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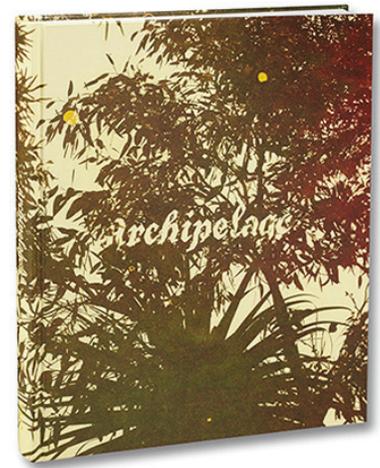


Book Review: Archipelago

By Adam Bell
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We begin with a boat. Aboard the Arcadia II, we're led down a river, into the ocean, and along the rocky coast of a tropical island. Led by an unseen captain, our actual trip is far from clear, but we never seem to stray too far. Matthew Porter's *Archipelago* takes its name from the island of Kaua'i, part of the Hawaiian archipelago, which features prominently in the images, but is never clearly described. Instead, the island, as well as the implied islands that surround it, serve as a metaphoric framework that allow Porter to weave together multiple strands of his work. Employing a variety of different styles and evoking numerous pictorial genres, Porter's disparate images touch on numerous topics and playfully explore the illusionistic possibilities of photographs. Frustrating expectations of a simple journey, *Archipelago* is a collection of associative links, overlapping narratives, and tangential threads that constantly push us away and pull us back, ultimately leaving us to circle in the eddies of the images' magnetic pull.

Best known for his sun-drenched images of 70s era muscle cars suspended mid-jump, Porter is a protean photographer whose work has long sought to dissect photography's mythic and history laden possibilities. Much like Porter's exhibited work, *Archipelago* employs an intentionally varied style that merges multiple narrative threads from Jane Fonda's activities protesting the Vietnam War to the Hawaiian island of Kaua'i to the American Southwest to a coastal lighthouse in Maryland. Ambitiously conflated, the multiple bodies of work are joined and overlapped into a perplexing and fascinating whole.



Archipelago
Photographs by Matthew Porter
Mack, 2015.



Historically dense, the contextual support of Porter's image is not always immediately apparent, but become clearer upon close inspection and through the occasional snippets of text that appear in the book. In the case of Fonda, who appears via a restaged photograph of her at a rally from the late 60s or early 70s, we are reminded via the text not only of her controversial political stance and actions during the Vietnam War, but also how her actions and the images taken of her during the time haunted her for years to come. Although less apparent, the tropical island of Kaua'i has significance as the location for numerous Hollywood movies depicting Southeast Asia and the Pacific — the tattered foliage and forlorn iguanas are lingering reminders of the former backdrop for reimagined wars on the screen. For Porter, photography is not only a means of making both the past and present visible, but also a tool to dissect the fantasy and reality of a place.

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Archipelago ties these varied bodies of work together through the careful use of repetition and the subtle variation of reoccurring themes. Images, like those of iguanas, repeat with slight variations. Earlier work, like that of the cars or wasp's nests, are recycled, or referenced through Polaroids or behind the scenes shots of studio set-ups. Jagged lava coated coastlines and tropical foliage, as well as still-lives of rusted nautical equipment appear throughout the book. Along side these images are restaged iconic photographs, like that of Jane Fonda, as well as seemingly iconic photographs, like the two images of musicians who appear in the beginning and end of the book. Although seemingly disparate, each image becomes a crucial part of the journey, an implied link, visible thread, or tangent that temporarily leads us astray before pulling us back. Owing equal amounts to Roe Etheridge and Christopher Williams, Porter's work deftly conjures photographic illusions while simultaneously poking holes in its curtain.

The book's elegant design underscores this central theme. Each page is arranged in a grid of four potential images. Never entirely full, each spread has gaps. Like the titular islands, the clustered images orbit the book's spine — spinning outward in repeating and overlapping visual narratives. If there is a subject of Porter's book, it is this illusionistic dance and playful subversion of expectations. Each spread with its carefully placed images, circumambulates the work's true subject, which all along has been the dance itself. For the reader, the gaps are invitations to fill the fragmented narratives and puzzle over the omissions. Like gaps in a photo album, the absence of the images draws us in more closely. Interspersed throughout the book are several short texts that frame the work either directly, as is the case for Jane Fonda or the Knoll lighthouse, or reference the work's larger themes like place and time, like Brian Sholis' text. Fortunately, none of these texts attempt to explain the work, but help guide us in various ways.

Ending just as abruptly as it begins, the book leaves us on the boat. Looking off the deck at a small island, past a silhouetted bird on the coast, down a river, and onward into the dense jungle ahead, into parts unknown, we're left adrift, surrounded by land and sea.—Adam Bell

