

*Susan Wides: Seeing Seen*

by Carter Ratcliff

With the photograph entitled *August 31, 2015*, Susan Wides shows us forest greenery in the middle distances. Branches reach through the canopy, which is dense in some parts and elsewhere sparse enough to let daylight filter through. The foreground is measured off by angled lengths of light beige. Several of these are wide; others are thin and reach over the surface in patterns that tell us that they, too, are tree branches. Their blurred edges indicate, further, that we are seeing them from up close—so close that Wides’s lens has thrown them far out of focus.

Angling over the surface of *August 31, 2015*, the thick beige branches give the image an armature at once lively and stable. If this were a painting, commentary would move on from these large forms to other, more delicate ones. Because the artist’s medium is photography, we might stop at this point and ask: why has she so drastically unfocused the most salient parts of the image? If a photograph is to serve forensically, as evidence, it must be in sharp focus. And most of the photographers we consider artists, from Atget to William Eggleston, focus their lenses with precision, as if they wanted to supply their images with evidentiary weight. Wides has deliberately chosen to do otherwise, and thus another question arises: what is she up to?

In *September 11, 2015*, Wides establishes the foremost plane with shapes in soft-focus. Green and pink for the most part, they are easily identified as leaves and blossoms. Shimmering through the gaps between them is a texture of horizontal streaks in shifting shades of blue. Smudged and translucent around the edges, the patches of green and pink hover on the verge of abstraction. So does the blue pattern, even though it is precisely focused. Remarkably, this precision does not accelerate interpretation. Our understanding that the blue streaks represent rippled water comes no more quickly than our reading of the out-of-focus blobs of green and pink as parts of a blossoming tree. So we can say, at the very least, that the images in this exhibition demonstrate that successful representation does not depend on the mimetic accuracy so often seen as photography's primary virtue.

Our view of anything is coherent only after we have integrated its separate elements. Wides guides this usually unconscious process into consciousness with a play of sharp and soft focus that renders vivid all the spatial and formal disparities within our field of vision. Equally vivid is the surprise of experiencing, rather than conceptualizing, a crucial truth: seeing is not a matter of data transmission. Instead of passively receiving input from the external world, we actively organize it. With images that help us see ourselves seeing, Wides represents not only things but also our experience of making visual sense of them. Space, too, comes in for illuminating scrutiny. Landscape painting traditionally establishes foreground, middle ground, and background—a tripartite structure recalled

by *May 4, 2015*, which blurs everything but the branches in the middle ground. Floating in a field of pink blotches and fuzzy lines, these clarified forms have an intelligibility that, as we look, spreads to the entire image. It is easy to generate mysteries with a camera.

Wides's images do something more difficult. They show us how resourceful vision can be as it seeks clarity in ambiguity. In *September 20, 2015*, there are just two spatial regions: close to the lens, a foreground filled by dark green foliage; and, glimpsed through breaks in the green, a middle ground—or is it a background?—where water splashes over rocks. This is one of the most disjunctive images in the exhibition. The challenge here is not to identify leaves and rocks and water but to imagine in detail the portion of space they share. And we do this with the pleasure we take in the self-aware exercise of our senses that Wides's imagery encourages.

The perceptions we merge into a vision of the world are incessantly shifting, as is vision's focus on that world. Wides's pictures are still and so they cannot represent the temporality built into the very possibility of seeing. Yet it is precisely their stillness that gives them their power. If they mimicked seeing more accurately they would, like the movies, leave vision immersed in its usual unconsciousness. By freezing complex perspectives, Wides invites us to come alive to vision as a kind of inventiveness, an integrative faculty that, moment by moment, connects us to our surroundings and, ultimately, to one another.

