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PHOSPHORESCENCE:

Awoiska van der Molen's Sequester

An elementary tenet of photography is that contrast is generative of the illusion of space, as the eye reads each object against those that surround it in the construction of a three dimensional image from a two dimensional object. As with most things in life, the rubric itself is dry and far from captivating. However, the effects of contrast between light and shadow can be revelatory, full of rich and subtle nuances that deliver a visceral and elusive sense of mystery. Awoiska van der Molen's Sequester contains work of just such richness and layered complexity, and its subject, as in the best photography, is simultaneously the world and our capacity to frame it by seeing.

So much of the work in this book seems to shimmer at the porous boundaries between absolute shadow and indistinguishable light, in a short sequence of twenty-four photographic plates that seem to issue from some extra-terrestrial space. The book comprises three sections of eight photographs, separated by three full spreads of detail reproductions, in which black ink has been laid down on black paper covered in a telescopic fragment of some other image in the sequence. Thus it is not that the images themselves seem alien, but rather that our immersion into their rhythmic and elliptical flow requires an unmooring from the stable coordinates of everyday visual perception.

The photographs describe the surfaces, clefts and undulating expanses of an unspecified landscape rendered in long exposures made on nights of deep shadow, when each scene has been lit by the brightness of a distant moon. What we see in each image is thus the accumulated compression of many minutes or hours of light passing over a dark scene, so that gullies, trees, rock faces, leaves and hillsides are illuminated by a light that casts no shadow on the darkness that surrounds it. Each picture is thus a paradox of visual conventions, which awakens us to the mysterious difference of a nocturnal life that seems to breathe in the steady cadence of light passing from a celestial and utterly untraceable distance.

Amidst all this darkness these pictures are energised by life, and by the sense of its profusion into the imperceptible depths of shadow, where the silhouettes of leaves are transformed into spores with coarse and blurred edges. Trees seem to reach toward the light, as the jagged pattern of lightening shadow enlivens the surfaces of grass, and in the diaphanous glimmering of this nocturnal light we are made to feel like explorers of some deep and untrammelled ocean. It is the specificity of the earth and its interwoven forms that grounds the poetic rhythms of these images, despite occasional indices of human activity in the edges of a wooden fence, or the bright meniscus of tail-lights descending a hill in an extended blur. Ours is one form of life among many, our sense of certainty inescapably relative and of fractional duration, the world at large a mystery of unending alteration, decay and unquenchable beauty.

“What happens when we find ourselves in a place deprived of light?” asks Giorgio Agamben in an essay entitled *What Is the Contemporary?*. “The absence of light activates a series of peripheral cells” which “produce the particular kind of vision that we call darkness”. So in fact “darkness is not, therefore, a privative notion but rather the result of the activity of the “off-cells,” a product of our own retina.” Agamben concludes that therefore darkness as a concept is only intelligible within the narrow confines of our own optical capacity, and not an immutable register with which to measure the shape and nature of the world.

In *American Night*, Paul Graham challenged the normalcy of printing conventions in order to marry an aesthetic of illegibility with a social affliction that rendered a minority invisible in the pitiless cruelty of blazing light. In *Sequester*, van der Molen’s pictures challenge the stability of the normative category ‘landscape,’ in order to know it differently and perhaps in a manner that no longer presumes our own pre-eminence. Her photographs gradually and cumulatively reveal the untroubled stillness, grace and complexity of a world undeniably indifferent to our hopes, if presently vulnerable to our numerous interventions.

In chemistry the term phosphorescence describes a circumstance in which energy absorbed by an object is released slowly in the form of light, in a process analogous to the receptive activities of a photographic exposure. What van der Molen’s photographs describe in such apt and elusive detail is a sense of animate life unlinked to human activity, in which light emanates through shadows that reveal a world invented by the compression of time. In this her pictures guide us “On up the failing path, where, if a stone / Or earthslide moved at night, it moved itself; / No footstep moved it.”

They contemplate a somnambulant, serene and shimmering landscape, in which stillness is animated by the leavening of deep shadow, and they make visible, or even visceral the evanescent texture of time passing through our limited grasp.

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