



Matthew Porter's Archipelago

Photobook Review

August 17, 2015

Somewhere near the half-way point of Matthew Porter's Archipelago, you will find a photograph of iguanas staring at you, as if to inquire what the hell you'd possibly be doing there. Assuming that a. iguanas do in fact possess this type of curiosity and b. these particular iguanas were staring for that particular reason (both possibly not be very good assumptions at all), you might ask yourself the same, vis-à-vis this engrossing and confounding book. What the hell is going on here?

Thankfully, the PR blurb is of no good use ("correlations between disparate images, configured on each page like islands in an archipelago, clusters which form their own, indigenous subjects" – this is utterly descriptive and useless at the same time). So you're on your own, and the snippets of text thrown in for good measure here and there won't help you much, either. It really is a true photobook, in which the photographs carry the weight of the tale, and you either figure it out, or you don't.

This might sound like the kind of game for sophisticated insiders many photobooks in fact are, but it is not. Instead, Archipelago brings the photobook back to one of its very roots. It asks of its viewers to be simply patient, while somehow deftly avoiding what makes similar books by other artists so tedious (the kinds of books that should really be entitled "Why am I so clever"). I have been asking myself for a while how Porter actually manages to do this.

Part of it might be that visual references exist, but they aren't overly obvious. You don't feel like someone is constantly winking at you, asking you to be part of some self-congratulatory in-crowd. The references feel more like echos, and they both exist to photography outside of the book as well as photographs inside. There are frequent echos and themes, with repetitions or quasi-repetitions (through the use of slightly similar images) being employed to great effect.

If you were to ask me what the photographs end up being all about, I would probably say that they are about photography, about what photographs do and how they are used. But they are also about what they do when being put together in this specific way. In other words, they are not just referential (which would be tedious). Instead, their cumulative effect is one of a world created, a world that I curiously find myself wanting to visit in person, even though large parts of what is presented looks a tad grim (barren landscapes, disused machinery, etc.). It's like the type of science fiction that uses very familiar things to still create a completely alien world.

The large number of visual tropes aside, Archipelago operates through the use of a grid structure on paper, where of the eight spots available for picture placement only a small number is used (this is for vertical pictures, for the horizontal ones the numbers change slightly). There might be two, or three, or four pictures, often three, sometimes even just one or five. And these three pictures are in different spots, with different relationships — visual echoes — between them. On top of this basic structure, there is a larger thematic arc over everything, which guides us into, through, and out of the book.

I honestly didn't think I would enjoy the book as much as I ended up doing, but it has exerted a sort of magnetic pull on me that I have found hard to resist. Archipelago most certainly isn't your photobook if you prefer those to be easy. And at first, the book might seem to be a bit inaccessible, in particular since it resists telling you a simple story. But even though it does "interrogate the medium" (terrible term, I know), the book does a lot more than that, given the imagery ultimately is so seductive, large parts of it simply being beautiful. The beauty is embraced, at least to some extent, and not merely questioned.

Interrogating the medium almost inevitably runs the risk of ending up in a joyless dead end. Porter deftly demonstrates how to do better.

Archipelago; photographs by Matthew Porter; texts by Brian Sholis, Lindsay Caplan, and Matthew Porter; 132 pages; MACK; 2015

Rating: Photography 5, Book Concept 5, Edit 5, Production 5 – Overall 5