterpoint to the photographs. They are certainly more tangible and immediate—the thing itself, not a two-dimensional depiction—but despite their substance, they are not wholly unequivocal either.

The artists whose works appear in *Phantoms in the Dirt* suggest in various ways that something is at stake here, wheth-

er it's how we look at the world (both its material and immaterial aspects) or how we try to understand what happens around us. It's a truism to say that everything is getting more dematerialized these days, a claim usually followed by a cursory nod to new technologies and the internet—and yet there you have it: the ground beneath your feet, same as always. Nevertheless, it means something different now to make artworks like these: the backdrop is changing, and it has done so in significant ways even since *Formless: A User's Guide* was published in 1996, when Bois and Krauss pointed to the dirt we somehow continue to forget. Theoretical understandings of the material world, for one, have been shaken up in recent decades: physicists now tell us 85 to 90 percent of the universe is composed of unobservable dark matter, while proponents of chaos theory and complexity theory have shown that “the physical world is a mercurial stabilization

of dynamic processes”—ideas that are trickling down through the culture at large.² Solid stuff might be in the minority, at least on a subatomic level, and it is becoming increasingly evident that the emergent properties of the planetary ecosystem or the global economy, to name two obvious examples, are unpredictable and continue to elude full understanding.

A trace, by definition, is likewise inconclusive, though its very incompleteness can also make it suggestive and intriguing. It can be a visible mark or physical object, or a barely perceptible hint of something. Either way, the trace

indicates the existence of some greater force, or the former presence of something that's no longer there—which is to say, it points beyond itself, often enigmatically. To think in these terms is to weigh both the tenuous palpability of the trace and the elusiveness of the larger entity (the missing something) to which the trace refers. As closely attentive as the works in *Phantoms in the Dirt* are to the nitty-gritty and the photographic, they often have larger frames of reference; they hint, in traces and sometimes in their titles, at current economic realities, at tangled geopolitical histories, or at complex conditions today in which matter plays its part alongside human actors. Rust Belt towns in the American heartland fall into decline. The first working nuclear reactor is buried in a forest preserve outside of Chicago—the inconspicuous origins of the nuclear age and the seed of a history that led to both power plants and atomic bombs. Armed struggle and violence continues in the Democratic Republic of Congo, a poor country rich in mineral resources. A super volcano lies waiting to erupt underneath Yellowstone National Park. That's only to name a few. Behind other works lurk other stories, sometimes just out of sight.

Perhaps to the artists' credit, the works presented in this exhibition don't urge us into theoretical realms, opting to focus instead on material traces that are closer at hand, though shadowed by larger realities. There's plenty to grapple with there already, especially as subjective impressions or projected meaning overwrite our encounters with elemental things and unassuming places—a quandary amplified by photographs, which create their own kind of equivocal distance from the substance of the world. With these diverse considerations in mind, ranging from the material to the mysterious, one might reasonably look for an appropriate parting image rather than a final conclusion: in three photographs in *Phantoms in the Dirt*, a bright white rectangle appears in various dusty landscapes, as if wandering around on its own, a blank spot—perhaps a cipher or lacuna—not only in these photographic images, but also out there in the rugged world itself.

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¹ Yves-Alain Bois and Rosalind E. Krauss, *Formless: A User's Guide* (Cambridge and London: MIT Press, 1996), 25.

² Diana Coole and Samantha Frost (eds.), *New Materialisms: Ontology, Agency, and Politics* (Durham, NC and London: Duke University Press, 2010), 13.

In their introduction to this anthology, the editors provide a lengthier account of scientific and theoretical positions that are changing ideas about matter, of which these are just a few; see 1-24.

Photo Credits

Page 1.

Shannon Ebner

Untitled Blank No. 3, 2008

Courtesy of WallSpace, New York

Page 2.

Harold Mendez

Panic dwindled into jitters into detached fascination. It was just a show.

The longer I watched the less I felt. Events coupled, cavorted, and vanished, emotion hanging in mid air before my lemur eyes like a thin shred of homeless ectoplasm. It was cool. It was like drowning in syrup.

(After Sally Mann), 2008-2011

Courtesy of the artist

Page 3.

Adam Schreiber

Remains, 2011

Courtesy of the artist and Sasha Wolf Gallery, New York

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