

On mind and presence

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"I often recall a Steve Reich talk in grad school about the difference between an electronically generated single note seen on an oscilloscope (a straight line) vs. the varied line which would show up if a single note were played by a virtuoso on a violin. This is somehow akin to the straight line of the rectangle explored in my previous Place (Series) vs. undulating lines of the body in *figure, ground*."
Bill Jacobson

In *figure, ground*, Jacobson does not create an impossible perceptual game of Gestalt Theory. There is no trick and no hesitation. We first see the figures. They appear firmly at the very edge of the frame looking off into the distance: humans of all ages, turned away from us, looking at the landscape, in the outdoors, alone. Dressed appropriately for the season which surrounds them, they face the woods and meadow. Their bodies oriented right or left, they form a group of individual onlookers. In image after image, their features are unreadable, resolutely turned away. Their positions direct our own gaze into the photographic space.

Erect in the foreground, each figure is so close to the picture's surface that we read every detail of its outline, the creases and shades traveling on the silhouette. We feel the slight uneasiness of the peculiar stance, each body clearly detaching from the background in a soft unifying light. There are no projected shadows, no high contrasts. The natural space beyond the model is diffused. The photographer's shift of focus is what gives the body materiality. It is an optical fact, when we concentrate on an object with our bare eyes, everything else around it is perceived in soft focus. The intensity of our concentration dematerializes the surroundings. We only see clearly the object on which our mind focuses.

In Jacobson's work, diffusion has a long history. For many decades, the photographer explored the possibilities of soft focus, in black and white and color alike. An earlier image from 2010 features a gloriously lit, crisply white, rectangular towel hanging against the soft focus of a deeply verdant forest. At the time, things in places, natural or constructed were at the heart of the work. In this new series, Jacobson takes an intimate look at the human subject. The space is pictorial, the figures sculptural.

The dreamy texture of the landscape opens a poetic dimension. Near and far are equally illusive. Colors or grays convey the tonal qualities of daytime and season. In front of Jacobson's figures, a myopic vista expands, its subtle palette reporting the world without details. Perhaps the figures can see clearly what we perceive as blurred landscape? Or do they share our predicament? But what they are looking at remains for us inaccessible. Turned away, they tune in to a private view. Besides, without access to their eyes, what they are gazing at is for us uncertain.

Photography is essentially about the gaze and its perceptions. Jacobson's compositions present a figure to be seen rather than portrayed. His models' presences are the central focus of these images. It is their presence, rather than their selves, that

are the subject. The photographer does not conceal the methodology of the set up. The models' awareness of being watched is evident. One feels the figure awakened by the process under the active scrutiny of the photographer. They are bound to Jacobson's gaze as much as they are engaged with the land they are gazing at. Held back on the clear side of perception, they are facing another perceptual dimension. They are balanced on the threshold between reality and the dreamy pictorial space on the other side. The figures are on a critical edge.

"My impetus for this new work was a response to the 5 years I spent shooting rectangles. Towards the end of the project I became obsessed by the subtle difference between the straight line of geometry vs. the slight undulating line of the edge of the body." Jacobson remarks that organic lines are undulating; non-organic lines only can have the straight edge of geometry. The pictures in *figure, ground* offer firm and soft lines, all undulating. They express a moving sense of life and time. The presence of our own mortality is written in these very undulations.

This reflection on being and time remarkably connects to the eternal romantic. German Romanticism especially comes to mind looking at this series. *The inscription of man in the landscape, the aloneness, the measure of time, and the dominant atmospheric space*. With a simple repetitive set up, Jacobson touches on the essential relationship of humans to the natural world. The work evokes Gerhard Richter's paintings of blurred photographic landscapes. Jacobson's images represent vistas conceived as an inner vision, the figure's inner vision. *figure, ground* can be understood as a photographic meditation framed as an exercise of perception, where the mind is the point of focus, and everything else is diffused.

The figures we observe are present to both the land and their own minds. As if the photographer thought about Heidegger's Dasein and Descartes's most famous credo all at once. These people are thinking. They are inwardly and outwardly present to the world. They think thus they are, confirming Descartes' paradigm. And yet, the pictures record the figure's presence as one inscribed in the world. They illustrate our unavoidable condition, to exist not only in our mind but somewhere: Heidegger's understanding of human beings as being there. It is a simple idea: our human condition binds us to the earth. Our existence is not separable from its ground. It cannot be understood separately from it. We are bound to the world of reality as much as we are bound to the creative world of the mind.

Jacobson's reflection on landscape reminds us that conceptual exploration, poetics and existential philosophy are not mutually exclusive. They are part of the multi-layered resonance of our undulating lines that exist both without and within.