



No. 2

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Difficulties and Dogmas

Though photography has ancient precursors, like the camera obscura, pursuing photography as a means for producing lasting images is a relatively recent (beginning of the 19th c.) phenomenon. Even more recent is the invention of technologies that allow a photographer to, in a systematic (and thus repeatable) way, manipulate light to achieve anything like style. And so, as a stable artform, photography is incredibly novel, and its status as an artform has always been contested by those enamored with the more established fine arts. Frederick H. Evans (d. 1943) once complained that “the great difficulty I have is in getting handworkers in any art to allow that I have any right to say or think that photography can be a means of expression” (The Photographic Journal, XXIV.8: 1900).

The primary challenge directed at the photographer is to produce images that stand as artworks worthy of captivating our aesthetic interest and respect on their own terms. Many have supposed that the only reasons we have to take interest in a photograph are instrumental. Many different forms of this argument have been given, with more or less precision (for instance, the recent exchange in (Scruton 1989), (Lopes 2003), and (Phillips 2007)). We may value a photograph because it functions in a merely documentary way, enabling us to see a faithful representation of its subject when we would ordinarily be unable to access it. The illusion of photographic “transparency”—our being able to see the subject “through” its surface—makes them highly useful for these documentary purposes. What is interesting about the purely documentary photograph, however, is not the photograph itself, but the subject. Extending the legal text analogy given in (No. 1), such a photograph functions as a pure instrument, a mere way of easily accessing an interesting subject. The photograph itself would be expendable, so the argument runs, if the subject were before us. As such, the photograph deserves praise only as a (more or less) effective tool, and the photographer functions only as a sort of technician.

Can photography overcome these sorts of objections? If so, then the artistic photograph must be capable of standing on its own as an object worthy of our aesthetic interest (again, as described in No. 1).

Pictorialism was an early photographic movement designed to answer these sorts of challenges. The pictorialist attitude adopts photographic technology as just one more tool used to produce an aesthetic object irreducible to its uses, compositional history, or conceptual contents. The pictorialist uses the camera in a “painterly” way. Unlike the following era of “straight” photography, faithful, ultrasharp reproduction of a subject was not the pictorialist concern. Neither would the pictorialist hesitate to heavily manipulate or alter...



Dollhouse Window #1



Carhartt

...the photographic negative in the name of “photographic purity,” that senseless bias demanded by the most naive of the dogmatic purists. I am thinking in particular of Paul Strand (d. 1976), who, though having produced some fine photographs, was quite a poor thinker given to extreme arrogance manifesting as a tendency to elevate his own personal preferences to the rank of dogma. He once wrote that “the very essence of photography” is “absolute, unqualified objectivity,” and declared the pictorialist ideal of painting with the camera to be “merely the expression of an impotent desire to paint;” per Strand, pictorialists were responsible for the bad reputation of photography, leading many to think of it as “a poor excuse for an inability to do anything else” (Seven Arts, Aug. 1917).

Such philosophical unsophistication is now commonplace, many having unintentionally adopted an extreme form of Strand's views over the course of a century. With the prevalence of digital cameras, photography has been democratized, and we are inundated by a never ending stream of nearly pure images. What's more, the masses, having become photographers through the distribution of technology, look to voraciously consume a further kind of photograph, in addition to the hyper-clear: the nostalgic. The former consists in perfectly faithful reproduction of the subject, and many so-called artists pay handsomely for photographic equipment that can closely mimic the human eye. The latter kind of photograph is merely a simulation of the messier, more organic photographic technology of the past, not towards some artistic end, but merely as a way of stirring up memories of the photographic past (reducing the photography to a mere tool for sentimental recollection).

As a result, the photograph is now associated with the commonplace, the sentimental and the plain. Viewers on one end of the audience are hostile to the challenging, lacking attention span for anything that is not easily grasped; on the other, more snobbish extreme, our audience finds themselves prepared to dismiss any photograph as a commonplace triviality.

And so the open-minded photographer faces not only the first challenge of making a work of art that can stand on its own, but of overcoming both the puritanical or merely nostalgic expectations of contemporary audiences, and the association of the photograph with the commonplace. How can our photographs effectively make demands upon an audience overfed on exactly what they desire, while rising to the level of a fine art? The following photographs are my experiments in pictorialism, and I hope to have produced at least one thing worthy of stirring up my viewers' love.



Somewhere in UT



Brewster, WA



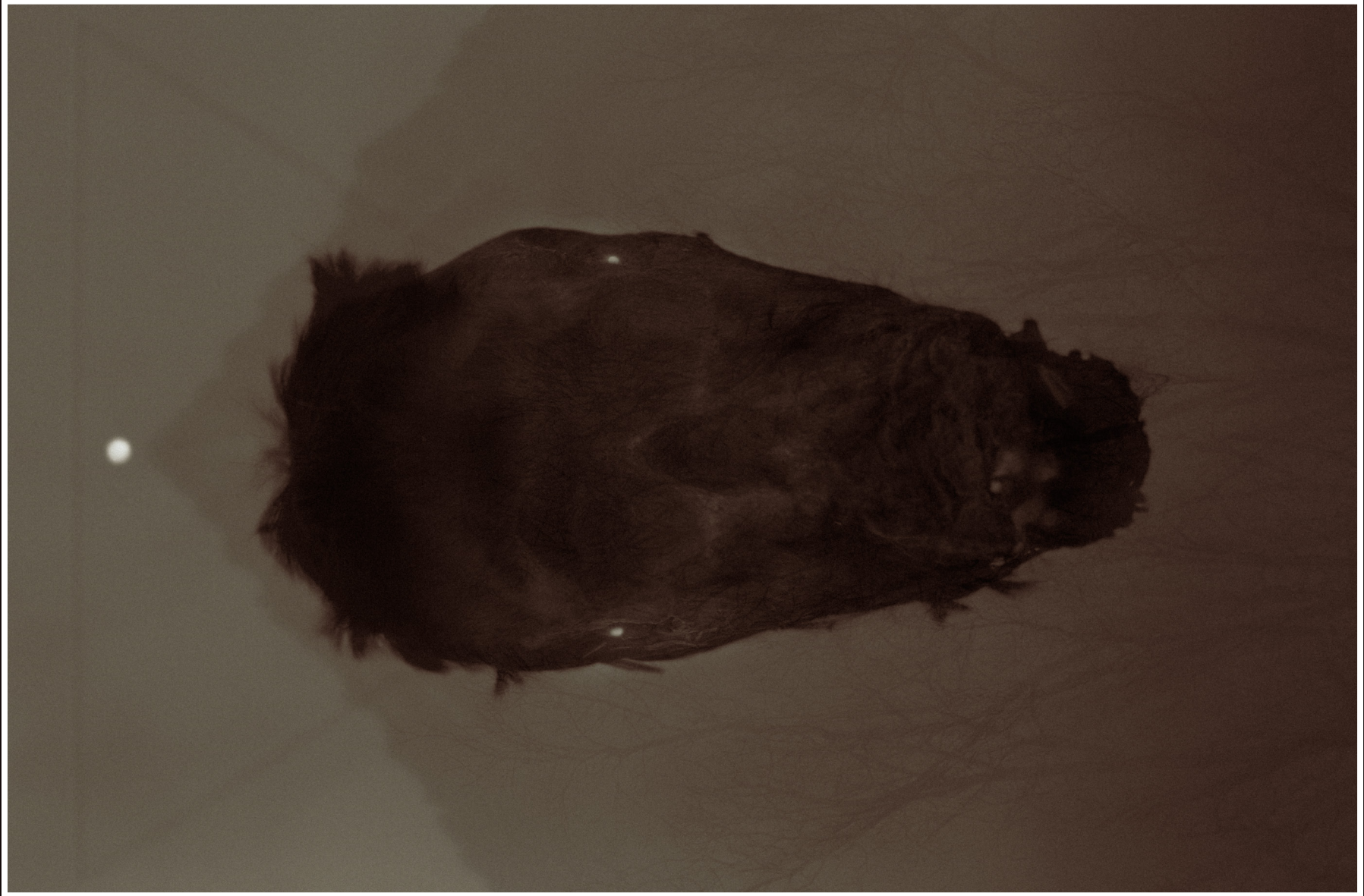
Somewhere in CO #1



Somewhere in CO #2



Near Tulsa, OK



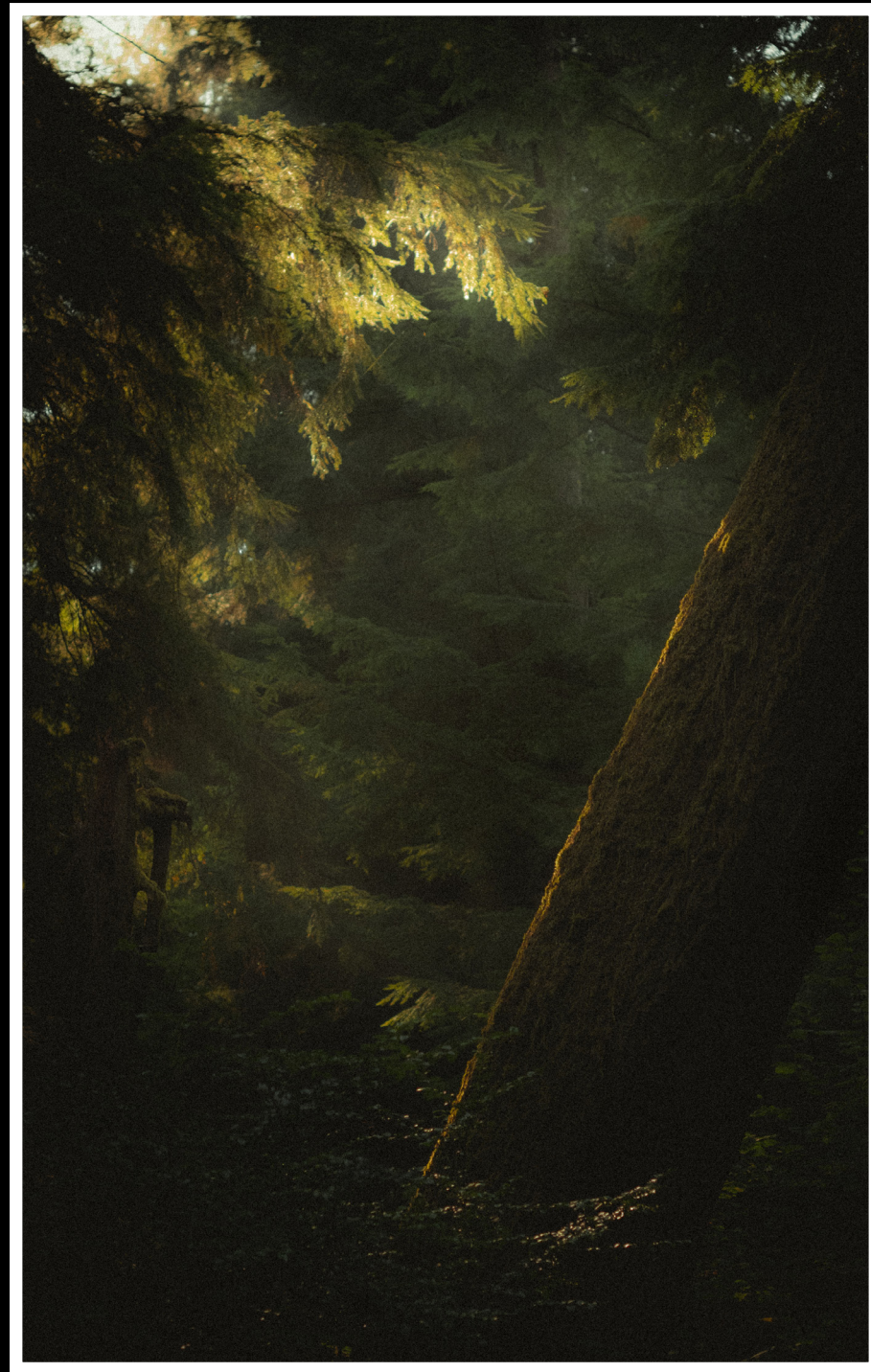
Descent from Hermon



Dollhouse Window #2



Clover in Amber



Point Defiance Park #1
Tacoma WA



Point Defiance Park #2
Tacoma WA



Valley of Dry Bones



No. 2: Difficulties and Dogmas

Music can captivate the ear in an instant; films are able to command attention through motion. But a still image, no matter how beautiful, is easy to overlook unless presented as something set apart from the ordinary. This photobook series is an attempt to liberate our view of photography from purely instrumentalist or hedonistic understandings. Each begins with a short essay on aesthetics, intended to frame the spirit of the pictures that follow.

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