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Angle of Incident #30: Shoreline

By Gary Michael Dault

You would scarcely imagine that this lambent photograph—one of a suite of Great Lakes photographs by Robert Burley, who teaches at Ryerson University's School of Image Arts, and whose exhibition of Great Lakes photographs is now in exhibition at Toronto's Stephen Bulger Gallery—could be construed as controversial, but the fact is that at least two veteran Toronto photographers, both of whose work and opinions I care about and admire, have issues with it (and the rest of the series).

For them, Burley's serene studies of the "horizons of the Great Lakes" 1) lack documentary specificity and differentiation, and, by extension, 2) provide a puzzling and even troubling homogenization of visual experience, given the fact that the shorelines and skies of, say, Lake Huron (as in the work reproduced here), appear to offer the viewer the same density and distribution of all-over pearlescence, the same generation of gentle edge to edge effulgence, as his photos of, say, Lake Superior and Lake Ontario do. One if these visually acute friends seems especially restless about the fact that Burley may therefore have had (and indeed probably has had) recourse to the various pictorial democratization procedures available through Photoshop.

This suspicion might have troubled me more (for it troubles me not at all) if I had been more interested than I am in Burley's photographs as documents. In fact, I am much more engaged by their poetry.

This seems closer, by the way, to Burley's own program for them: in his gallery press release, he writes of the "contemplative view" they offer of

the shoreline and the degree to which he hopes "that these photographs not only confront the formal issues of rendering space but also address the philosophical meaning of these natural sites". Even the ever-suggestive Heidegger makes a brief appearance in the document at this point, when the photographer quotes from His late "Conversation on a Country Path about Thinking" (A Discourse About Thinking) to the effect that "thinking would be coming-into-the-nearness of distance".

I'm not entirely sure what Burley means by "the philosophical meaning of these natural sights." It is clearly not really the nature of thinking, he's after here, but merely Heidegger's stirring phrase "coming-into-the-nearness of distance." But if Burley is willing to trade "pure" philosophy for phenomenological lyricism, then there's quite a lot to be said about the photographs in that way. The shore is clearly the limit of the known and familiar world. When we stand at the limit of the land, we are at a powerful and moving axis of transformation. Staring at the sea, at a lake as large as the sea, makes you—the phrase is poet Charles Olson's—"long-eyed". Burley says his Great Lakes photographs were taken (obviously) with a large format camera, and were the result of "long exposures in the light of early dawn. The time exposure," he continues, "breaks down the tangible properties of deep space by eliminating the physical characteristics of the water."

This too, I don't quite get. For me, whatever "physical characteristics of the water" are here unrepresented, what is offered, almost obsessively—to the extent that the photographs are informed by it and built to hold it—is the glorious brimming-ness of water. The flood, the expanse of it, lies heavily and laps at the edges of its confinement. The lakes are oceanic, in the Freudian sense.

There is stillness and comfort of Burley's brimming shorelines because the early-morning waters sleeping at land's edge are expanses of what the indispensable Gaston Bachelard terms (in his exquisite *Water and Dreams: An Essay on the Imagination of Matter*, 1942) both "maternal water and feminine water".

Water, writes Bachelard, quoting from Paul Claudel's *The BlackBird in the Rising Sun* (1927), "is the gaze of the earth, its instrument for looking at time" (*Dallas: The Dallas Institute of Humanities and Culture*, 1983, p.31). "If the look bestowed by things is rather soft, grave, and

passive," Bachelard continues [and Burley's photographs incarnate passivity to an almost airless, excitingly oppressive degree]" then it is the look of water. An examination of the imagination leads us to this paradox: in the imagination of universalized vision, water plays an unexpected role. The true eye of the earth is water. In our eyes, it is water that dreams" (*pp. 30-31*).

Robert Burley's Great Lakes continues at the Stephen Bulger Gallery, 1026 Queen Street West, until December 23. 416-504-8929.