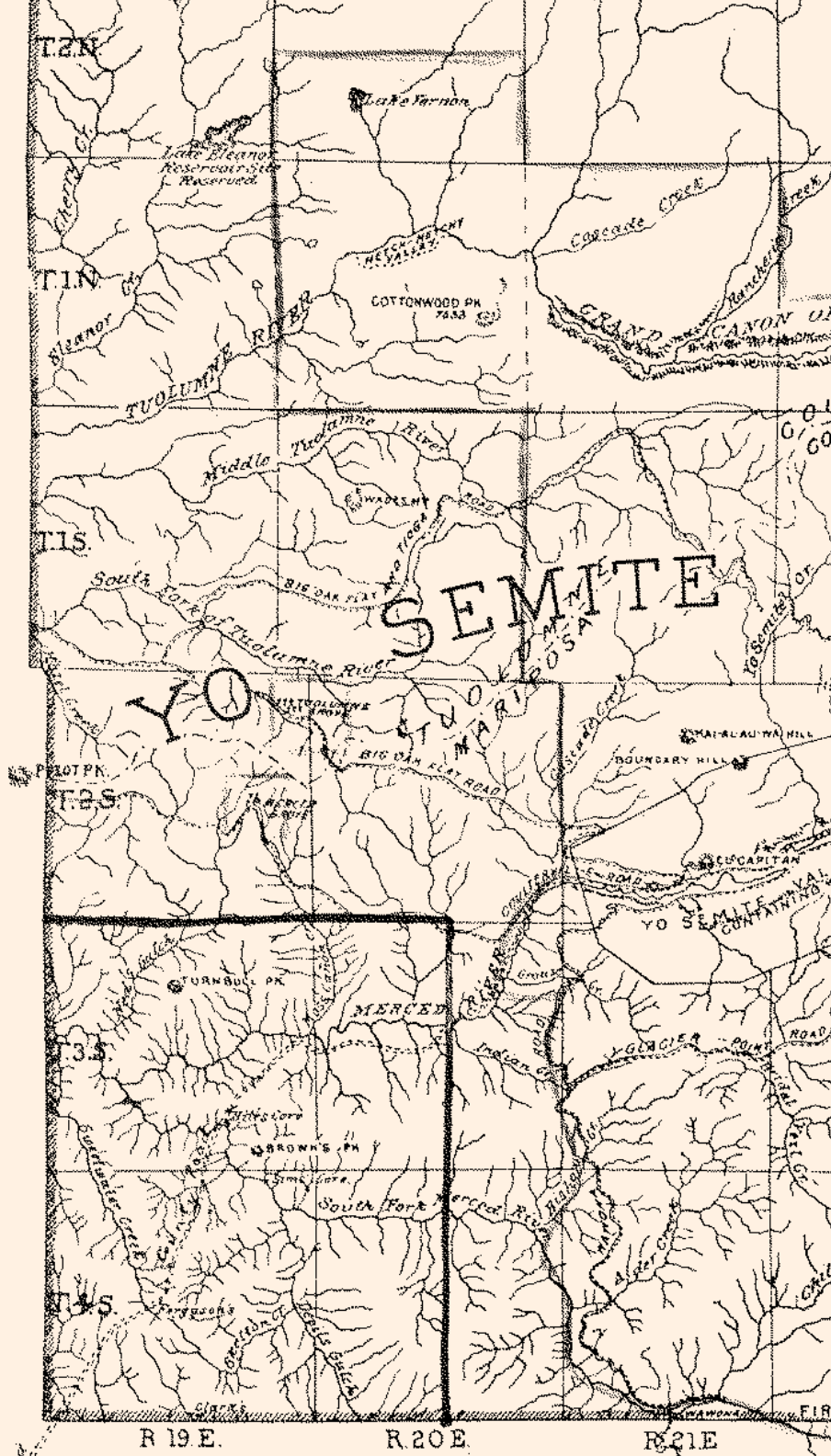


of the Yosemite National Park outside of the blue line, *Continued*



...In that Empire, the Art of Cartography attained such Perfection that the map of a single Province occupied the entirety of a City, and the map of the Empire, the entirety of a Province. In time, those Unconscionable Maps no longer satisfied, and the Cartographers Guilds struck a Map of the Empire whose size was that of the Empire, and which coincided point for point with it. The following Generations, who were not so fond of the Study of Cartography as their Forebears had been, saw that that vast map was Useless, and not without some Pitilessness was it, that they delivered it up to the Inclemencies of Sun and Winters. In the Deserts of the West, still today, there are Tattered Ruins of that Map, inhabited by Animals and Beggars; in all the Land there is no other Relic of the Disciplines of Geography.

Suárez Miranda, *Viajes de varones prudentes*,
Libro IV, Cap. XLV, Lérida, 1658

Previous

John Muir Sierra Club. Detail from Petition and map from John Muir and other founders of Sierra Club protesting a bill to reduce the size of Yosemite National Park. 1893. National Archives and Records Administration Center for Legislative Archives. Washington, DC.

Terra Incognita

Liz Sales

In his essay *The Agency of Mapping: Speculation, Critique and Invention*, landscape architect James Corner writes, “Mapping is a fantastic cultural project, creating and building the world as much as measuring and describing it.” Historically, cartography has aimed to convey accurate and complete models of space. However, Corner explains that because cartographic illustrations are easier to comprehend than the land they depict, human spaces are often planned and constructed on the basis of maps. He argues that because these maps precede and inform their territories, territory itself can be viewed as a representation of the map. Though Corner is interested in the interplay between cartography

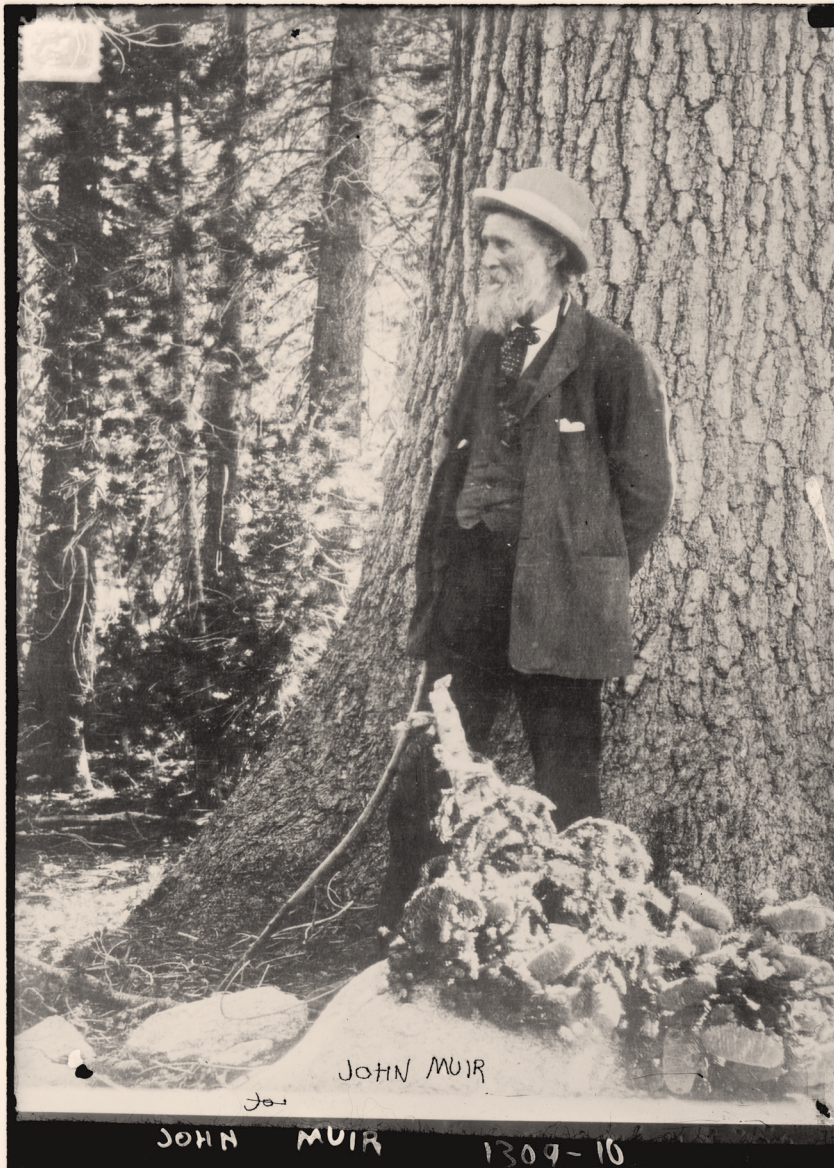


Fig. 1

John Muir. n.d. glass negative.

Library of Congress, George Grantham Bain Collection, Washington, DC.

and landscape architecture, his observations apply to all representation; the landscape photograph is more readily understood than the wilderness, just as the real world can be more difficult to navigate than the map. With this in mind, Peter Happel Christian uses multiple photographic strategies and techniques to re-create his world as much as he depicts it.

Half Wild borrows its title from a passage in *Our National Parks*, written by John Muir [Fig. 1] in 1909, wherein the Scottish-American naturalist, author, and early advocate of wilderness preservation contemplates the public's "growing interest in the care and preservation of forests and wild places in general, and in the half wild parks and gardens of towns." Using this phrase as a way of thinking about both his surroundings and photography itself, Happel Christian constructed this work over the course of four years in his home in the Midwest and in Muir's home, Yosemite National Park.

The margin between tame and wild is narrow; Henry David Thoreau walked into woods barely outside of his town in search of "raw and savage delights" and found himself in a wilderness [Fig. 2] acceptable enough to write *Walden*. This modern ecotone—the transitional area between two environments—is best described through Happel Christian's observational photographs. These images show natural and suburban life overlapping to create half wild spaces. The photograph *Overgrowing* pictures a grape vine obscuring the entrance to a local hardware store. The storeowner has left it to climb in and around his display of goods. Air-conditioners, lawn mowers, and thermometers—tools

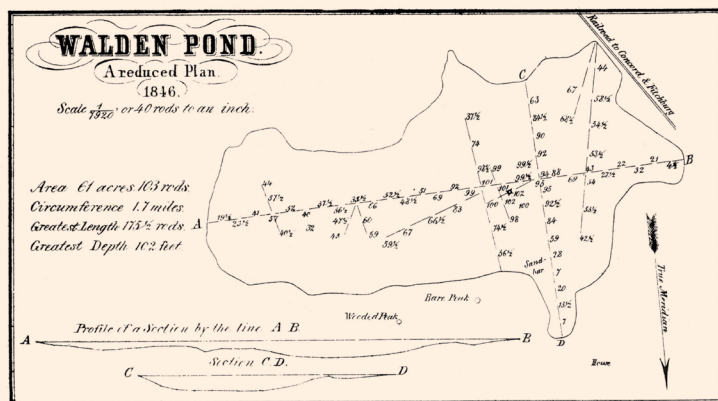


Fig. 2

Henry David Thoreau, *Walden Pond: A Reduced Plan*, 1846.
From *Walden; or, Life in the Woods*. Boston: Ticknor and Fields, 1854.



Fig. 3

Apollo 17 Crew. *The Blue Marble* (AS17-148-22727). 1972, photograph.

typically used to manage the human experience of nature—decorate negative space created by this feral plant. In the larger edit, images like this articulate the wild marginalia creeping in from the edges of urbanity as photographic evidence of the earth's resistance to total domestication.

The first photograph picturing Earth from space was taken in 1972 by the crew of the Apollo 17 spacecraft. [Fig. 3] NASA rotated the image before publishing it to mimic Western maps and globes, which typically position Antarctica at the bottom. Geographer Denis E. Cosgrove has suggested this photographic image could be viewed as a map because it informs our geographic understanding of the world. However, the photograph actually displaces the viewer because it pictures Earth outside of any context. An analogous dislodgment can be found in Happel Christian's constructed images. In the privacy of his studio, he creates still lifes, often from lone, found objects. Considering these photographs as maps, their terra incognita removes all sense of scale, creating potentially limitless territory. Additionally, with the edifice typically supporting these objects removed, their artificiality is laid bare, like singular disembodied planets, floating in the blackness of space.

Half Wild is also interspersed with ready-made still lifes, pictured within their natural context. The artist's peripatetic suburban strolls in search of these assemblages call to mind Robert Smithson's *Monument of Passaic New Jersey*. [Fig. 4-6] This photo essay is comprised of industrial relics Smithson observed in

and around his hometown and re-imagined as monuments. Happel Christian also uses his camera to depopulate the suburban environment, drawing the viewer's attention to recurring objects, like the fake rock. This replica intersperses the book's sequence, as does images of actual boulders in Yosemite National Park, contrasting the two places, as Smithson did with New York and New Jersey. The fake rock pictured, one of four that decorate the entrance to a financial services business, is broken, the seeming victim of a vehicular accident. Revisited by the photographer, the viewer watches as it collapses into plastic refuse through the course of the sequence. Documenting its decomposition underlines the pure simulacra of the object, which can be lightweight plastic, acrylic, or fiberglass, but can never truly be a rock.

Half Wild complicates the aforementioned dichotomies with images that acknowledge the simulacra of Yosemite National Park, which undergoes considerable human management to embody ideals of wilderness. Conservation photography also obscures human presence in service of these ideals; Ansel Adams's majestic images of the Park show no trace of the Ahwahnechee, still being evicted from Yosemite Valley throughout his tenure. Avoiding the tropes of conventional landscape photography, Happel Christian's images include tourists and park signage, picturing the park as part of the modern ecotone.

Our conceptions of iconic spaces like Yosemite are often photographically informed. Corner asserted that

Images: © Estate of Robert Smithson / Licensed by VAGA, New York. Courtesy James Cohan Gallery, New York and Shanghai



Fig. 4-6

Robert Smithson, clockwise from top: *Monuments of Passaic—Negative Map Showing Region of the Monuments along the Passaic River, New Jersey, 1967.* *Monuments of Passaic—The Fountain Monument: Bird's Eye View, New Jersey, 1967.* *Monuments of Passaic—The Sand-Box Monument, New Jersey, 1967.* Six photographs and one cut photostat map

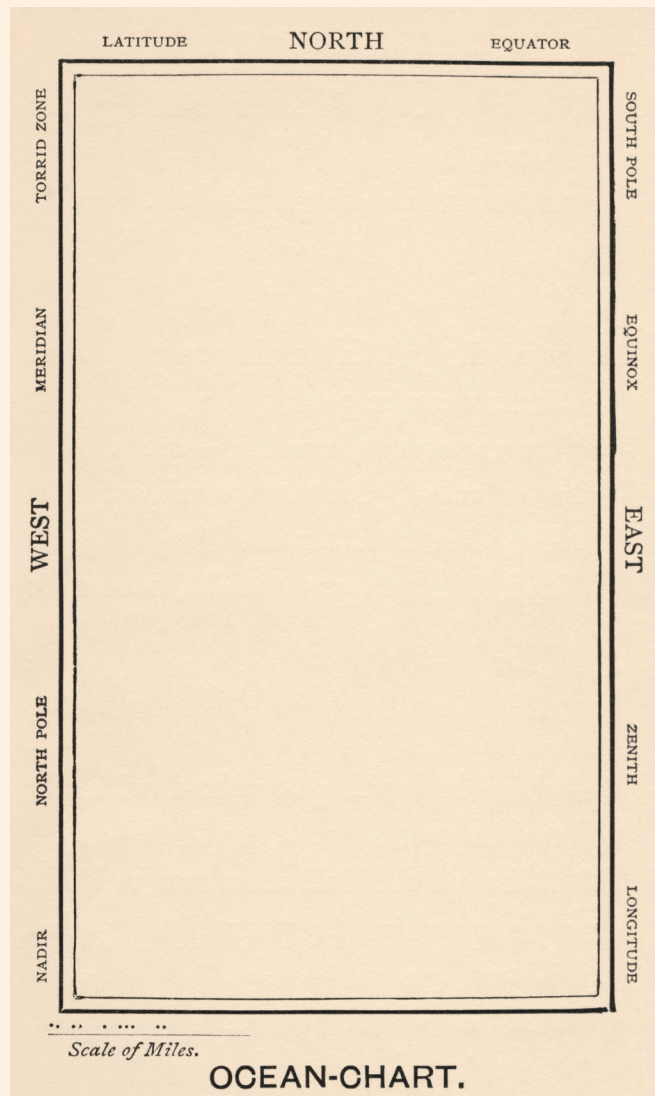


Fig. 7

Henry Holliday, *Ocean-Chart*, 1872, ink on paper. From "Hunting of the Snark" by Lewis Carroll, London: Macmillan, 1876. Reprint, New York, L. Mac Veagh, 1931

"Other maps are such shapes, with their islands and capes!
But we've got our brave Captain to thank"
(So the crew would protest) "that he's brought us the best--
A perfect and absolute blank!"

a territory could be seen as a representation of the speculative map that preceded it; well-known spaces are often experienced as embodiments of the photographs that depict them. Lewis Carroll articulates this in his last novel, *Sylvie and Bruno*, which concludes with a conversation about a fictional map built to scale: "It has never been spread out, the farmers objected: they said it would cover the whole country, and shut out the sunlight! So we now use the country itself, as its own map, and I assure you it does nearly as well." Happel Christian avoids depicting Yosemite through its iconography, in favor of navigating it with fresh eyes, as though it were uncharted land. [Fig. 7]

Sun Sets—which depicts a poster portraying a sunset over the Teton Mountains illuminated by the actual sun crawling across the photographer's studio wall—calls Jorge Luis Borges's "On Exactitude in Science" to mind. This one-paragraph-long story imagines an empire wherein a map, like the one in Carroll's story, is drawn to scale. In this case, the map does cover and thus obscures the actual landscape it depicts. Eventually, the representation disincarnates into the empire, until there is neither distinguishable map nor territory, just as the sunlight disappears into the illustration of a sunset on the studio wall.

A lesser-known story of Borge's, "The Parable of the Palace," describes a poem which illustrates a palace so precisely that the palace itself disappears. Likewise, Happel Christian sought out examples of language literally obscuring territory and captured images like



Fig. 8
Sierra Club Membership Mailer, 2013, from the Artist's Studio.

OK. The term “OK” is a malleable discourse marker. It can be used with appropriate tone of voice to convey doubt or request confirmation. The versatile term can also be used as an exclamation to express approval or as an adjective to articulate adequacy or even mediocrity. In the artist’s backyard, “OK” is used as survey language by the utility company that services his geographic region to denote that there are no gas lines buried below ground. *Half Wild* includes images of the term spray-painted directly on grass in his yard as an allusion to the ambiguous relationship between nature and description.

While he seeks out instances of text in the natural world, Happel Christian takes pains to make language indecipherable through his cameraless photographic darkroom work. This may be because the everyday objects he incorporates directly into his darkroom practice, like a bookmark he found in his library copy of *Our National Parks*, are more personal, collected from his own metadiscourse. For instance, the photographer received a nickel in a mailing from the Sierra Club as part of a campaign to encourage him to renew his membership. [Fig. 8] To the Sierra Club, the nickel illustrated the low daily cost of membership to an environmental agency; to him this nickel represented the paradoxical environmental waste generated by the Sierra Club’s mass mailings. In the darkroom, he made three overlapping exposures of the nickel by balancing it on its edge on light-sensitive paper, creating a graphic, geometric shape with formal qualities of a symbol but signifying nothing. Through this process,

Happel Christian is abstracting language from his own narrative, inviting more wordless and wild stories into his life.

In *A Field Guide to Getting Lost*, writer, historian, and mapmaker Rebecca Solnit proposes that a map is just one of many ways to tell a story, maintaining that “the maps of language types and those of soil types canvas the same area differently, just as Freudianism and shamanism describe the same psyche differently.” Her own atlas, *Infinite City: A San Francisco Atlas*, charts Solnit’s personal experiences with the city. These are an autobiographical alternative to authoritative cartographic endeavors like Google Maps, which leave no room for terra incognita. The illustrations in Solnit’s atlas—like *Monarchs and Queens*, which shows butterfly habitats alongside queer public spaces—celebrate the subjectivity of cartography. Happel Christian features his own photographic subjectivity in images like *The Mountain*, which pictures the derelict site of a former granite quarry. The words “The Mountain” are spray-painted on cinder blocks alongside an arrow, directing the viewer out of the frame. However, the only mountains pictured are the cinder blocks themselves, underscoring the photographer’s authorship.

As part of his effort to explore this complicated doubling that occurs between the photograph and its referent, Happel Christian employs literal doubling throughout *Half Wild*. A paired set of composed images, each depicting an older gentleman looking off into the distance, yet each slightly different, invites

careful scrutiny though eliciting uncertainty and curiosity. Happel Christian uses the book form to create a similar experience, inviting the reader to flip back and forth between images to find only minute differences, creating a kind of feedback loop.

The images in *Half Wild* form an atlas, which simultaneously serves to construct and deconstruct Happel Christian’s world. He sets up dichotomies between the suburban Midwest and Yosemite National Park, still life and landscape photography, image and text, and then disrupts any meaningful distinctions. Ultimately the artist shows us we can never fully comprehend the territory behind the map, the landscape behind the photograph, or the wildness behind the tame; we can only see the half wild.



George Fiske, Muir's Cabin in Yosemite. n.d. Photograph.

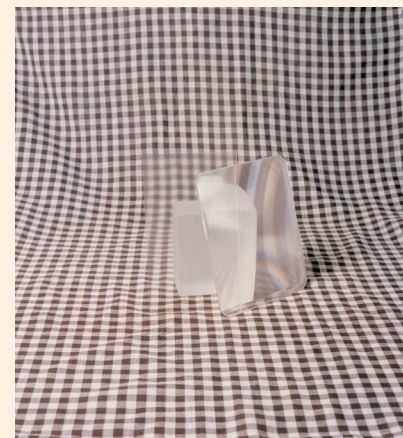
Plates



Work Order, 2014



Shed, 2013



Western, 2012



Mariposa, 2013



A Place to Become New, 2012



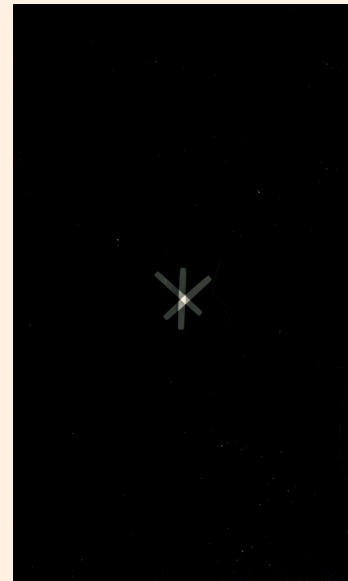
Broken Rock, 2011



Woodhill & Traverse, 2014



OK (Winter), 2011



Nickel Mountain, 2013



Unearth, 2010



Black Maple Eye Ball, 2012



Inspiration Point, 2011





The Mountain, 2014



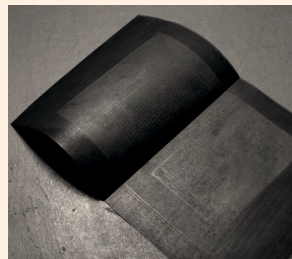
Merced, 2011



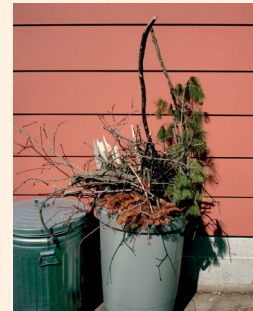
Red Stick, 2011



Champion, 2011



Oceans in Ponds, 2013



Branches, Sticks, Trim, 2014



OK, 2010



Going Back, 2012



Sun Sets, 2012

Branch, Plexiglas, Stakes, Stain, Scrap, 2012





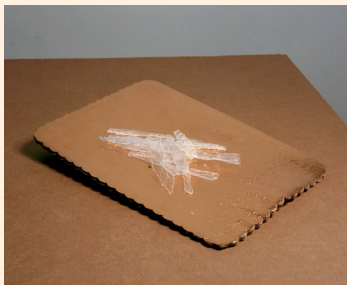
Make a Better Scene, 2013



A Clean Trap, 2011



Gravity I, 2011



Gold Rush, 2012



Friction I, 2012



Michael's Jewel II, 2012

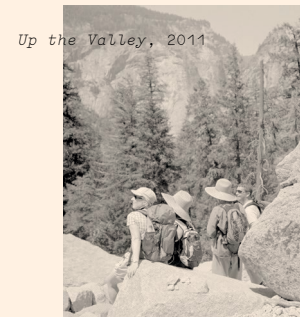
Michael's Jewel I, 2012



Friction II, 2012



Sun Shield, 2012



Up the Valley, 2011



Gravity II, 2011



Really Big Boulder, 2011



Geode, 2012



Shelter, 2013



Double Prop, 2013



A Time Remembered, 2010



Overgrowing, 2011



Inside Life, 2013



Escape, 2013

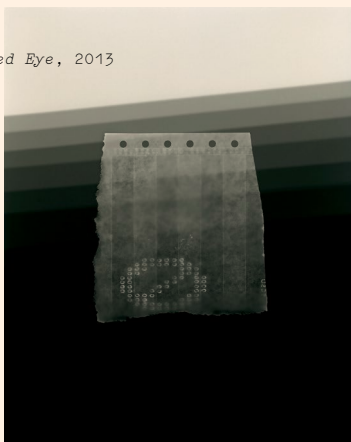


Black Piles Drip, 2014

7, 2013



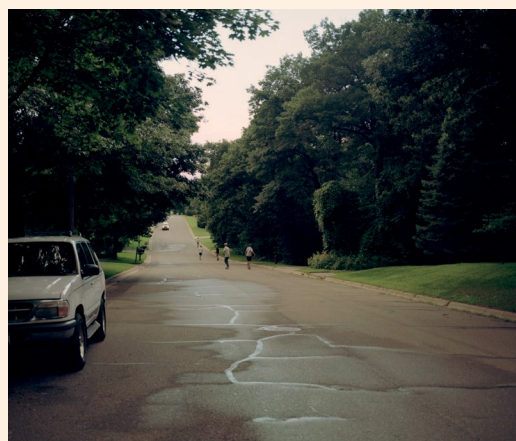
Buried Eye, 2013



OK OK, 2012



Collapsed Rock, 2013



Lance Mountain Lion, 2011



X, 2010

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