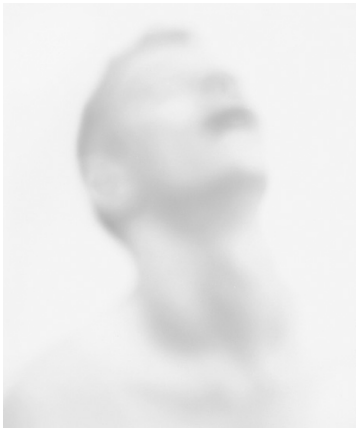
Palinode

> I dipped my finger in the Styx and—
> spoiler alert—I don't understand love.
> Alan Felsenthal, "Past Life Palinode," (2017)

Bill Jacobson's exhibition at the Hiram Butler Gallery, his first solo exhibition in Houston since his mid-career survey at the Blaffer Art Museum in 2000, is titled simply *Regards*. A way of looking used as a closing of esteem and even affection, we generally sign "regards" as a reflex action without reflection. Nonetheless, "regards" takes its performative power to enact what it describes from the condensed economy by which it replays and relays the act of looking with a reflexively implied bow of deference. Derived, it is worth remembering, from guard, "regards" promises not the pretend security of invasive and weaponized surveillance. Rather, it is to exercise the relational protections of respect through the repetitions required for reciprocal care. However, if we introduce the camera into this scene, what happens to this care-work of regard? Is there such a thing as a photographic regard capable of such respect?

Regarding Bill Jacobson's *Regards* with respect to the artist signature we may think we know, what may seem most significant about *Regards* is what is *not* here. There is no trace of the artist of the melancholy mood and mode of the formal indistinction of the photographic blur—celebrated in the past tense. Or, as Mark Alice Durant puts it:

> When Bill Jacobson's out-of-focus photographs were first exhibited in the early 1990s they were a revelation. Emotional, psychological, political, lovely and haunting, they seemed to whisper important things about the state of photography and a crisis of representation catalyzed by the AIDS crisis.[i]



As Jacobson recounts it, "he began his signature, indistinct images in 1989."[ii] Jacobson often speaks of the spectral, waking-dream quality of the out-of-focus haze as a materialized analogue of the ephemeral and even furtive imaging processes of the memory work of desire. Jacobson's blur refuses the particularizing details demanded by identificatory localization (this body, this place). The blur's indistinctions solicit us into the intimate estrangement that is the lure of the photographic encounter. They offer a space of extimacy which is not the opposite of intimacy. Rather, extimacy is an intimate estrangement that magnetizes the charged otherness inside. The extimacy of Jacobson's blur swirls with the charge of a residual magnetism irresolvable to the polar binaries of negative or positive that prompts an aesthetic sense of remanence. And it demands a certain kind of work from us as spectators.[iii] Cue the sound of British duo Erasure's 1988 anthem, "A Little Respect" with its synth beat repetitions of plaintive direct address: "give a little respect to me." In confronting Jacobson's blur, their lyric refrain "why you making me work so hard?" turns around to become your charge as spectator.[iv]

Yet, attending to the collected edge-work of Jacobson's turn to sharpened focus asks no less of us. *Regards* convenes a highly condensed selection of twelve photographic prints drawn together from all four of the main bodies of what Jacobson calls the "in-focus" work. Across three prints from *Some Planes* (2007-2008), horizon lines hover less as the desert landscapes we are told they are than as floating color field frictions of contact between surface planes. In three geometric plays from *Place (Series)* (2009-2013), provisional arrangements of rectangles linger indeterminately between the made and the found. They make of place (whether out there or in here) not a grounding given but a vertiginous verb form. The place at work in *Place (Series)* takes the form of the repeated action of a

serial placing of rectangles within, on, over and beside other rectangles as if into an abyss that stretches both expansively and toward potential collapse. Two clothed bodies from *figure, ground* (2016) occupy the near foregrounds of what might otherwise have been landscape vistas. In quiet defiance, they turn their backs on us in the still, non-ironic, not re-pose of the romantic *Rückenfigur* familiar from Caspar David Friedrich. In their nots, they return us to the nonspecific relations of *Some Planes* and *Place (Series)* to give us figure and ground no longer in the terms of human in or against environment and more as some frictional planes of contact in more-than-human worlds. From *945 Madison Avenue* (2015), four ostensible exceptions to the Jacobson aesthetic rule of non-specification give us a furtive sense of secret access to not just any particular place but the interior thresholds of the Breuer building, the hallowed former address of the Whitney Museum of American Art. Yet, here, in the hollowed interim before being occupied by the Met, what may be palpably absent (artworks, guards, visitors… that yet leave their traces of wear) matters less than that for which their emptying makes room by remaining precisely unspecified.

And, yet, I should take that back at least in part. What I should make clear is that the in-focus work defies comprehensive representation even just in its sheer volume of experimentation—a tiny aperture onto which is opened by the titles that *are* here such as *Place (Series) #665* (there is actually a #1 and a #1215). Further, *Regards* samples *not* from all of the in-focus work, but from those that came after the expansive series that marks the beginning of the sharp turn, *A Series of Human Decisions* (2004-2009) with its title nod to the lesson on the constructed nature of the world as mediated— already saturated, that is, by photographability. "This was the lesson I learned," Jacobson relates, "once I started shooting in focus in 2004."[v]

But what then is the lesson we, as spectators, learn? *Regards* confronts us with the recusal of the Jacobson signature blur. In its place we find the evident mastery of the device of the turn-around as a kind of formal retraction that critics have called an "about-face."[vi] But that is also not quite true. We might, rather, think the recusal of these rectilinear rectangles in terms of the palinode that forms the dividing hinge between parts one and two of Roland Barthes's *Camera Lucida.* (These "notes on photography" were not at all incidentally published in 1980 and translated into English in the year in which Jacobson received his MFA). Here, in the ecstatic gutter of a melancholy gap that cannot (indeed, will not) be closed, Barthes's critical elaboration of that famous photographic prick he called the "punctum" unhinges itself from the kind of taming prophylactics incapable of grasping the real of what photography is. In pursuit of a writing (what we could call its writing of the writerly photograph) that would come as close as possible to the essential madness that constitutes photography's quiet but essential capacity for derangement of the senses and what passes for common sense, Barthes pivots to look inward and recants:

> I would have to descend deeper into myself to find the evidence of Photography, that thing which is seen by anyone looking at a photograph and which distinguishes it in his eyes from any other image. I would have to make my recantation, my palinode.[vii]

The palinode is the technical term for poetic renunciation that joins the two sides of recantation in the form of a poem that revokes a prior one by re-singing it. But the palinode is not an exercise in the *vice versa.*

What is often claimed as the launching instance of the palinode takes us to the recantation of Greek lyric poet Stesichorus invoked by Socrates in Plato's *Phaedrus* 243a at the crucial turn in the dialogue as an education of and between lovers. This is a palinode that takes us back not merely to the lost guard in regards but also to the sense of sight as a volatile responsibility and form of love:

> And so, my friend, I must purify myself. Now for those whose offense lies in telling false stories about matters divine, there is an ancient rite of purification—Homer did not know it but Stesichorus did. When he lost his sight for speaking ill of Helen, he did not, like Homer, remain in the dark about the reason why. On the contrary, true follower of the muses that he was, he understood it immediately and composed these lines:
>
> > There's no truth to that story:
> > You never sailed that lovely ship,
> > You never reached the tower of Troy.[viii]

As Socrates tells it, whereas Stesichorus's palinode works its purgation and restores his sight only after he suffers the loss, Socrates's recantation of Stesichorus strikes, instead, in apotropaic anticipation, delivering its palinode to mad love as the vertiginous basis for philosophical vision.

Apprehended in these terms, Jacobson's recantation of blur cannot be mistaken for a disavowal of his out-of-focus work, but, must, rather, be reckoned with as a palinode to photography's lessons in mad love. In 2003, the year in which Jacobson turned away from blur to work exclusively with "sharp focus," Susan Sontag published *Regarding the Pain of Others*, her indictment of photography's particular violence as a deadly unseeing-machine of the everyday. Through its relentless production of the viewing position of "regard-at-a-distance," photography does not stop the violence it repeats. Instead, it re-diagrams the scene of violence for our consumption from the point of view of a disavowal that makes it possible to participate as if we are not implicated in what we consume.[ix] The regard-at-a-distance that concerns Sontag could not be further from the enfolding geometries of Jacobson's turn from the diffusions of blur and that is precisely the coincident point.

Jacobson's particular poaching of the sharpness of focus produces the effects of neither window nor mirror but, rather, a flatbed field. In holding us contemplatively close, it short-circuits the alibi structure of regard-at-a-distance. The recessive rectangles within rectangles of Jacobson's in-focus

works re-pose the ostensible distancing device of regarding the world through the imposition of a rectangular grid in the apparatus of the camera and its viewfinder. They return the rectangle as site for the estranging intimacy of being held in encounter by the material delicacy of the rectangular photographic print. What Christian Metz called photography's lexis, its comparatively small "silent rectangle of paper," here affords an experience of the world not so much as referenced and much less as indexed by that rectangle of paper but the world as materialized vulnerably in the uncertain promises of a geometry no longer from the outside.[x]

Jacobson's sharp-edged rectangles do not renounce the blur of the fleeting in the meantime of the multiple series in which he explored what he called the "interim." The in-focus work recalls for us that the interim is that strange, intervening temporality that is the temporary. The space-time of the interim is not present, past or future but, rather, that of the mortal and not-at-all triumphal meanwhile. In Jacobson's in-focus works we are not *pace* Friedrich wanderers "above the sea and fog." Nor, as with the iterations of the defocused *Interim* series in the plural, seeing in and through the queer diffusions of fog as an everyday climate and social condition. Rather, the turn to sharp focus in a sense focuses on and, thus, intensifies the interim. It gives us a felt sense of the rectangle as another name for the vital precariousness of the photographic print that defies the dematerialized squares of Instagram to repose the material conditions of our regard as that of our unstable immersion in the flux of the world. Immersion in the nonspecific, even impersonal rectangle in and of the temporary relational arrangements of the world becomes the necessary site within which to learn to navigate by a counter-compass to the naturalized presumption that the right angle or vantage from which to regard (and hence judge and navigate) the world would be through denial of our condition as no less vulnerable geometries ourselves.

But to become focused on the *ad interim* is not merely a negative lesson. Attunement to the time-space of the interim brings into charged constellation—and not a little ecstatically—the avowal of the both/and of Jacobson's palinode to photography's pedagogy of mad love. This is an avowal of both another kind of clarity of vision in de-focused diffusion *and* felt access to another side of sight which is less about seeing clearly than being carried away by the de-specifying drift of the particulate clouds produced by being drawn into edging focus. Jacobson may have ceased making out-of-focus work, but his recantation of blur, nonetheless, retains it—making it, in a sense, sing again.

In the 2011 exhibition at the Julie Saul Gallery in Chelsea, Jacobson rebuffs the narrative teleologies of chronological sequencing and segregations of bounded periodization. And, instead, intermingled in-focus and out-of-focus works spanning three decades of practice under the allure of the directional title, "Into the Loving Nowhere." The exhibition title re-sings a line from "I Am Part of the Load," the Sufi mystic Rumi's incantatory versing for an impersonal consciousness beyond both "conscious decisions" and "personal memory" which, he writes, are "much too small a place to live." This impersonal consciousness is transporting, moving us toward a more-than-human mode of being and becoming across "millennia" through the "dust-grains" of the here and now. It is not reduceable to the straight-jackets of the normative—sexual or otherwise. Rather, it is a universalized "place" where all have at

least the potential to lose themselves in a form of being that "streams at night into the loving nowhere, or during the day, in some absorbing work."[xi]

The in-focus work convened in *Regards* calls on us no less to absorb ourselves in the hard care-work of regard as spectators. But at stake in Jacobson's palinode is no less than the praxis for which philosopher Michel Foucault appealed in a 1981 interview. "Friendship as a Way of Life" issued the challenge to devise new models for an erotics of regard Foucault called friendship. In the absence of pre-existing forms, devising new models of relation demands the kind of aesthetic invention for which Jacobson's palinode to the possibilities of photography may offer a way. Not via the blueprints of representation but, rather, through an erotics of regard that comes closest to making a medium less of the photo than of pothos, associate of eros and love god of longing.[xii]

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[i] Mark Alice Durant, "Bill Jacobson," 2015, *Conversations with Saint Lucy*, https://saint-lucy.com/conversations/bill-jacobson/

[ii] See the artist's biography on Jacobson's website, https://www.billjacobsonstudio.com/wp/biography/

[iii] Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar, Book VII: The Ethics of Psychoanalysis, 1959-60*, trans. Dennis Porter (London: Routledge, 1992), 139.

[iv] Erasure, "A Little Respect," written by Andy Bell and Vince Clarke, *The Innocents* (April 18, 1988).

[v] Ian Berry, "Layered Upon, Over Time: An Interview with Bill Jacobson," in *A Series of Human Decisions* (Seattle: Decode Books, 2010).

[vi] Michael Abatemarco, "This Must Be the Place: Photographer Bill Jacobson," *Pasatiempo* (November 27, 2015),

https://www.santafenewmexican.com/pasatiempo/art/gallery_openings/this-must-be-the-place-photographer-bill-jacobson/article_157a7d66-3d69-5ab4-973c-45fd15d395cd.html

[vii] Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, trans. Richard Howard with foreword by Geoff Dyer (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2010), 60.

[viii] Plato, *Phaedrus*, trans. Alexander Nehamas and Paul Woodruff (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 1995), 243a, 25.

[ix] Susan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others* (New York: Picador/Farrar Straus & Giroux, 2003).

[x] Christian Metz, "Photography and Fetish," *October* 34 (1985): 81-90.

[xi] On the potential of impersonal intimacy, see Leo Bersani and Adam Phillips, *Intimacies* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008).

[xii] Michel Foucault, "Friendship: A Way of Life" (1981), trans. John Johnston, in *The Essential Works of Foucault 1954-1984*, *Volume I: Ethics: Subjectivity and Truth*, ed. Paul Rabinow (New York: New Press, 1997), 135-40.