

Greg Wilken's *Terra Incognita*

–Tucker Neel

Greg Wilken arrives at his final images through a process akin to a fact-finding mission. On these expeditions the artist is motivated by the discovery of a significant historical event or condition which results in research, field explorations, documentation gathering, and the presentation of evidence, usually in the form of framed photographs, films, and custom-made artist books. Taken at face value, it's a fairly simple set of procedures, a way of getting from A to Z, but the resulting works are anything but easy, demanding a cognitive shift from viewers.

Wilken's *On the Natural History of Juan Fernandez* (2006), for example, was inspired by the story of Alexander Selkirk, a Scottish sailor who survived for four years (1703-09) marooned on Juan Fernandez Island just off the coast of Chile. The tiny island has since been renamed Robinson Crusoe Island after the famous Defoe novel inspired by Selkirk's tale. After conducting research, visiting the island, and taking photographs, Wilken printed two large-format photographs: one of non-native plant species being removed from the land and one of native plants being grown in a greenhouse. He also created a film of plants arranged in a garden, and multiple photos of individual books floating in black expanses of space. In contrast to the implied didacticism of its title, this body of work obliquely reframes a fractured natural and literary history of Juan Fernandez Island. Using disparate yet connected images, it treats the land as a mythic non-site, a place in between physical and imagined reality. In this project, as in the works on view at CUE Art Foundation, the artist gives his audience the narrowest bit of visual information, with little attendant text. The underlying message of such a destabilized historical narrative is that the past is not fixed and knowable, but rather the fleeting coalescence of reminiscences, everyday images, and second-hand stories we tell each other.

Wilken often engages in library research, which no doubt inspires projects directly involving printed matter. For example, *Literary Encounters* (2010) is a series of silver gelatin prints of hairs found in the pages of books. This poetic collection of traces of the human body in contrast to the stark sterility of printed text points to the fragility of human existence and the endurance of published ideas. In another series, one of the artist's few hand-drawn projects, Wilken meticulously renders the frontispieces of books where past owners left their marks via notes, dedications or ex-libris, again contrasting the sign of living human presence with the mechanically printed word.

Such bibliographic inspiration translates most obviously into the artist's own hand-made books–art objects that reflect his fascination with happenstance, discovery and fractured comprehension. Wilken often isolates images of a particular kind and contrasts them with other, seemingly unrelated pictures. This technique is evident in *Castaic* (2010) which investigates the 1928 St. Francis Dam break outside of Los Angeles, the second most deadly disaster in California's recorded history. *Castaic*, the book, presents images from the rather mundane, pasture-like dam site as it exists today. These images of overgrown golden grass are juxtaposed with cold documentation of broken celluloid, remnants from a 16mm film. The implication of violence, the latent trauma that permeates sites of now forgotten catastrophes, is present in this book—a realization arrived at through visual associations rather than edifying narrative.

For the new body of work on view at CUE, Wilken was inspired by the Southern Pacific Railroad company's early 20th century photographic survey, "The Road of a Thousand Wonders." This promotional title was used by the railroad to describe their trains' coastal journeys from Los Angeles to Portland. To promote this travel line, the railroad commissioned photographic surveys to capture the vistas and attractions along the route, producing numerous postcards, posters, and prints, now collected in a photographic archive. This pictorial record prompted Wilken to travel the same route, sometimes by train, sometimes by car, creating his own image archive while traversing the roads originally charted by the railroad. For the artist, this road is both a physical journey and a metaphor for how we write and rewrite historical narratives in repeated but never fully successful attempts to solidify a true understanding of the past. The original early 20th century archival project acts as historical anchor, providing the artist with a road to travel, a space to contemplate, and an impetus to create images along the way.

Walter Benjamin, inspired by Baudelaire, characterized the urban flâneur's meanderings throughout Paris as a paradigm of perambulation for the modern man, the perfect way to experience and critique bourgeois capitalism. Nearly forty years later, the Situationists would pick up this practice, championing the *dérive* as key to exploring one's surroundings. Given that consumer-friendly structures in the American West were once, and still are, built

around automotive transportation, perhaps we can take Wilken's journey along the coast as a kind of American post-industrial *dérive*, albeit across greater distances, and in solitude—a perfect on-the-road reflection of an alienated country. In Wilken's work we can see the abandoned main streets of drive-by towns, rusting industrial architecture along highways, mall parking lots, and cookie-cutter weigh-stations, as our own contemporary arcades, artifacts from our own "primordial landscape of consumption."ⁱⁱ Inspired by Benjamin's and the Situationists' use of the urban *dérive* as a model for production, Wilken takes to the road, allowing himself to wander consciously, paying close attention to the particulars of the topography that engulfs and frames him, taking note of the tangential and yet relevant ideas that spaces, places, and people inspire.

During a recent studio visit with the artist, I found myself pouring over dozens of 4x5 transparencies, freshly developed from Wilken's most recent journey up the coast. These are a fraction of the total gleaned from his travels. The images depict lonely gas stations, desolate highways, a Valero service station abutting a humble cemetery, overgrown brush lining an old road turnaround, and other banal scenes reminiscent of passing glances or snapshots. While they may look less idealized, these images, like their Pacific-Railroad-commissioned postcard antecedents, speak the language of everydayness that typifies the "feel" of passing through.

We turned to a box labeled "California Color Theory." It held what appeared to be simple color tests of fruits against complimentary backgrounds: limes against a cadmium field, oranges on a cerulean background, etc. Another box contained shots of "California Skies," images of wispy clouds, cumulous thunderheads, and azure expanses. Yet another box was labeled "California Interiors," holding pictures of kitchens and living rooms, each with its own decorative touches: lace curtains, brass lighting fixtures, gaudy wallpaper, unremodeled cabinets. Whether these iconographic taxonomies would make their way into the final exhibition had yet to be determined. Nevertheless, their presence in Wilken's studio gave the impression of a portrait compiled from contrasting, seemingly unrelated image categories.

According to Wilken, his recent work takes great conceptual and formal inspiration from artists coming out of the New Topographic Movement, inaugurated by a 1975 exhibition at the George Eastman House in Rochester, NY, and featuring work by photographers like Bernd and Hilla Becher, Robert Adams, and Stephen Shore. These artists' photographs dispense with the artiness associated with modernist landscape photography. The modernist Ansel Adams, for example, long produced picturesque views that beautify—and thus beatify—rugged terrain by capturing majestic natural lighting in dramatic compositions, suggesting a land bequeathed to its inhabitants by the grace of God. Instead, the New Topographic photographers favor unspectacular everyday images of the landscape.

It's easy to read Wilken's relation to this art historical trajectory, since his views of deserted streets and empty parking lots bear striking resemblance to, say, Stephen Shore's color photograph of an uninhabited commercial intersection in Kalispell, Montana—the two images bearing the same signs of boredom, stagnancy, and weathered obsolescence. Yet, as one glances through Wilken's transparencies, a distant, more removed precedent comes to mind, something perhaps more closely related to the archival impulse underpinning his recent collection of images.

While pouring over Wilken's 4x5s and 8x10s, I was reminded of the late 19th century US geological survey expeditions that attempted to capture the West under the aegis of American Manifest Destiny. The Pacific Railroad survey that inspired Wilken was itself preceded by these larger, more inclusive compendiums. In many ways, the US-government-sponsored expeditions gave "uninhabited" places, future places of "wonder," an evidence of existence, rendering the previously unknown "real." As cultural historian Alan Trachtenberg notes when discussing these early photographic expeditions, "a photographic view attaches a possessable image to a place name."ⁱⁱⁱ

In *Reading American Photographs*, Trachtenberg examines the way photographic surveys in the late 19th century set out to document the West, serving as both a component of mapping and an aid to westward US expansion. In one instance, he discusses a 1868-69 series of photographs by T.H. O'Sullivan with explanatory text by the geologist Clarence King, part of a geological survey commissioned by the US Department of War. He notes that these image spreads discard the strict chronological and typological rigidity typical of a government survey in favor of non-linear image diversity with images of waterfalls, workers illuminated by flares, campgrounds, and panoramic landscapes, conveying atmosphere instead of a categorization. Trachtenberg writes, "By their diversity, which calls attention to our dependency for what we see upon the photographer's choices and the camera's position, the pictures raise a question about cognition, the relation between seeing, investigating, and knowing—the question which lies at the base of the survey as a whole."ⁱⁱⁱⁱ The question becomes how best to capture the essence of conquest, the possibility of fortune, the grandeur of nature in conflict with, and under the new control of, "enlightened" exploratory power. Amidst the seemingly disconnected imagery, in the cognitive interstices between images, we find the spirit of the

western project: a bubbling mixture of hard work, reverence for natural wonder, and good-ol' industrial know-how. While Wilken operates under far less regimented strictures, and outside the purview of governmental oversight, his work too presents a problem of cognition, how we understand and "know" vast expanses of land.

Wilken's diversity of views all circulate around, but never quite fix, the subject at hand: the vast expanse of terrain along America's West Coast. Back in the 1860s, Clarence King characterized such a land as "terra incognita," unknown land, "a labyrinth of intricate changes."^{iv} Wilken's transparencies make visible the conundrum of this terra incognita. In his pictures we apprehend, if only momentarily, something all too familiar yet still unknown. In presenting us with these disparate images, Wilken problematizes the very notion of a photographic record, giving rise to dispersed and transitory knowledge about history and the past's relationship to the present.

¹ Walter Benjamin, *Arcades Project*, trans. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin (1972; reprint, Massachusetts and London: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1999), 827.

² Alan Trachtenberg, *Reading American Photographs: Images As History, Mathew Brady to Walker Evans* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1989) 125.

³ *Ibid.*, 134.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 133.

The writer, **Tucker Neel**, is an artist, writer, curator, and gallery director in Los Angeles. Neel's art investigates the production of political allegiance, memory, and collective experience. To view his complete projects please visit tuckerneel.com. Neel holds an MFA from Otis College of Art & Design and a BA in Art History and Visual Arts from Occidental College. He is currently an Associate Professor in the Communication Arts and Liberal Arts & Sciences departments at Otis College of Art & Design. He is a Contributing Editor for *Artillery Magazine* in Los Angeles, and his writings have also appeared in *Art Lies Magazine*, **ARTPULSE** Magazine, the *LA Alternative Press*, and *X-Tra Magazine*. You can read these writings at tuckerneel.wordpress.com. Neel is also the Director & Founder of 323 Projects, a telephone-based art gallery. To visit 323 Projects simply call (323) 843-4652 anytime, day or night, to hear audio art. For more information, visit 323projects.com.

The mentor, **Richard Vine**, is a senior editor at *Art in America*, where he writes frequently on contemporary art in Asia and elsewhere. He holds a Ph.D. in literature from the University of Chicago and has served as editor-in-chief of the *Chicago Review* and of *Dialogue: An Art Journal*. He has taught at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, the American Conservatory of Music, the University of Riyadh in Saudi Arabia, the New School for Social Research, and New York University. His articles have appeared in various journals, including *Salmagundi*, the *Georgia Review*, *Tema Celeste*, *Modern Poetry Studies*, and the *New Criterion*. His book-length study, *Odd Nerdrum: Paintings, Sketches, and Drawings* was published by Gyldendal/D.A.P. in 2001. *New China, New Art*, his book surveying art in China from 1976 to the present, was released by Prestel Publishers in fall 2008. It was reissued in an updated and expanded edition in fall 2011.