



Matthew Brandt, *Devils Lake OR 2*, 2008. 16x20 in.

II SURFACE TENSION

Matthew Brandt's *lakes and reservoirs 2*

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A few years ago, while walking through a supermarket parking lot, I found several pages from a family photo album. Despite the fact that a thin sheet of protective plastic covered each leaf, tire tread from careless cars and scuffs from the uneven pavement had marred the surface of the images. When decontextualized, the anonymous family's trip to the amusement park already had taken on an eerie cast, filled with menacing clowns and gargantuan, inflated cartoon characters marauding through the streets. Given the vicissitudes of time, even the most mundane images suggested darker meanings, as foreign bodies and irregularities threatened the indexical purity of the image. Parts of the emulsion were scratched away, revealing red and orange tones that made it appear as if the road in front of the Six Flag sign was ablaze and that Fred Flintstone was caught in a war zone.

Matthew Brandt's recent series, *lakes and reservoirs 2*, at times assumes the look of a damaged family snapshot, although he prints the photographs at a much larger scale than the supermarket four-by-six. *Lake Hollywood*, for instance, appears pecked at, with flecks of orange and red obscuring the unequivocally "generic, calendaresque"¹ view of the "properly" framed landscape. However, the degradation that Brandt

¹ Matthew Brandt, e-mail message to author, July 4, 2008.

² *Ibid.*

inflicts on the photograph does not create a sinister mood or evoke nostalgia in the same way the battered pages of the family album suggests an act of “domicide.” (The exception to this might be *Dead Lake*, with its macabre color palate and strongly connotative title.) Brandt’s images replace the pervasive plastic sleeve, designed to preserve memories within a “crystal veil,”² with a different kind of skin that sits on top of the image. In *Veil Lake*, we see a survey-style landscape as if through a translucent gauze. The image is intensely saturated with red, but liquid blue cascades down from the photograph’s top edge—not dissimilar to a Morris Louis poured acrylic painting. However, unlike Louis, Brandt’s works are undeniably representational and indexical, drawing on Western pictorial and photographic conventions of the picture window, of deep space. As the punning title *Veil Lake* suggests, one of Brandt’s chief concerns is the notion of a color-saturated screen and the oscillation between two and three-dimensionality it engenders. Despite the veil of color aggressively pressing forward—even jeopardizing the legibility of the represented image—balanced framing devices and the water’s winding path nevertheless lead the viewer’s eye into the background.

The tension between depth and surface, which the viewer experiences optically, extends to Brandt’s artistic process, in which he investigates the relationship between the indexical image and its material support. Describing this series as a way to learn about the properties of the color C-print, *lakes and reservoirs 2* represents a kind of empirical research, albeit divorced from scientific rigor. Exploring the terrain of the American West, Brandt photographs bodies of water. After printing conventional C-prints, Brandt soaks the prints in water collected from the same locations he captures with the camera. After a soaking period that can last from days to weeks to months, the water eats away at and breaks down the paper’s layers of color emulsion. Under normal conditions, the three layers of the emulsion, when developed, produce cyan, magenta, and yellow dye, creating an entire spectral range through a subtractive model. By stripping off patches or entire layers of emulsion, Brandt exposes the chemical and material undergirding of photographic “reality,” insisting on an “additional level of truth-value”³ beyond indexicality.

³ *Ibid.*

Although Brandt controls when he removes the print from its lake water bath, he does not heighten the image’s degradation beyond the effects of the soak, preferring to “keep the raw.”⁴ Brandt seems acutely aware of potential charge that his work merely aestheticizes decay. The prints’ vivid—or, more

⁴ *Ibid.*

pejoratively, garish—colors might bolster this critique. Despite the art world's recognition of color photography in the 1970s, such “unnatural” tones perhaps still carry the stigma of commercial applications or technically inept snapshots. However, Brandt is quick to note that the colors in the *lakes and reservoirs 2* series are outside of his control; it is the inherent properties of the C-print that determine the color's intensity. The viewer confronts the fact that the “gaudiness” of each emulsion layer provides the basis for most color photography.

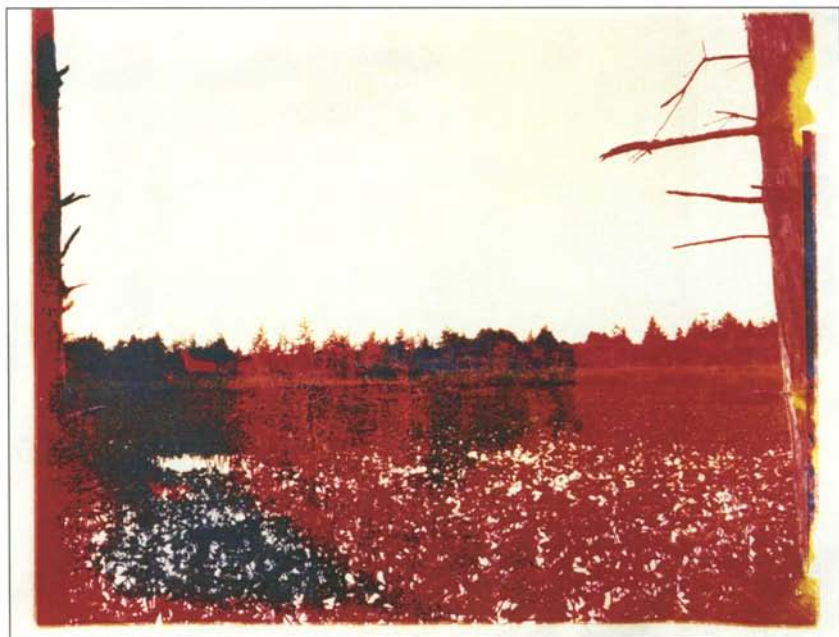
In addition to mining the relationships between pictorial depth and flatness, photography and its material support, Brandt sees his work as a kind of “topographical mapping.”⁵ Just as water has cut through and formed many of the geological features of the landscape he photographs, so too does it act on the surface of the print. *Fall Creek Lake* and *Horse Thief Lake* serve as prominent examples of this effect, with ripples and bubbles suggesting landmasses forming on the otherwise flat, static surface. In *Devils Lake*, the water's wear leaves the *gestalt* of a peak that rises above and dwarfs the foothills below. The print not only bears the chemical imprint of the actual landscape, but also mirrors the natural processes of water erosion. By extending this principle of degradation, Brandt conflates the physical site of the lake with the studio and the gallery space.

Brandt treats photographic history—its genres, conventions, and technology—as another site, yet one that remains as dynamic and fluid as the water that washes over the prints. The result is a body of work that is as much about revelation as it is about veiling.

All images courtesy of Matthew Brandt.

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⁵ *Ibid.*



Matthew Brandt, *Dead Lake OR 2*, 2008. 30x40 in.



Matthew Brandt, *Lake Hollywood CA 2*, 2008. 30x40 in.



Matthew Brandt, *Fall Creek Lake OR 1*, 2008. 16x20 in.



Matthew Brandt, *Veil Lake CA 5*, 2008. 30x40 in.



Matthew Brandt, *Horse Thief Lake OR 1*, 2008. 16x20 in.



Matthew Brandt, *Nacimiento Lake CA 1*, 2008. 16x20 in.