Susan Wides: Alive and Looking

In contemporary photography, nature is furniture, static visual data that cannot be distinguished from created forms. Everything is a landscape and nothing is natural. The so-called new topography of the 1970s finds its apotheosis in current practices, where people and places are pure signs, truly generic, and the plethora of detail lends a spurious particularity.

Perhaps that's just the way it is with photography: living and looking are two different things.

But I'm not so sure. The constant pressure on photography since its inception has been to render what is experienced but can't be seen, or certainly can't be reduced to an available set of signifiers: time, God, inner apprehension, fear, pain, ecstasy. A postmodernist would argue that there is nothing but available signifiers, but this prison house of language is precisely what poetry breaks through and reconfigures. And Susan Wides is first of all a poet. Just as metaphors stubbornly refuse to die into literalness, so her imagery refuses to die into transparency.

Stieglitz called them equivalents, the things a photographer finds/makes that somehow accord with inner experience. He did refer to mirrors or windows. There's faith and magic in the process he articulated, the conviction that two unrelated terms do relate, that an image can somehow convey a feeling, an intimation, and that a "symbol" can be something more, something charged with presence. I believe that this is the pressure behind all landscape photography, even the most theoretical or ceremonial. It is there in Stieglitz's Lake George and in Steichen's great gum prints of forest ponds. It is there also in Lee Friedlander's late western landscapes, seen through forest tangle, and in Ray Metzker's recent and thoroughly obsessive woodlands.

This is photography's hopeless project, and yet Susan Wides has come to an understanding that has freed her to create her own equivalents: Everything that lives, moves. That includes landscapes and photographers, too. Her technique of forcing part of the image out of focus established, in her earlier "Mobile Views" series, a fairly straightforward dichotomy, heightened by the 4 x 5 camera's normal clarity: motion versus the static detail. At first glance, I thought this represented a nature/culture opposition, with nature the moving thing. But the actual play of blur and detail, foreground and background, was more complicated, oscillating. In any case, life seemed that uncatchable thing that always left art behind.

"Kaaterskill," a kind of reversal of the Hudson River School painters, takes us deeper into the woods. The photographs diminish to zero the distance between us and the places Wides puts us. With no vantage point, no rocky crag from which to celebrate nature's public ceremonies, we find ourselves the center of the action. The stasis and flow are not so much features of a landscape (although they are) as inner movements we experience in a rich, dense place we don't know and hasn't yet become visual wallpaper. There's

panic, here, and preternatural composure. Unlike Thomas Struth's recent landscapes, whose scope and detail are unassimilable and force us into a contemplative, not to say analytical stance, "Kaaterskill" draws us into an experience. These photographs may not reproduce Wides' encounter with nature – no photograph could do that – but they occasion or provoke a parallel encounter, a potentially overwhelming one.

In a distinctly post-romantic time, we wouldn't want to call Susan Wides our Wordsworth with a camera. Yet she establishes an identity between the artist and the audience, between self and nature. To show the motion that inheres in stationary things (and vice versa), she must move. And to see it, we move, too, up and back, searching for stability, accepting velocity and time. We're looking. We're alive.

Lyle Rexer
Brooklyn, New York