



ALL THE RIGHT

# ANGLES

THE SHIFTING FOCUS OF BILL JACOBSON'S PHOTOGRAPHY



Bill Jacobson: *Place (Series) #425*, 2010, pigment print mounted to museum board, 37 x 31 inches; left, *Untitled #4033*, 1999, chromogenic print mounted to museum board, 30 x 36 inches (print size)



the effects during the enlarging process. Sometimes it was both. Asked about his techniques for blurring the scenes, he said, "Well, technically, I've never blurred a picture, because blurring implies movement, and I've never done that. Basically these are out of focus, but they're also diffused, or I sometimes used a very low-tech enlarging lens. I really prefer to call these altered images."

When he was doing those, he experimented with scanning the negatives to make inkjet prints rather than using the traditional chemical printing process with an enlarger. But that never worked well. "There were all kinds of technical, perceptual problems," he said.

Jacobson has used a 4 x 5 view camera since 1992. He prefers it because it "forces a certain stillness. It forces you to slow down and really look and think about what's going to be exposed on that sheet of film." It is noteworthy that he has stuck with a traditional film camera — and with a large camera requiring the use of bulky sheet film, a tripod, and a dark cloth over the head for composing the image — in this age of the automatic and the electronic and, by all means, the convenient.

To illustrate his stance, he told a little story that depends on an understanding of the photographic term *available light*. Also known as "existing light," it means shooting only with the light found at the scene; some photographers have favored this situation, eschewing the use of flash, for example.

"I saw Garry Winogrand speak back in the 1970s, and somebody asked if he believed in using available light, and he said, 'I use any damn light that's available,' which I think is great. It's about not having rules."

The Connecticut native spent five years on the West Coast but has long lived in New York. He has been a member of the graduate faculty of the International Center of Photography in that city since 2008. He has done six artist residencies at the MacDowell Colony in Peterborough, New Hampshire, since 1996.

Examples of his work are held in the collections of the Whitney Museum of American Art and the Guggenheim Museum in New York; the Corcoran Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C.; and the Fonds National d'Art Contemporain in Paris, among many other institutions. His work is represented by Julie Saul Gallery, New York; Robert Klein Gallery, Boston; and Milliken Gallery, Stockholm.

Jacobson's work is featured in three monographs: *bill jacobson 1989-1997* (1998); *Photographs* (2005), with an essay by photographic historian Eugenia Parry; and *A Series of Human Decisions* (2009), which includes a Jacobson interview with Tang Museum curator Ian Berry.

The title of that last volume is also the name of the series he did after deciding to leave behind the out-of-focus photography. "In 2004, I made the decision to shift the camera in-focus, and that required a relearning of photography, a new way of seeing that I had abandoned for a decade and a half. With that, I did a very analytical series of in-focus architecture and interiors called *A Series of Human Decisions* from 2004 to 2009.

"The out-of-focus work was a very internalized way of perceiving the world, and once I made the decision to go in-focus, I started thinking about the physical construct of the world around us. They are two very, very different ways of making images, but I think one implies the other. What's missing in one ends up in the other. So it was kind of a yin-yang process of compensating, of filling in. ... The out-of-focus work was completely devoid of physical description; the new body of work became completely about physical description." He has now forsaken the enlarger for the in-focus work, which he has found can be presented brilliantly using inkjet technology.

And what about that rectangle? "The shape came out of *A Series of Human Decisions*, shooting the real world and thinking about how the physical world is constructed. When I analyzed the pictures I was taking, everything is broken down into geometric constructs like this."

For the second iteration of his renewed satisfaction with in-focus photography, he found himself seeking out the "very flat horizon lines" of arid Western lands. Thus the 2007-2008 *Some Planes* series, which includes high abstractions composed at White Sands and other sites. The rectangle is present there, but it is more baldly resolved in *Place (Series)*. "This refers to how places are constructed, and I wanted to approach the work with the notion that the rectangles are the centerpiece," he said.

The series includes one photo with a central rectangular frame filled with graffiti. That one is an excerpt from the vocabulary of the New York streetscape. Others are even more naked, their vertical rectangular shapes standing against lighter and darker horizontal rectangles — each one abstractly but fundamentally representing a horizon image — formed by a plain tabletop in front of a plain wall.

"This is perhaps the least emotional work I've done, but it talks about very human archetypes: how we construct space, how we create images, how we create the world around us; and as formal as these are, I think they speak to something very human."

The superimposed-rectangular-plane pictures fit strangely into the terms of his career-long dialogue about humans and human-designed spaces contrasted with, or perhaps simply co-existing with, nature. "The title *Place (Series)* refers to place as a noun and the act of placing, a verb, and I think the decisions I've made creating these spaces and placing these objects within these spaces talks about human desire and the choices people make every day.

"The older I get, the more I see how the work has changed dramatically over 22 years, but I also see a very strong consistency," Jacobson said. "Now I get even more clarity on what holds the different bodies of work together." ◀

## details

- ▼ Bill Jacobson: *Place (Series): New Photographs*
- ▼ Exhibition through May 12
- ▼ James Kelly Contemporary, 550 S. Guadalupe St., 989-1601

he rectangle is a special shape in Bill Jacobson's newest *Place (Series)* photographs. Although there is nothing inherently, obviously cryptic about it, the vertical rectangular plane (sometimes barely taller than a square) appears iconic and powerful. It may remind you of the obelisk in *2001: A Space Odyssey*, the way it seems to suddenly appear here and there in different contexts, including standing starkly in a field of clover against a forest background.

James Kelly Contemporary has the first solo show of the *Place (Series)* photos on view through May 19. The prints pose an interesting contrast to Jacobson's earlier series, several examples of which are included in the exhibition.

His early, characteristically unfocused photographs include the pale, almost manikin-like *Interim Portraits* series and the ghostly figure studies in *Song of Sentient Beings*. "Those go back to 1989," he said during a perusal of the prints at James Kelly. "I graduated from San Francisco Art Institute [earning an MFA] in 1981, and I took a break. For about seven years, I didn't do much work for myself. I had moved to New York, and I did a lot of commercial work, documenting artwork. I think all those years I spent shooting other people's paintings and sculpture actually influenced this new work quite a bit. The out-of-focus photographs, I think, were a reaction to all that commercial work. It gave me the freedom and independence to do something that was distinctly my own."

He retained the out-of-focus methodology but shifted to color for two series — *Untitled* and *New Year's Day* — after visiting India in 1999. Like his previous works, these series dealt with issues of presence and absence and talked about "images that have not yet been created as well as the multitude of images that have been created throughout time."

For each out-of-focus series, he used a different process. Some were made that way with the camera, and in others he improvised

