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The Air That Rests on the Horizon

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THE AIR THAT RESTS ON THE HORIZON

a senior project by Jane Sartwell

May 2022
“Involuntarily I pictured a solitude with an immense horizon and widely diffused light; in other words, immensity with no other setting than itself.”

— Charles Baudelaire

My photographs are an attempt to transform the landscape with a camera. The physicality of moving through the world with the view camera and a tripod is central to my work. It requires me to find my footing, to consciously sense my own body in the landscape. It allows me to more clearly see the subtle geometries and irregularities of the world, those captivating and quiet moments I want to photograph. I am fascinated by the calligraphic marks in soil and pavement, the tension of feet just barely grazing the floor, the constellations left by melting snow.

Searching for these whispers keeps me looking at and framing my world, confronting it at odd angles with strange tools. My intention, above all, is to take the world by surprise. I try to willfully disorient myself in the landscape, to allow the big to get small and the small to get big. I try to ignore my ingrained spatial logic, which relies on visual anchors like the horizon line. The horizon places us within the familiar proportions of a body and the comfortability of a central perspective. I am interested in how difficult it is to place oneself in an image without a horizon, how it becomes possible to fall in and out of the picture, all the while remaining suspended on the flat surface of the image. The singularity of my vantage point begins to waver and join up with other possible perspectives.
Often, an alternative, illogical horizon line presents itself. The horizon is the single seam which distinguishes earth from sky. It forms proportions, angles, and ratios. An imagined horizon causes this seam to multiply and disperse into many seams, into threads that could weave together a blanket — flat yet flexible. Challenging myself to see differently is central to my photographic process. The words of Vilém Flusser are often with me when I am shooting: “The gesture of photographing is a movement in search of a position that reveals both an internal and an external tension driving the search forward: this gesture is the movement of doubt. To observe the photographer’s gesture with this in mind is to watch the unfolding of methodical doubt.” This doubt is what allows me to break from my typical methods of making sense of a scene.

I present gray abstraction as an alternative logic of landscape. This tendency toward abstraction allows me to challenge conceptions of natural space and the body. I intend to make photographs that are less about their subject and more about their elusive internal tensions. I want the images to break down into a balancing act of equal and opposite forces: emptiness and fullness, flatness and depth, ambiguity and clarity, shrinkage and expansion, silence and interruption. This is what allows the images to exist in the realm of the imaginary, what permits me to walk on imaginary terrain. I want to find an unfamiliar footing in the real world; I want to breathe with the air that rests on the horizon.