

Susan Wides: Mobile Views at Kim Foster Gallery

L'exactitude n'est pas la verite -- Henri Matisse

Blur, for most of us, is an intractable fact of life. Days, months, years seem to flow by in a dreamy haze, interrupted by all too brief moments of focused lucidity. Many of us – the myopic, the caffeine-addicted, the habitually sleep-deprived – open our eyes each morning to a familiar fog that only begins to dissipate after we have fumbled for our glasses and swallowed a first cup of coffee. The world shifts into focus, but it is not a uniform focus; certain objects, certain significant details loom into consciousness with a heightened clarity as the rest quietly fades away into dreamy obscurity.

Susan Wides's newest series of photographs, "Mobile Views," are like visible emanations from this myopic eye of the mind. Wides made these pictures with a 4 x 5 – inch view camera, twisting the pleated bellows and tilting the lens to create hazily indistinct scenes, each with a narrow zone of sharpness. Details gently glide into focus, catching the eye and holding it like a fish on a hook.

Most of Wides's "Mobile Views" were made in the domesticated reaches of eastern Long Island, and most present an image of nature bearing insistent, and at times enigmatic traces of a human presence. Yet the photographs are not so much documents as interpretations, landscapes mediated through the subjective vicissitudes of human perception. This preoccupation with the interiority and subjectivity of vision has been integral to Wides's earlier work, particularly to her evocative studies of flowers cultivated in botanical gardens. In these photographs, Wides isolates each specimen and its embossed level in a luminous oval vignette that fades into soft darkness around the edges. Each flower seems to glide under the spotlight of the mind's eye, suggesting an intensely absorptive narrowing of attention. In the landscapes, Wides intensifies her use of selective focus to convey this sense of perceptual absorption. She manipulates the camera's lens to seize upon details in the landscape – a weathered wooden fence, a house gutted by fire, a tiny leaf in a barren pine forest – with the hypnotic fixity of a child's gaze.

Yet there is also a fluidity in these photographs that echoes the mobile shifting of attention, the way the focus of our perception seamlessly darts from one detail to the next. Wides chose to call this series "Mobile Views" because of the implied and

condensed motion within each image, their sense of tilting and panning through space like the mobile frame of a movie camera. In several of the images, Wides uses a strip of sharp focus to lead us into the imaginary space of the picture, laying out a clearly delineated leaf-lined path that mysteriously draws the eye further into the scene. In other pictures, the zone of focus falls on or near the horizon line, reiterating the most fundamental and irreducible element of landscape imagery – the inevitable meeting of earth and sky.

With these landscapes, however, Wides definitively veers away from the sober documentary style that has dominated landscape photography for the last twenty years or so, embracing instead a dreamlike lyricism and a lush interiority. By intentionally throwing her lens out of focus, she encourages a kind of imaginary slippage that imbues her images with a strange sense of enchantment. In one photograph, we view a landscape through a dense thicket of dark spindly branches that transform the sky into an expanse of gray marble streaked with veins. The body of water below seems to refract the late afternoon sun into a thousand glittering specks of light. Look closely, however, and these shimmering reflections resolve themselves into an unimaginably large flock of Canadian geese.

This continual slippage between focus and blur, between clarity and obscurity, also brings to mind the elliptical operations of memory. The time of year (late summer to early autumn) and the time of day (late afternoon to early evening) add to the elegiac mood. And yet Wides's photographs seem to be as much about the processes of forgetting – about the ways in which objects and landscapes and events quietly slip away from us – as they are about recollection.

The photograph, as Oliver Wendell Holmes once said, is like a “mirror with a memory.” Holmes coined this phrase in 1859, in the midst of a widespread positivist faith in photographic objectivity. Yet even today, in the midst of a widespread crisis of faith in photographic objectivity, our collective memory is shored up by millions upon millions of Kodak moments. While every photograph preserves within itself a more or less permanent trace of a particular moment in time, whatever truth it yields is ultimately transfigured through the subjective filter of the photographer's eye. With this new body of work, Wides turns the camera itself into a malleable extension of her own perceptual cognition. She holds up a photographic mirror to the world, but what it reflects back is the gloriously myopic landscape of the mind.

Madeleine Frank
February 1998