

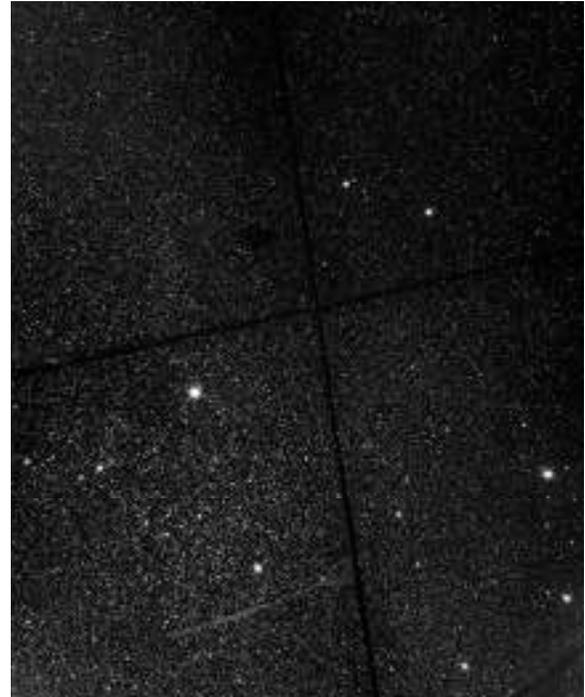


Embodied Camera

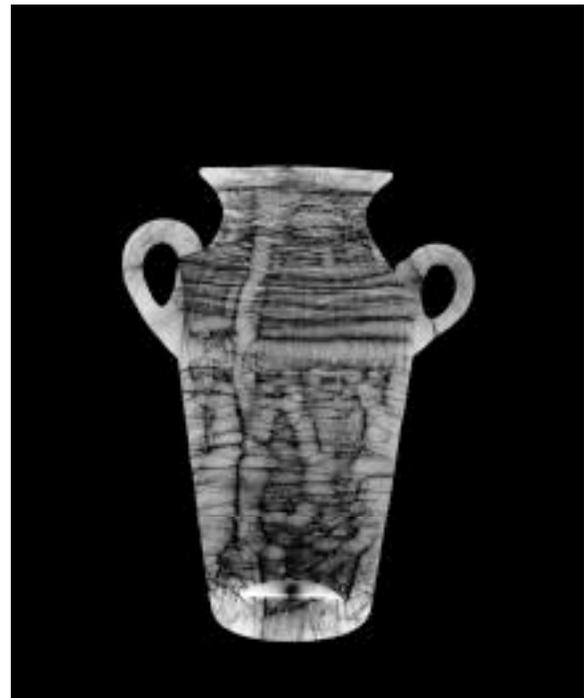
John Rapko

Stardust at our feet, bottles radiant with their own micro-texture, da Vinci's exemplary man found in the cracks of a sidewalk—the images and motifs in Susannah Hays' work show eyes attuned to otherwise unnoticed plays of light and figure. Light is shown almost as a substance and always as revealing a complex inner structure that could never be guessed from the outlines and surfaces of the objects photographed. Although it reveals both objects and their inner texture, light is here primarily a dense presence and not a sign of something else. Nor is the light emitted from elsewhere, but instead seems to have been bound to the very things it strikes. How can one make sense of these paradoxical presences, these light-things of this world?

A photo-graph is not just a writing or marking with light. Another thought accompanies its etymology: the need for a reliable mechanical process that preserves the information contained in the light and converts it into an image. In ordinary perception light itself, so to speak, mediates between object and retina. In the photograph the process (whether chemical or electrical) intervenes between the retina and the original array of light. Faith in photography implies faith that the mechanical process will result in the image that will structure a new array of light relevantly similar to the original array emitted by the object. Postmodernism directs both an epistemological and a cultural skepticism towards these faiths.



Fallen Sky, 2001



Bottle No.11, 1998



Bottles No. 6, 1998

Epistemological skepticism in photography primarily attacks the faith in the similarity of the two arrays; what you see in the photograph is not what was there to be seen. Cultural skepticism asks why we have the interest in the identity of the arrays and what purposes our desire for the identity serves. A quarter century of what one might call skeptical practices of photography has not, I would suggest, dissolved our photographic faith. Rather, it seems that we exist in a state of reflective disequilibrium, unable to give up our faith while acknowledging, even insisting, upon its groundlessness and susceptibility to manipulation. One major response to this condition is the work of Andreas Gursky, which seizes new technologies to renew our sense of photography's capacity to exhibit something of the world's unsurveyable complexity, while newly highlighting its construct-

edness. Hays' work is a compelling version of a different response. She reduces the complexity of the image's environments, the thought of which contributes to the epistemological skepticism, in the service of tightening the bond between the object and the light it emits.

In ordinary visual perception we assume a distinction between object and light: an object exists in a field of light, which is not itself perceived. In reality we must sense the structural array of light with the retina, and we treat that array as homologous with the object and as revealing its surface. Putting the perceptual process this way seems to open up a gap between the object and the perceived array. How do we know the propagation of visual arrays is a reliable indicator of the object? This somewhat academic skepticism toward visual faith rhymes with the epistemological skepticism, and is just as unanswerable in the abstract. One response would be to live the faith. Hays' work lives its photographic faith in fusing the object and light. The gap is closed by a kind of attentive practice. This is, I think, one source of the powerful presence and presentness of Hays' photographs.

The other dimension of presence accrues to the photograph through her treatment of the struc-



Calla Lily, 1998



Red Maple Leaf, 2004

ness in different ways. One model, stressing the holism of the mind, suggests an image of consciousness as a field of dim light of which perception and attention draw and highlight images. Another model suggests consciousness as part of a larger field of mentality, itself heterogeneous and partially opaque to itself. Yet another, suggested by Wittgenstein's remark that the human body is the best possible picture of the human soul, figures the mind as conceiving itself as a body that contains its thoughts and perceptions. Hays' images evoke these models equally. The bottles and leaves seem icons of consciousness, while the entire photographs of the starry and shadow-crossed sidewalks seem to embody the mental models; the edges of these photographs function like the outlines of the bottles and leaves. Hays' photographic practice suggests life as a continual exercise in the re-embodiment of the mind.

One feature of Hays' work that will unsettle many viewers is the obviousness of their beauty (analogously, one kind of objection to Gursky's work has been to note its obvious sublimity). The undeniable beauty of the works, that is, the beauty of the motif as well as the beauty of the works as wholes, seems to me to function in three ways that reveal themselves progressively in sustained looking at the works. One understands the beauty first as a rejection of the "look" of cultural skepticism, or, more exactly, the now conventional idea that the sign of critical intelligence in art is a refusal to anything worth looking at. The first role of the

ture of the motif. There is always a kind of absolute distinction between inside and outside. Light does not radiate out from the motif, nor does it traverse the figure and its ground. Instead it stops within the motif and reveals its texture. The photograph's elements are field, border, and internal differentiation. The effect of this is that each motif becomes a metaphor of the ways consciousness is embodied. After Descartes and Freud, we might think of conscious-



Bottle No.3, 1998



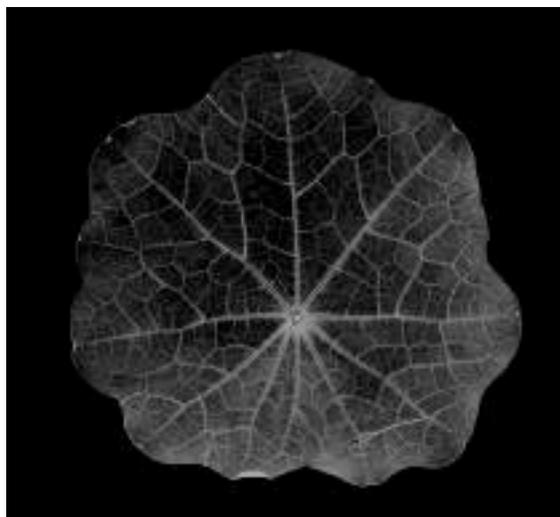
Bottles No.9, 1998

conceived, some works by Eastern European composers such as Arvo Part or Valentin Silvestrov, or the Iranian filmmaker Abbas Kiarostami; the musicologist Richard Taruskin has referred to a new consonance, Crowther to a transhistorical dimension in art. One might say there is an effort underway to undo an excessive historicisation of art, which insists that every work be purely of a narrowly understood contemporaneity.

The light that dawns in these works was already here.

--John Rapko

Art Critic, John Rapko is Resident Critical Studies faculty at San Francisco Art Institute. © 2004



Nasturtium, 1998