

# BROOKLYN RAIL

CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES ON ARTS, POLITICS, AND CULTURE



MAILINGLIST

ArtSeen  
WEBEXCLUSIVE

February 7th, 2018

## SUSAN WIDES: *this:seasons*

by Hearne Pardee

KIM FOSTER GALLERY | NOVEMBER 16 – DECEMBER 22, 2017

Just as Impressionists brought viewers into contact with the reception of light in the eye, Susan Wides immerses them in the more active process of focus. The apparently stable, seamless visual field is just a convenient fiction: our eyes, in conjunction with other senses, are actually in constant motion. Wides uses an architectural lens she can rotate to change the field of focus so as to bring sharp resolution to some image areas while leaving others blurred. In this way, the luminous photographs in *this:seasons* merge highly defined background details with blurry foreground masses, immersing us in the field of vision more deeply than did her earlier, more conventional landscapes. The compression

reflects a push for direct contact with her subject, Kaaterskill Clove, a site favored by painters of the Hudson River School and now emblematic of our threatened environment; there, even as she restricts her field of view, Wides situates her perceptual studies in the grand tradition of the American landscape.



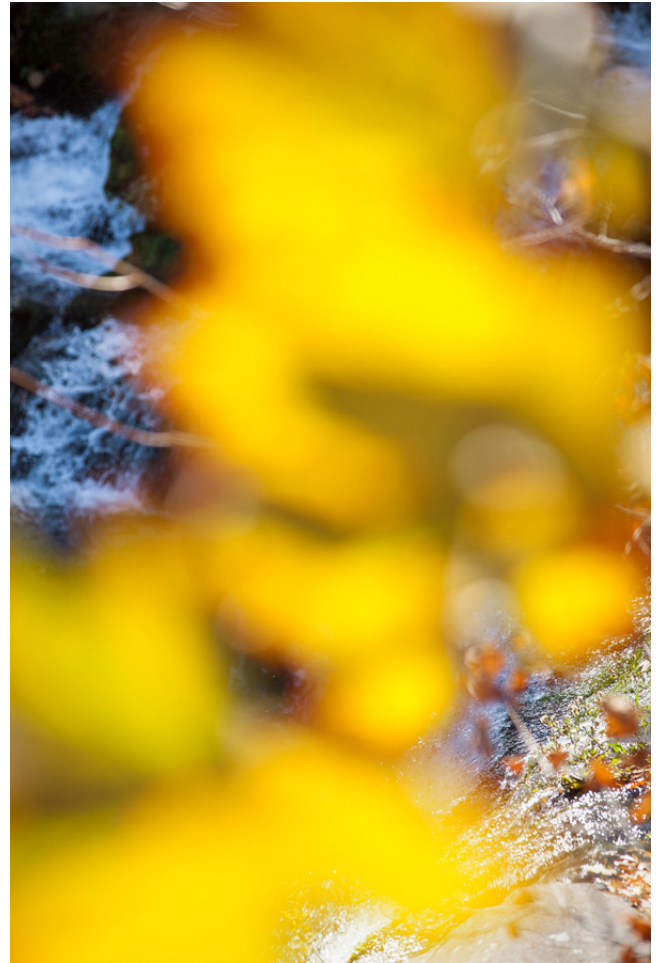
Susan Wides, *February 22, 2015\_4:01:53*, dye sublimation on aluminum, 60 × 40 in. Courtesy of Kim Foster Gallery.

Like David Hockney, Wides seeks to escape the black box of the camera obscura: while Hockney juxtaposes multiple photographs to avoid the static, monocular focus of the conventional lens, Wides goes deeper into the individual frame. Indeed, frames assume an active role in these disorienting images. If Hockney emphasizes the pictorial, Wides is more inspired by the “slipping glimpse” of Willem de Kooning. In statements about her work, Wides cites Baudelaire, the flâneur, who pursued the “fleeting and infinite” in chance encounters. She also quotes Merleau-Ponty on Cézanne’s depiction of

objects “in the act of appearing.” Wides’s unfocused masses of color suggest the inspiration both Baudelaire and Cézanne found in Delacroix, whose pulsing color works in tension with the order imposed by drawing.

Baudelaire, of course, also warned about photography’s threat to the imagination. What would he think of the technical perfection of sprays of water in *September 3, 2016\_12:49:45* (2016), which resemble scumbled brushstrokes? Wherever focus emerges, endowing the details of rocks and branches with crisp poignancy, high shutter speed freezes the perceptual process and creates purely photographic artifacts. Just as Berenice Abbott’s scientific photographs reveal what’s visible only with a camera, the sharply defined ripples of water in *9.11.15\_3:20:17* (2015) generate wavy lines unmoored from conventional realism. If the relatively muddled, tactile surface of Monet seems better suited to convey the actual effect of looking at light on water, the hallucinatory clarity of Wides’s photographs, digitally printed on aluminum, exalt the purely visual. Their disembodied presence recalls Ralph Waldo Emerson’s metaphor of becoming a “transparent eyeball.”

The camera interrupts the flâneur’s spontaneous flow of perceptions, isolating the visual; it reveals new aspects of the world but engages the dark hand of mechanization. The degree of intervention becomes an issue: Wides’s on-site practice situates her between photographer Klea McKenna, who exposes photographic paper directly outdoors, and video artist Peter Campus, whose sustained, pixellated “videographs” allow the process of focus to unfold over time. Wides attempts to strike a balance by describing her work in her press release as an “alliance” with Kaaterskill Clove; she encourages viewers to seek unmediated encounters with their surroundings, proposing a participatory vision that implicitly involves all the senses, including memory, in the act of seeing. By grounding herself in the physical, historical and cultural space of the Clove, she places visual focus in the larger context of “consciousness.” But what would the “transparent eyeball” mean in the era of GPS? Indeed, the all-inclusive flow of sensations must now take into account the devices that extend our sensory apparatus. Confronting digital dehumanization along with ecological loss, Wides weaves together fragmentary encounters through her lens, a contemporary flâneur, generating Edenic visions in which the “machine in the garden” is us.



Susan Wides, *October 27, 2014\_12:43:47*, dye sublimation on aluminum, 60 × 40 in. Courtesy of Kim Foster Gallery.