Eyes on the City:

Susan Wides and the Perception of Perception

Vision has always been the central theme in the work of Susan Wides. Seeing oneself see isn't the easiest thing to do, but Wides's photographs provide the plausible illusion that we are watching her see the world through a network of continually shifting visions codified by the camera. The present series of Mobile Views, as she calls them, addresses urban landscapes by day and night, both on the margins of the city and at its elegant center. New York City offers very different optical cues about the construction of vision than do the fields and woods of the previous works in the series. The newest Mobile Views embrace both Madison Avenue and the Fresh Kills landfill, locations which we might describe as the two poles of the city, as far removed from each other in spirit as it is possible to be. Yet taken as raw material for perceptual acts rather than as actual destinations on the map, they offer some surprising similarities. The city is a playground of pictorial possibilities, a staging ground for the artist's perceptual adventures.

Although photography is preeminently the art which addresses the vagaries of optical experience in a constantly changing world, part of its magic is its power selectively to recall the stimuli of the other senses, beyond the visual. In the earlier Mobile Views, one senses breezes moving the branches of trees, and registers the day's temperature in the fields. In these Fresh Kills pictures, by contrast, there is a separation from such perceptual cues, a kind of muffling of some aspects of experience which in turn enhances others. Fresh Kills becomes a landscape of broad horizons, calm grandeur, and resonant silence. The massive trucks moving on distant horizons seem as soundless as Tonka Toys. The ubiquitous wheeling mass of fiercely raucous seagulls, busily culling sustenance from the rubbish being smoothed into earth, is rendered as a silent, tidily gestural pattern against the sky. Some of this is the startling effect of snow upon the city--nature's reproach to the messy complexity of the built environment--and some of it is photographer's ceaseless refashioning of the world into art.

Transformation is a potent force in these photographs, which reveal Wides's conviction of the roles of art and perception in transmuting the base metal of ordinary urban reality into aesthetic gold. What might seem an almost Hitchcock-ian profusion of birds at the dump becomes in Wides's hands a vibrant sign of grace, a principle of animation amidst the wide plains of trash-becoming-landscape. Fresh Kills is thus rendered as something like a botanical garden of refuse, a protected realm inviting exploration without giving away its secrets. Birds, trucks and snow in continual motion are all stilled by the action of the camera. An austere distance pervades these images, attracting attention without offering intimacy, much like the splendid, chilly expanses of Antarctica. The photographs thus approach the effects of nineteenth century expeditionary photography.

The striking, free-standing photograph from Fresh Kills printed on two-way vision material (a kind of perforated photographic emulsion), is almost an installation work, echoing the barrier function of the fence which is its subject with a kind of synthesis of abstraction and trompe l'oeil. Brand name-embellished debris have flattened themselves against the scarcely visible wire mesh to become flat pattern elements defining a spatial plane lying much closer to the camera than that of the horizon just visible beyond. The buoyancy of the levitating debris is curiously at odds with the threat of the world's effacement by a wall of garbage in which the logos of Macy's, the GAP, Dunkin Donuts, and the like are prominent. Does the fence keep people out of the dump, or the trash in? Is it a display or a restriction? Incontrovertible evidence of the hyperactive consumerism of the age, these bits of detritus are like a puzzle that can be assembled to reveal more than one picture. Transformed by the photographer's vision, they become precious tesserae in a mosaic of meaningful forms. Always resisting didacticism, Wides engages with the grittiness of urban experience, and allows an edge of critique to inform the work, while nonetheless maintaining her engagement with the pleasures and splendors of optical perception.

The view from Madison Avenue is quite different from that at Fresh Kills. The cool, open light of snowy

afternoons gives way to the edgy dynamism of evening's flaring illuminations, which are seen far more intimately, from closer points of view, than the magisterial vistas of the dump. Since the turn of the last century, photographers have been studying how electric lighting (especially on early winter evenings) affords a demonstration of how the modern city is a machine for producing abstraction. These Mobile Views offer ambiguity about wherein the mobility lies: it seems rather to be the subject than the viewer which is moving. This resolves itself after a moment into stylish syncopations of pattern, meditative yet jazzy. Here, the transformation is of light into matter: solid disks and dinner-plate size sequins of light glitter and adorn the night like tangible ornaments. One photograph casts the city as a ravishingly abstracted Danae, courted by a shower of gold.

Wides says that she likes working out in the world, engaging with exterior reality rather than with her sometimes too insistent interior one, but that it's now almost impossible to photograph what's actually going on in the world. Yet her photographs are gentle responses to the vagaries of postmodern culture and the efflorescences of late capitalism, thoughtful records of the infinite subjectivity of perception within the radiant city rather than an inventory of its changing face. She aptly captures the manner in which light and architecture generate the contagious energy of a great city at night, yet also acknowledges the cold heart of the stylish allure of urban consumption. In many of the pictures, strings of lights, like too-ambitious vines, seem almost to squeeze life from the trees which are their hosts, nature giving way to rampant culture. More sinister than the photographs from the dump because more seductive, these images commemorate the brilliant allure of a culture of consumption, the beginning of a process which find its inevitable culmination in the display on the fence at Fresh Kills.

In exploring what she calls "states of perception through photographs of contemporary landscape" Wides deliberately subverts the inherent clarity of her 4 x 5 view camera "in order to re-imagine photography's interactions with the process of seeing". Her working process is essentially a meditative one in which photographing in the field is but one step toward realizing the final works afterwards through printing, cropping, reversing, and otherwise "re-imagining" the visual information contained in her negatives. A hint of the Bauhaus spirit of experimentation and invention echoes through her working method. She speaks of a desire to "reconcile opposites and negotiate contradictions": fantasy and fact; abstraction and representation; outdoor and indoor experiences, among them. Throughout her work, referents cycle in and out of

recognition, and questions of reality versus invention introduce themselves. The 'real world' she photographs, whether city scenes, landscapes or the wax museums of one of her earlier series, actually exists only within her finished prints and (perhaps) fleeting on her own retinas, since it is one that cannot exist without the essential mediation of perception. If a tree falls in the forest and Susan Wides isn't there to see it, it can't be pictured.

The previous Mobile Views photographs, like the images of botanical gardens and flowers which in turn preceded them, were lovely and inviting photographs. By contrast, the series of photographs from wax museums with which Wides first made her mark were often uncanny and disturbing. The present, urban Mobile Views have elements of both. The city doesn't conceal its strangeness and insalubriousness from Wides, and she doesn't fail to engage it through her enduring fascination with the act of perception itself. In this work, the flower and museum-loving romantic has abandoned the sylvan or pastoral settings of her rural landscapes for much tougher urban ones, indeed for the rudely epic themes of Fresh Kills' extraordinary landscape--or, one could say, for the sheer excitement, perplexity, fluidity, and complication of making art within the city. These photographs mingle tension, exhaustion, and irony with energetic wonder and vivid fascination in proportions which acknowledge both the state of the city today, and the insistent subjectivity of the artist's vision. In the nocturnal images, light blooms like the flowers so often absent in Wides's earlier images of botanical gardens, making a magical flare of light like that of a fireworks display. Thus, what is actually the city's continual glaring illumination comes to seem as marvelously ephemeral as the falling rockets of Whistler's Nocturnes. These photographs also suggest another paradox: privacy amidst the crowded streets, the privacy of one individual's uniquely subjective vision, distinct amidst the surrounding crowd. Through this artist's eyes, we see not just the city but vision itself.

Ellen Handy

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