

REVIEW

Phantoms in the Dirt

MUSEUM OF CONTEMPORARY PHOTOGRAPHY, COLUMBIA COLLEGE
CHICAGO

JULY 24–OCTOBER 5, 2014

Navigating a dense downtown like Chicago's, lined with skyscrapers and boulevards, it is strange but also refreshing to enter a museum with photographs of dirt and water on the walls and rusty metal and wood objects on the floor. The exhibition *Phantoms in the Dirt*, at the Museum of Contemporary Photography, may at first have appeared difficult to grasp because of the general unspectacular appearance of the artworks presented, but there was also something unsettling and arresting about them that compelled visitors to want to stay and look closely into each work. And a closer look revealed that these are not simple or straightforward presentations of landscapes or found objects. The exhibition of works by sixteen artists attested to the variety of methods and capacities of photography, while also exploring the uncanny materiality of the familiar objects and scenes surrounding us. They bring to mind—and extend—the magical status of photography, particularly prevalent in early discourses on photography of the mid-nineteenth century that marveled at the new invention, often believing it could capture and reveal apparitions. The exhibition title itself hinted at photography's association with magic and necromancy.

Curator Karsten Lund explains in his catalog essay that he brought together artworks that "scrutinize and make use of the rough world of matter" and that are also "equally attuned to the mutability of photographic meaning and to the equivocal presence of remnants and traces."¹ He also acknowledges that each work "offers a more enigmatic face to the viewer, at least initially. These works, above all, stand on their own as a set of clues to various mysteries still being written."

It was important for museum visitors to read the explanatory notes about each work and artist, as these contained critical information to assist looking and understanding. However, with those notes placed in open-top file boxes hanging in corners of each gallery room, rather than in label form on the wall next to each work, the access wasn't easy. During the two times I visited the exhibition, I was the only viewer who seemed actually to be picking up and flipping through the files. With the help of the notes about each work, one could locate and clarify some of the sources of the eeriness that the exhibition exuded—the layers of associations, allusions, ambiguities, and contradictions that the presented works together evoked.

The exhibition began with two overwhelmingly large landscape photographs by Richard Mosse, *Sugar Ray* (2012) and *Beaucoups of Blues, North Kivu, Eastern Congo, November 2012* (2012), which curiously contain hills and trees that are bloody pink and orange instead of typical green. The Berlin-based Irish artist took these photographs in the Democratic Republic of Congo using an infrared film stock originally produced by the United States military to find soldiers in camouflage. Thus, paradoxically, he chose to photograph the peaceful-looking landscapes in this country that has been devastated by war, and he used the special film designed for military purposes to see the

invisible, resulting in the photographs of pink landscapes devoid of traces of the Congo's real-life situations. With this awareness, the photographs appear far more surreal and uncomfortable. On the opposite wall were Anya Gallaccio's black-and-white photographs entitled *As the Moon Turns in Space* (2011). At first, they appear as lunar landscapes with mysterious, beautiful rocks, perhaps from outer space, but they turn out to be dirt particles photographed with a scan microscope, a technology normally used by scientists.

Delightful surprises and bizarre discoveries were found throughout the exhibition. What looked like a beautiful abstract painting of a starry night—Greg Stimac's *Santa Fe to Billings* (2009) hanging just at the entrance of the museum—turned out to be a photograph of bugs and dirt. This work comes from a series of photographs Stimac produced in 2009 during a road trip across the United States. Before each drive, he affixed a sheet of Plexiglas to the front of his car, which thus collected the bugs and grit that piled up as he drove. The exhibition also included a 16mm film work by Stimac, *Old Faithful Inversion* (2012), an appropriation and recreation of a tourist's video of the eruption of the Old Faithful geyser in Yellowstone National Park that he found on YouTube. He inverted the found video's colors and made it an endless loop, resulting in a sublime image of smoke blooming into a pastel-toned horizon, recalling Mark Rothko's paintings.

Adjacent to the film were Alison Rossiter's small works on paper. At first these appear to be vintage photos of landscapes, but the "vintage" effect is due to the artist's use of expired photographic paper, some of which dates back to the 1920s and '40s. They are also not photos of landscapes—the cloud-like atmospheric images have been produced by the mold in the old paper. Rossiter thus didn't "take" photographs but created these works in the darkroom by dipping the old photographic paper in developer. It was fascinating to learn that her process was so simple and that it generated the ghostly images from mold, indeed calling forth "phantoms in the dirt."

Old Faithful Inversion (2012) by Greg Stimac; courtesy the artist and Andrew Rafacz Gallery, Chicago

