Burton
Pritzker

Forgotten
Planes

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Pritzker

MUSEUM OF THE SOUTHWEST, MIDLAND, TEXAS

With texts by **Mark L. Smith** and **James Housefield**

Forgotten Planes

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INTRODUCTION

THE MUSEUM OF THE SOUTHWEST is pleased to present the publication of the book *Burton Pritzker: Forgotten Planes*, and the subsequent exhibition of selected works at the Museum, to further enhance the public's understanding and appreciation of contemporary fine art photography.

I first met Burton Pritzker during an exhibition we hosted for him at the Museum of the Southwest in 2005. The exhibition featured photographs from his *Texas Rangeland* series. Having previously seen these works as reproductions in his book of the same title (University of Texas Press, 2002), I was not fully prepared for what ultimately proved to be an evocative viewing experience. The series featured images of cattle in compositions blending photographic objectivity with personal expression. I was tremendously moved by their beauty.

In the fall of 2008, when I learned that Burt had finished another series of photographs titled *Forgotten Planes,* I was immediately intrigued and sought out an opportunity to see the work. *The Forgotten Planes* series began as a private commission photographed in eastern New Mexico. Burt was invited to create a series absent of parameter, which is every artist's dream. The series is about "light," and the magnificent light of New Mexico has attracted artists for over a century. After seeing the work, I concluded that such a monumental artistic achievement should be documented for the future via publication, and that the Museum of the Southwest should strive to acquire a portfolio of the prints for its collection.

This exhibition and book, together with the Museum's acquisition of eighty-seven of the photographs for its permanent collection, represent the fulfillment of that goal. A fundamental purpose of the Museum of the Southwest is to collect, preserve, display, and interpret works of art relating to the defined geographical area implicit in our name. This focus includes art of a historic nature, as well as contemporary art by both emerging and established artists. Through our exhibitions, educational programs, and publications, the museum provides a framework for scholarly and public discourse on art and artists and their important relationship to society. The photography of Burton Pritzker dovetails neatly with this mission.

I would like to thank Midland architect Mark Wellen for sowing the seeds of dialogue for this project among the principle participants, and for hosting a couple of dinners where we discussed the possibilities and benefits of such a collaboration. I would also like to acknowledge the contributions of art historians Mark L. Smith and Jim Housefield for their insightful essays on Burton's methodology and aesthetic approach. The book designer was the gifted graphic artist Henk van Assen of HVAD, a design studio in New York City. Bill Kennedy at K2 Press in Austin, Texas, was responsible for all the fantastic pre-press work. I would also like to recognize the entire board and staff of the Museum for their continued encouragement and support of our many programs and projects.

A special note of thanks is due to the artist himself, Burton Pritzker, who, after all, is the creative force behind this extraordinary body of photographs and an important artist for Texas and the nation. Finally, the Museum of the Southwest would like to acknowledge the generous support of Tim Leach of Midland, Texas, and Robert Chase of Artesia, New Mexico, who made this project possible through their patronage.

THOMAS W. JONES
EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR, MUSEUM OF THE SOUTHWEST

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

HOW CAN I EVER BEGIN TO EXPLAIN the importance of this book in my life? It is the culmination of thirty-five years of work, and an unexpected blessing. Louis Kahn, the extraordinary American architect, once said that a great building couldn't be created without a great client. Similarly, this body of work could not have been created without a patron with the foresight to commission it. That patron was Tim Leach, whose support of my art has been pivotal in my life. With almost an air of nonchalance he commissioned this series and then, in another surprise, supported this book. He knows his mind, as few do, and kept surprising me with his belief in what I was doing. When I commended him for his appreciation of complex imagery, he brushed the compliment aside as if such understanding were commonplace. This is a sign of a man grounded in himself. I am indebted to him.

Meeting Robert Chase, Mr. Leach's one-time partner, was another serendipitous encounter. He was asked, as a favor, to point me in a direction and facilitate my capture of imagery. He did that and so much more, to the point that I was overwhelmed by his generosity. Two people with such diverse backgrounds as Mr. Chase and myself could not be found, yet I enjoyed every moment and conversation we shared. He drove me around the desert landscapes of southeastern New Mexico and we spoke about many things. Our time together was enlightening and I valued it highly. His support of my work and of this book have been critically important.

Tom Jones, director of the Museum of the Southwest in Midland, Texas, was another important contributor to the publication of *Forgotten Planes*. He exhibited my *Texas Rangeland* series in 2005 shortly after the University of Texas Press published my book of the same name, and has been enthusiastic about my vision ever since. Mark Wellen, my friend and an architect in Midland, was at the center of this project; he brought the players together and was the visionary behind it. He and Tom Jones crafted the final result, and I want to thank them both.

Then there are the essays. Mark Smith, co-owner of Flatbed Press and Gallery in Austin, Texas, is a man of many talents, not the least of which is writing. To this he brings his background as an artist, master printer, educator, and gallerist. Having a conversation with him about art is an inspiration. James Housefield used to teach with me at Texas State University at San Marcos before moving to the University of California at Davis. He is so passionate about art that he will do anything to bring it into the lives of students, including dancing on the tables if it will incite interest. I am honored and deeply touched by the beautiful, informed, and intelligent words contributed by these consummate professionals, whose opinions are highly regarded by many besides me.

You can see that the design of this book is inspired. Every decision made about its visual form was based on my conversations with Henk van Assen, my friend and one of the most intelligent and talented graphic designers I have ever encountered. Henk teaches at Yale University and has a studio in New York City. In my career as a photographer I have worked with many designers, but seldom have I met one who is so insightful and so good at communicating concepts. Henk listens, and his design reflects, and is synchronous with, my vision. It is a reaction to the imagery in the photographs and is never based on style alone.

Thanks to Bill Kennedy of K2 Press in Austin, Texas, for the scans and digital files from which the plates in the book were made. By working with Bill we were able to maintain a level of control that is unusual in the world of book printing. And, finally, this book reads well because of our editor, Lynne Chapman, who also worked on my book Texas Rangeland. Additionally, special thanks to Martha Boethel, my friend and personal content editor. She was unrelenting in her drive to keep me on track.

What a great team of talented people. It is a privilege to know and work with all of them.

BURTON PRITZKER
AUSTIN, TEXAS, SEPTEMBER 2009

FORGOTTEN PLANES

FORGOTTEN PLANES is a manifestation of my belief that form is transcendent and that the ability of the camera to record reality is the least of its possibilities. My focus is on the form of the subject, its placement in the frame, and the light that defines it. When form, light, and composition are synchronous, I always have a palpable feeling that I am on to something, another reality beyond what I see, at which point I strive to simplify, to strip away unnecessary elements that distract from the essence of the experience.

Forgotten Planes began at the Petroleum Club in Midland, Texas, in 2005. A group of people connected with my exhibit *Texas Rangeland,* at the Museum of the Southwest, were celebrating after the opening reception. Mark Wellen, an architect who'd co-sponsored the evening, knew I was trained as an architect at UC Berkeley in the 1960s and we began talking, looking for common ground. I told him I consider myself a recovering architect. We've been friends and supporters of each other's work ever since.

Later that year I received an email request to purchase four prints. I didn't recognize the name and almost deleted the message, thinking about similar e-mails which had been con attempts. This one, though, turned out to be from one of Mark's best clients, Tim Leach, a Midland oilman. He bought four images from the *Texas Rangeland* series and they are now hanging in his office.

By this time *Forgotten Planes* had already begun to gestate, just a hint of the reality of the book, like the faint but identifiable scent of the ocean that carries inland on a warm night.

Soon after Tim's purchase, I was invited to his house, a Mark Wellen design, to talk about doing some commissioned work. I would be free to create whatever I wanted, Tim told me, with only one caveat. I thought, here comes the deal breaker. He said, "Can you do this on my properties in southeastern New Mexico?"

I demurred, as courteously as I could. I have no interest in merely taking pictures of the surface of things. My quest is to photograph that which is not visible at first glance, a world I can only sense but that I know, with certainty, exists.

"No, no, you can do anything you want, just do it there."

"So I can create whatever I want, even abstract images, no limits, no strings?"

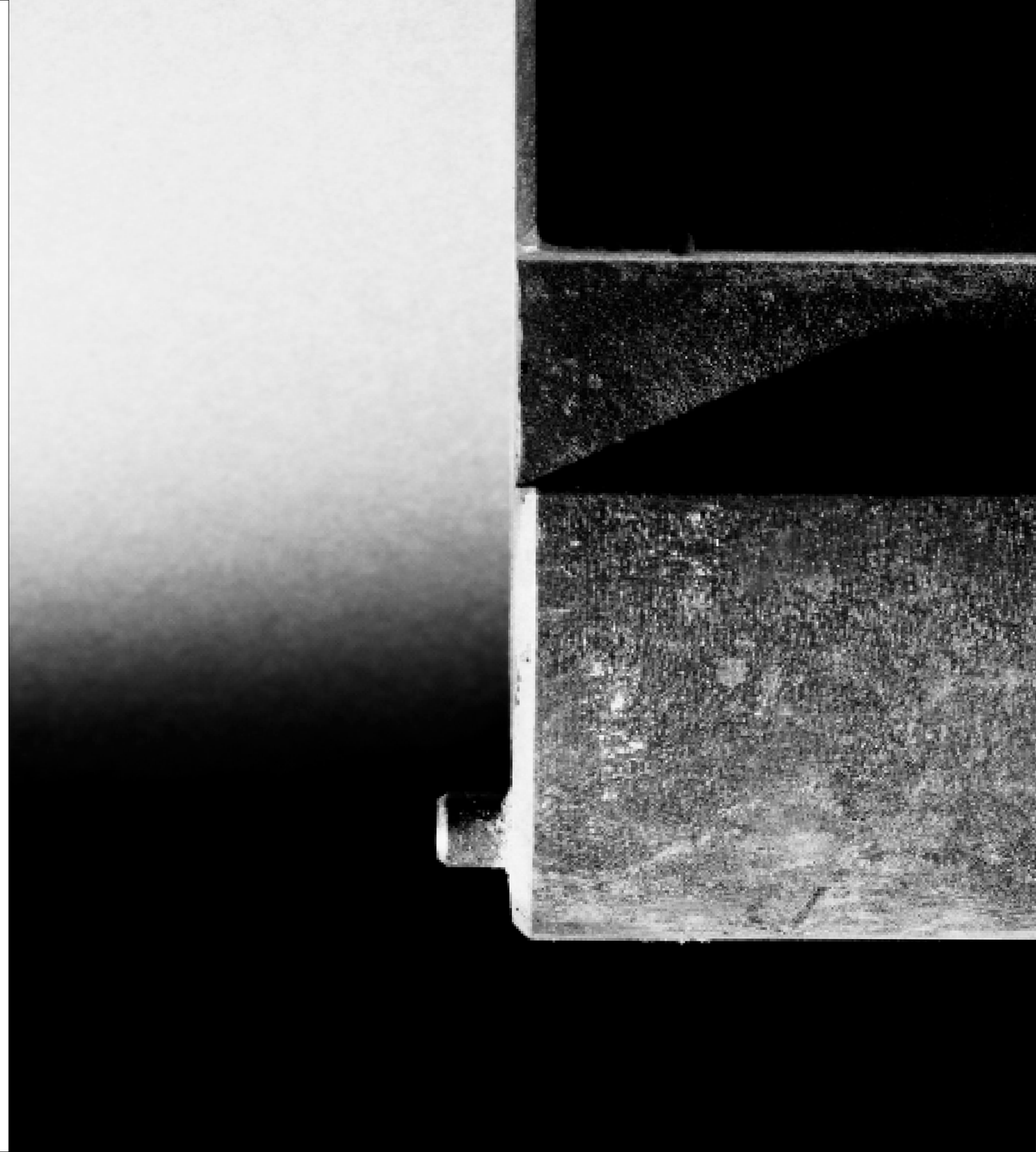
WHAT ARTIST WOULDN'T WANT THAT?

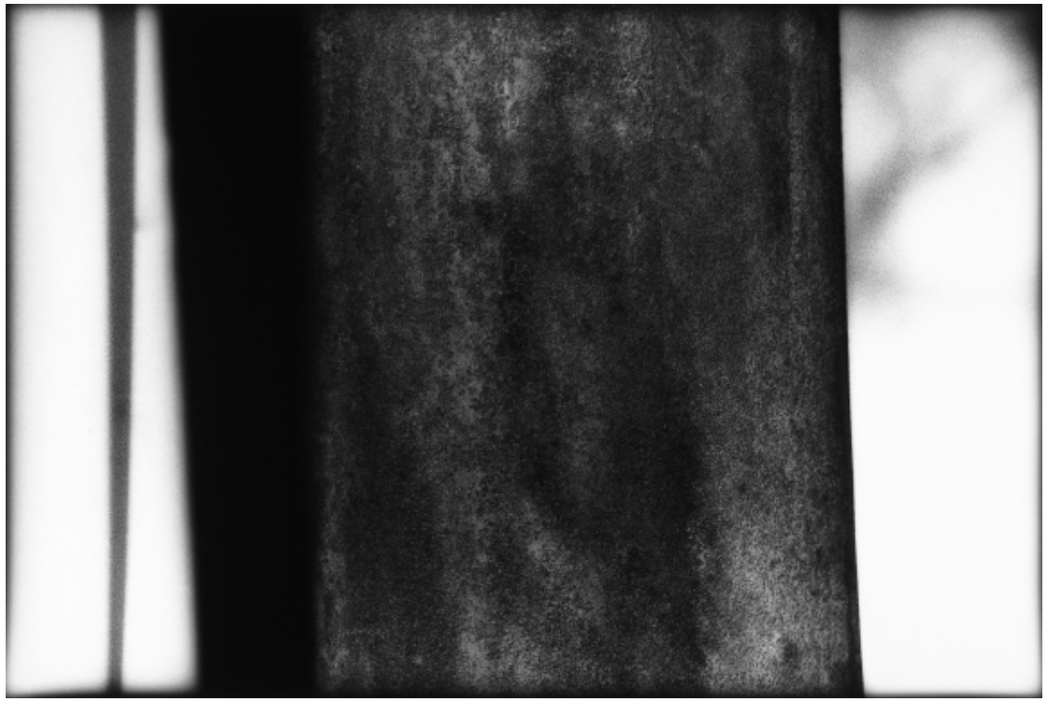
A private jet was sent to take me to New Mexico. Robert Chase, Tim's partner at the time, drove me around in the desert for a week in his Land Rover, his Blackberry in constant use, keeping track of his four hundred employees, stopping at diners on lonely highways and watching me from a distance as I wandered around looking for that alternate world living beneath the surface of things.

I worked hard for a week, shot tons of film and returned to Austin with boxes of artifacts to photograph in my studio—pieces of pipe, unidentifiable machine parts, stainless steel balls and rings, valves that couldn't possibly have anything to do with running my car.

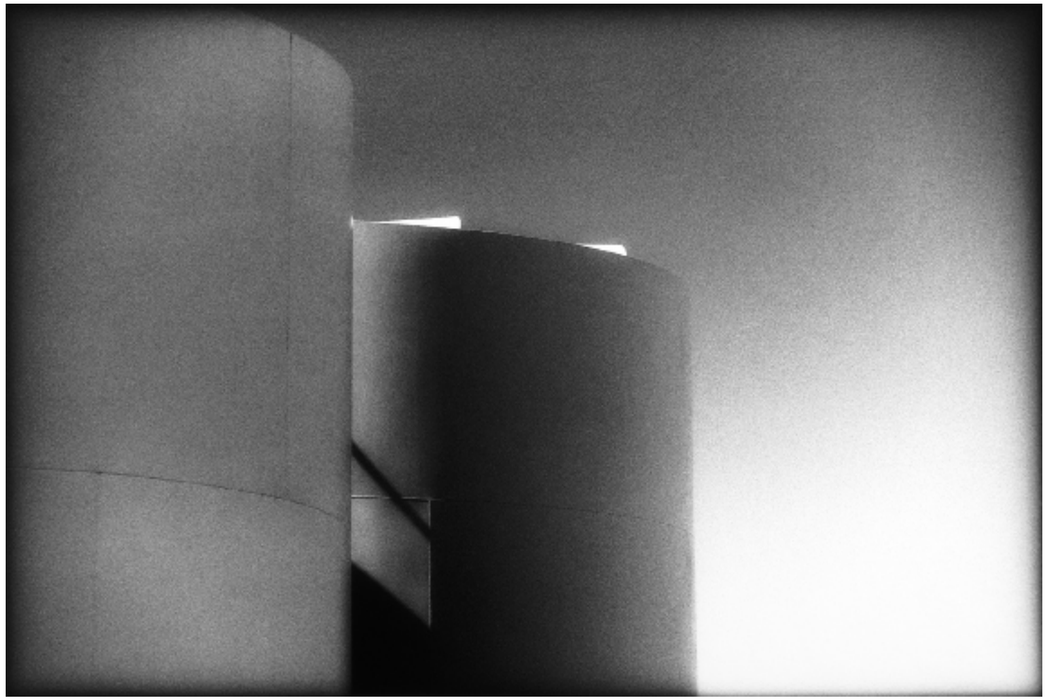
That was three years ago. *Forgotten Planes* is now complete and culminating in this book.

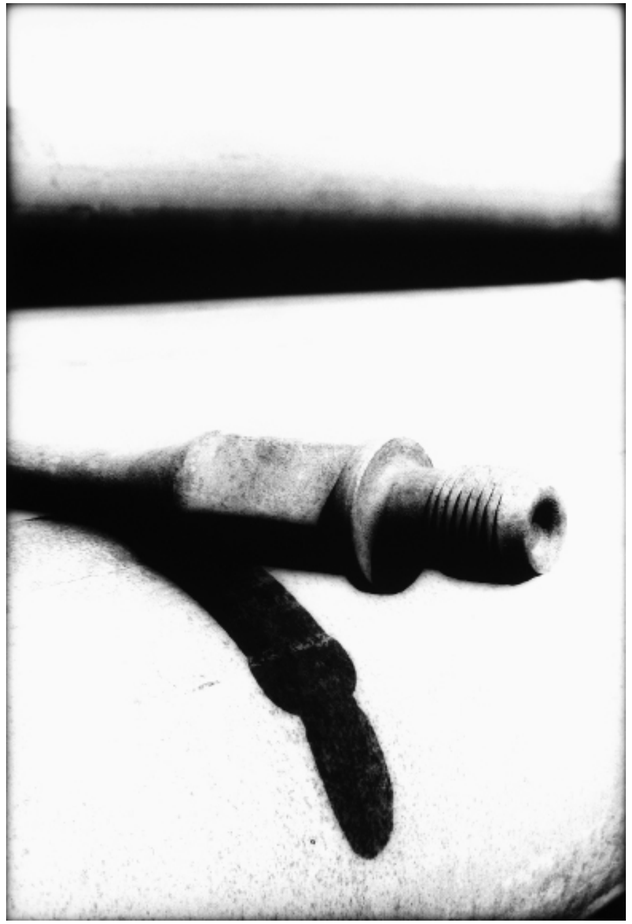
When I look at anything through a camera, I sense another world, another reality beyond what I see. If the photograph I take is successful, that "other world" comes into being, a kind of alchemy. For me, this entire project has been an alchemical process, and I am deeply grateful to Tim Leach for making it possible.





not presenting objects
but carriers of meaning personal to each of us





redolent with
the potential meaning that each of us
may find within it

THE WORK

There are two kinds of music:
the blues
and zippedy-do da.

— TOWNES VAN ZANDT

MARK L. SMITH

BURTON PRITZKER WOULD PROBABLY define "zippedy-do-da" in the visual arts as merely "pictures of things." And Pritzker's art is definitely not that. If his images are the visual equivalent of the blues, it is because both come from somewhere deep in the gut. They come from hard-won experience with the stubborn realities of life below the wealthy line. And like a good blues singer, Pritzker takes his subjects as they come, because he knows it is not the subject matter *per se* that matters; it is what he does with it. He respects it intensely and he acknowledges its inherent gravitas, no matter what it is. He uses light to bend its notes. He roots one phrase in the earth and sets another free in the white air. He pounds out a primal rhythm in a pattern of shadows and reflections. He intones a deep, velvety bass and then runs it head-on into a mockingbird's falsetto.

A musical metaphor fits Pritzker's works, but so does an architectural one, for he builds very sturdy compositions. A sculptural metaphor works too, for his forms have mass and monumentality. So does a poetic one, for his works are nothing if not poetic. But my preferred metaphor for this artist's creations is an alchemical one. True alchemists go beyond the impossible chemistry of turning lead into gold; they press toward nothing less than the ultimate enlightenment of humankind. That may sound overblown in the context of our present culture, but historically that was the goal of a philosophical alchemist. In alchemy and other occult systems, this is known as "The Work."

Pritzker transforms the most base of objects—a bull, an oil tank, a steel pipe—into something visually sublime, but a good poet like Billy Collins can also do that. It takes an advanced alchemist to do what Pritzker does. He draws the outer world in through his lens and into the laboratory of his camera, and there he heats it with the flame of his imagination. His enterprise is at once both gentle and profoundly aggressive, in that he transforms his subject into something else, something that has an ineffable power to levitate our spirit. That is why looking at his images can shock and inspire us; we have never before seen anything like them.

Another way to look at Pritzker's work is that he releases the essence of his subjects, the inherent, blinding "whatness" of them that we usually walk right by and do not see. Pritzker opens our eyes by enlivening our whole body during the process of viewing his work. He leads us on an ecstatic journey into the very bowels of the subject and then catapults us beyond it. Again, alchemy offers a procedure that fits Pritzker's undertaking: "Separate Matter from Imagination, the Subtle from the Gross, gently, in deepest meditation."[1]

Although Pritzker does wallop us with a new vision of the world, he also mesmerizes us. He slows us down and leads us into a meditative state. We stand in front of a human-sized print of the open end of a nozzle and we are transfixed by its transcendence. It does not make sense; in fact, his work takes up where sense leaves off.

How can photons that massage silver particles on film that in turn cast shadows on paper move us in such a way? Even Pritzker cannot fully explain how it works. And he does not need to explain it. The simple part is this: He looks hard, he records carefully, and then he manipulates according to what his eye and his gut tell him. The complicated part is this: What guides his efforts comes from someplace in the cosmos that neither he nor we can access except by this particular art. So it is with all genuine art.

What, then, are these magical images of Pritzker's? Over the last twenty years I have seen his architectural subjects. I have seen his figurative subjects, his animal and botanical and landscape subjects. And now his oil-field subjects—and they are all, as he says, "about something else." That something else is composed of light, shadow, form, texture, space, and line, all the formal elements that Pritzker adds up to something much more than the sum of those parts.

Take *A Space Between Thoughts,* [p. 123] for example. Here, Pritzker constructs a typically stable structure. (His first career as an architect lives on in the background of his aesthetic; the artist's love of classical Japanese architecture is visible here, as in so many of his prints.) But moving across

the space from left to right is an apparition, a vertical, ghostly form. It is a thin pillar of light that pauses briefly, in the inky darkness, for our delectation. Below, sunlight bathes the horizontal beam in soft shadow and a bright, luxuriant glow. It is a moment of poetic observation; it is serendipity; it is epiphany.

A *Space Between Thoughts* is a very simple composition, yet one that tells us a great deal about the artist's work. First of all, Pritzker has pared it down to its essence. This is what he does with all his work, to some extent. It is like haiku in that there is not one extra detail, and removal of any one element would cause it to collapse. His style has been compared to minimalism, but it is something different, something more romantic, something more full of Eros than classic minimalism. A *Space Between Thoughts* also exemplifies the meditative intensity of Pritzker's work. Its precision is formidable and yet spontaneous. His process is parallel to the way in which a Japanese or Chinese calligrapher creates masterful strokes with a sumi brush and black ink on paper: it requires enormous concentration and hard-won confidence, and it is executed in a few perfect gestures. In fact, Pritzker has identified Japanese calligraphy as one source of his inspiration. In terms of the way he organizes his images, we can also see echoes of the work of the American abstract expressionist Franz Kline.

Where Planes Collide [p. 123] typifies another organizational principle that Pritzker often applies to his work: the powerful tension of the tangent. This concern is visible also in *Phoenix Rising, Hint of Reality, We Wear Many Hats,* and *Mistaken Identity* [pp. 22, 124, 78, 126]. Pritzker is extremely sensitive to the way forms touch each other. (This attention to joints and junctures is also found in the best architects, such as Louis Kahn.) In *Where Planes Collide,* Pritzker brings the bulbous forms on the right tenderly together with the plane on the left in an embrace. His love of such a kiss of forms is reminiscent of the work of Ellsworth Kelly, in which the painter orchestrates similarly delicate tangents. *Mistaken Identity* is an especially interesting example of this principle; in it, the artist has transformed the brutalistic physicality of the process of welding two steel cylinders at a right angle into a string of beads on a human neck. Or so it appears. But it is not the allusion that interests Pritzker so much as the feeling of the string sitting on the "skin." Such a

reading—in my case, of the necklace—may not be the artist's reading at all, but I believe this would not matter to him. What seems to matter to him fervently is that we, as the viewers, derive *some* feeling from *some* unique association that each of us brings to a given work. In that sense his work is open—that is, redolent with the potential meaning that each of us may find within it.

Pritzker also cites Mark Rothko as an artist whose work he finds especially meaningful. *A Space Between Thoughts* exemplifies this connection by virtue of its gravitas and sense of mystery. Like Rothko's blocks of amorphous color suspended in ethereal spaces, Pritzker's images participate in some reality beyond the material world. *When Emptiness Looks Full, The Sorcerer's Hat, Looking to the Future, Moment of Realization,* and *Subterranean* [pp. 123, 22, 64, 120] are a few other works that represent this aspect of the artist's approach.

Another quality found in Pritzker's prints is one that balances his tendency toward the metaphysical: it is his affection for what I have previously referred to as the "whatness" of things—that is, their sheer physicality, their sensuous concreteness. He delights in, even celebrates, the way surfaces feel to the touch, the weight of things, the way light defines their materiality with highlights and shadows. One of the most beautiful works in this vein is *Detective's Clue* [p. 123]. The exquisite curve of the metallic drum, its smooth, reflective surface, the jewel-like clarity of the form—Pritzker combines these features to surprise us with how much potential pleasure resides in mundane objects. The effect of such an image reminds us of our reaction to a divine phrase in the music of Mozart or Puccini; it is an ineffable yet undeniable delight not only to the eye (or to the ear, in the case of music) but also to the soul. Maybe this is what anthropologists call the numinous: that is, some transcendent power that is incarnate in the stuff of the earth. Perhaps this is what an animist experiences. What Pritzker demonstrates is nothing less than the unity of that which is below and that which is above, or the outer and the inner, or whatever dyad of realities works for you.

Sometimes the artist's passion for the particulars of the empirical world is sensual to the point of eroticism. It takes a shaman to tease sexuality out of steel, but Pritzker arguably pulls it off in works like

The Reverie That Sees, Succumbing to Deception, The Opposite of a Perception, Solaris, The Artist's Personal Aspiration, and *The Oracle.* [pp. 12, 24, 36, 123, 45, 11] At the very least, the artist evokes Eros, that god who carries for us our passion for the things of this earth.

If Pritzker does approach his work as both a wizard and a lover, he also devotes himself to its technicalities. Once he has explored the environment for sights that move him and has invited them into his camera body, he inhabits his darkroom until he has worked his magic on his prints. And he does so with a stubborn perfectionism that rivals that of any artist in history. Like a good alchemist, he does not reveal precisely what he does in the red light of his laboratory. He remains devoted to silver on film, even as most of his peers have moved on to zeros and ones on computer chips. He is a consummate craftsman in the wet darkroom, manipulating each image until it sings to him just so. The physicality of the wet darkroom process is his *métier.* Pritzker is so committed to the craftsmanship of this process that he thinks of himself not as a photographer at all but as a print maker. This has led him to align himself with the art of print making and to explore, in particular, the difficult medium of copperplate photogravure.

Once Pritzker has completed his prints in the darkroom, he does translate some into digitally derived inkjet prints, but he always creates the initial image in the old-fashioned way, never digitally. I do not think he owns a digital camera. His gelatin silver prints that he enlarges to huge dimensions must be scanned from his images. This he does in close collaboration with artists Bill Kennedy and Scott King, proprietors of K2 Press in Austin. Together, the three of them produce giant prints that satisfy the artist's uncompromising standards of fidelity to his gelatin silver prints. I remember that, at first, Pritzker was reluctant to increase the scale of his works dramatically, believing that doing so would be simply bowing to current trends. Pritzker is totally unmoved by contemporary trends in art; his inspiration comes from classic modernism and from pre-modern sources. Eventually, he became convinced that very large dimensions would not compromise the integrity of his work, but would in fact more effectively showcase the monumentality of certain images.

Pritzker gives careful attention to the titles of his works; he is too much of a romanticist to assign numbers to them or to leave them untitled. I have had lively conversations with him about the merits of his intriguingly specific titles. Do they contradict his penchant for letting an image stand on its own? Do they give clues to meaning that circumscribe or prejudice individual interpretations? I for one appreciate their poetic quality, but regard them as harmlessly ancillary to the images. At best, titles such as *Preparation for the Execution* [p. 123] can help to inspire some viewers to think about an image metaphorically instead of literally. At worst, they can be a bit overwrought, such as *The Obstacle or a Solution?* or *The True Believer's Quandary* [p. 123, 86]. It is possible that Pritzker—like Robert Rauschenberg—may sometimes use his titles as random, false clues in order to derail a literal interpretation. In any case, the efficacy of the artist's titles remains an open question; but, in the end, it matters little in the face of the consistent power of his images, which, for most careful observers, stand very well on their own, titles or no titles.

The more literal of the artist's works, including landscapes such as *The True Believer's Quandary* and *A Tracker's Dilemma* [p. 123], imply narratives but they do not press them upon us. They are, like a pirate's laws, more suggestions than rules. We are still free to weave our own stories. Perhaps the artist's effectiveness lies partly in the way he combines implied narratives or symbols with modernist formalism. Each of us viewers takes a ratio of the two that fits our individual needs. In my case, the associative content of Pritzker's images is always in the background.

As I try to understand why Pritzker's work has such power to move me, I keep coming back to the word integrity. There is a stubborn honesty about his prints, a transparency of presentation. This is ironic, since he manipulates his images unabashedly. What you see is not what you get. And yet he is always true to the essential nature of whatever he records on the film, to the way that the light caresses the little silver particles. He takes what lies out there, preserves an image of it for his examination, and then feels his way into its heart. Using an alchemy only he knows, he presents a work's kernel of being with

unmistakable clarity. This is The Work that he does: he turns silver into gold, a precious metal of the spirit. In doing so, he reveals with stunning acuity what was always there, but what we rarely notice without the help of a seer such as himself.

1
Dennis William Hauck, *The Emerald Tablet: Alchemy for Personal Transformation* (New York, NY: Penguin Arkana, 1999), 432.

images
participate in
some reality beyond
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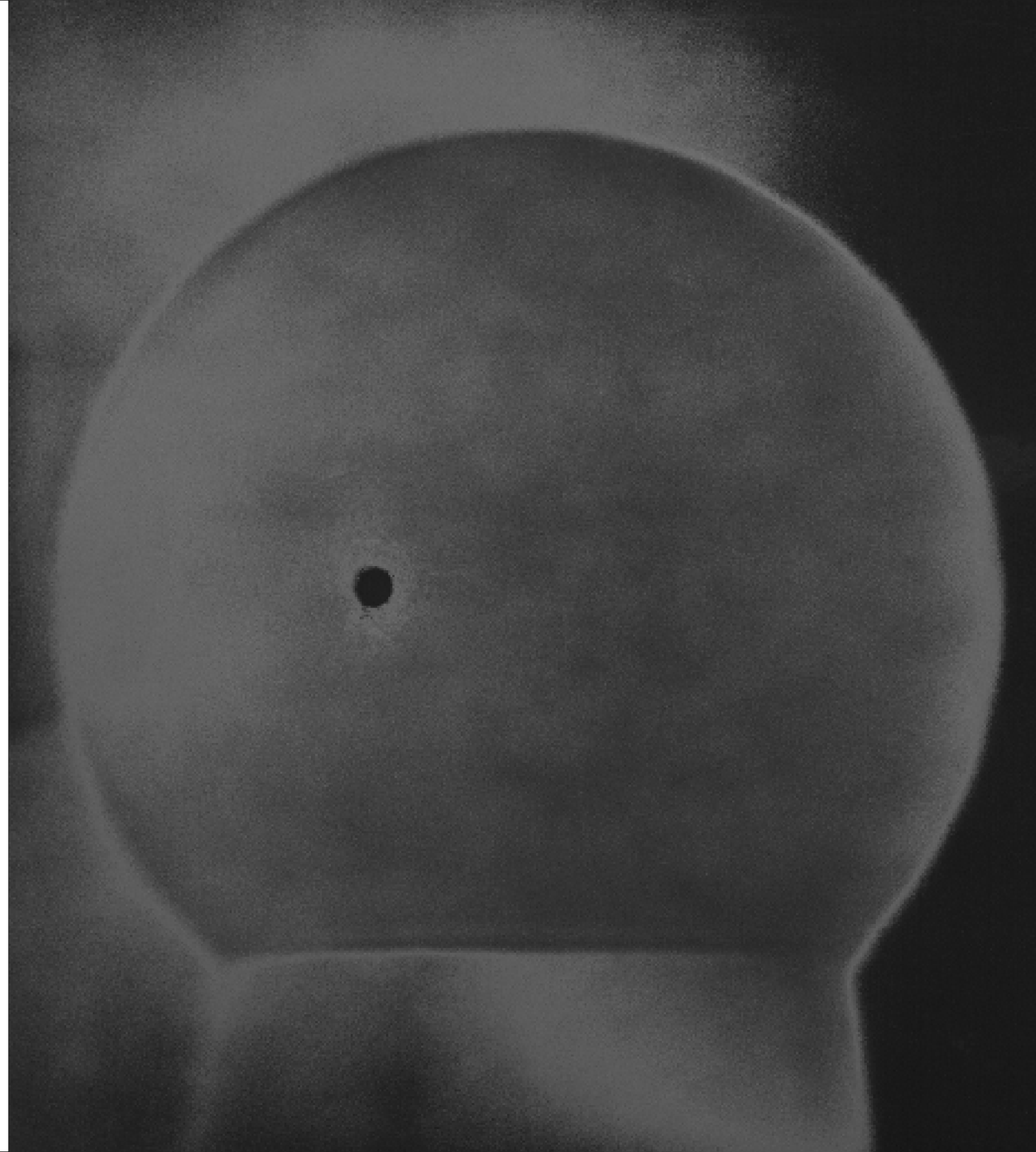
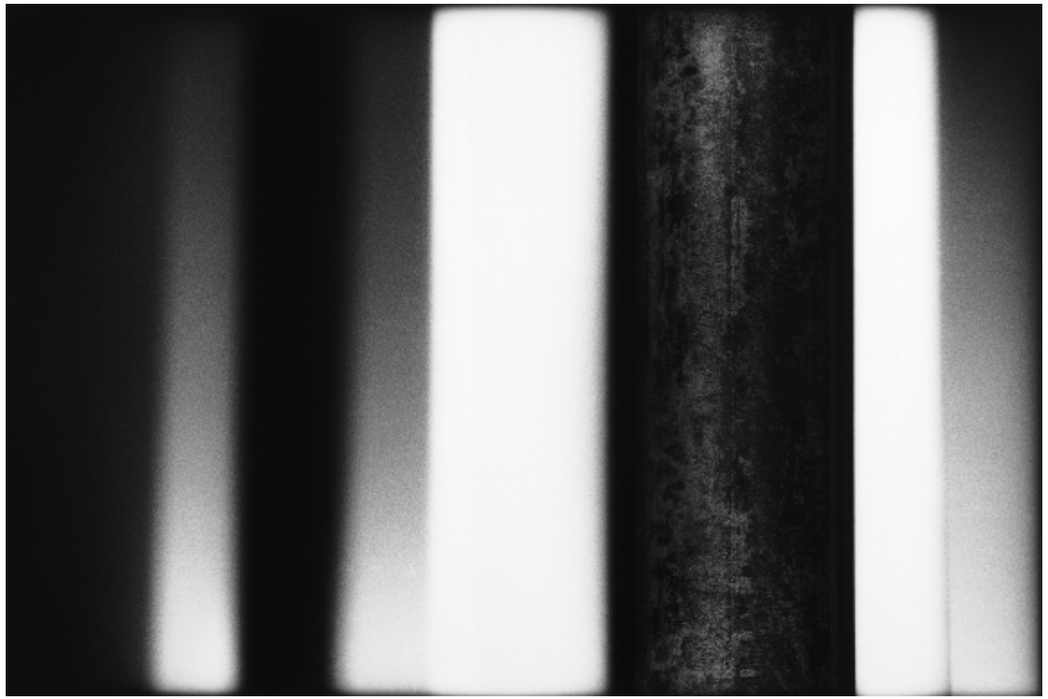
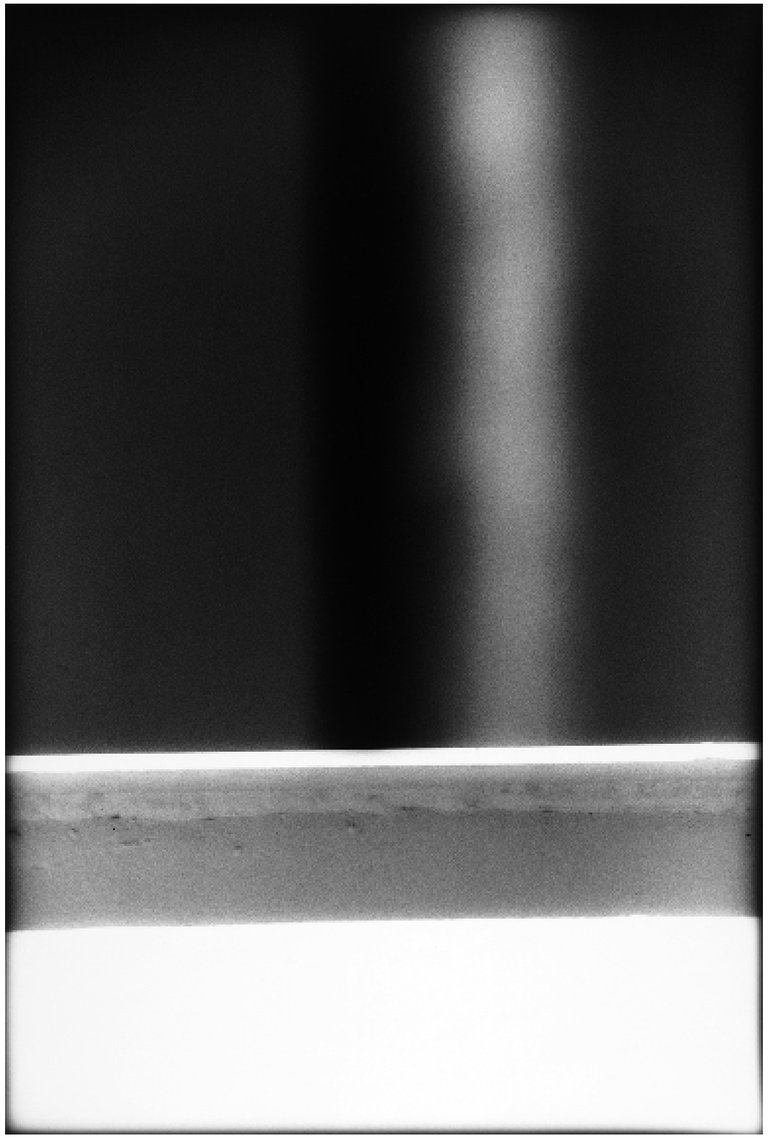
world







what was always there
but what we rarely see

coaxing
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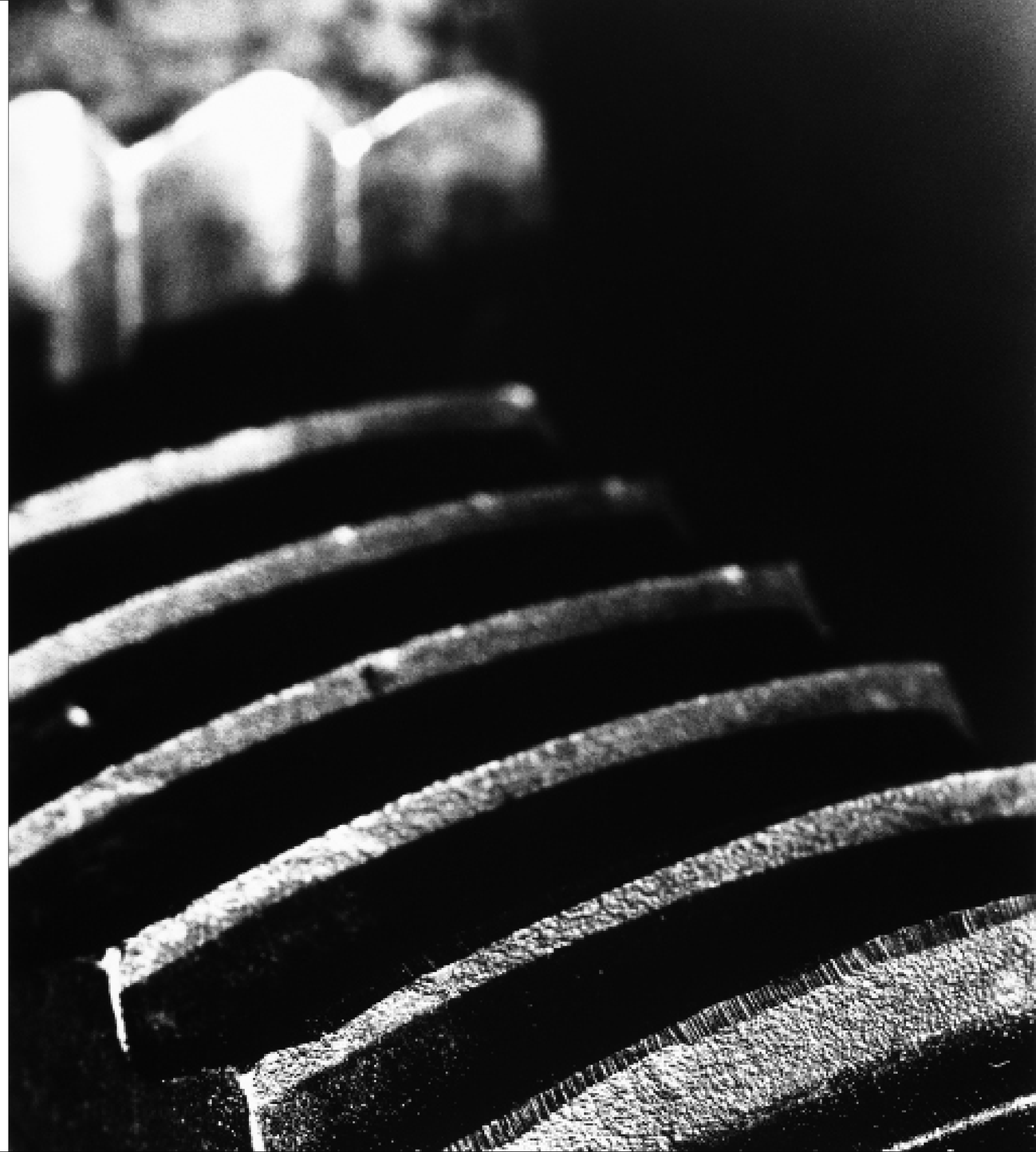

transcendent
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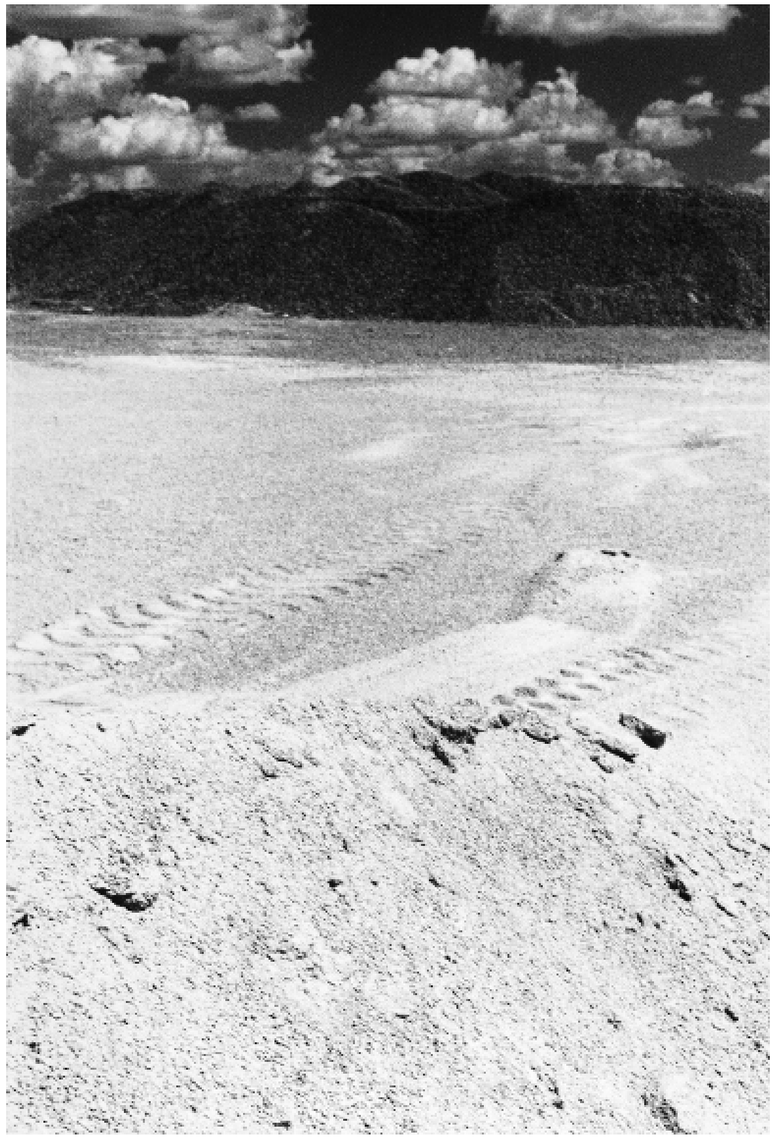
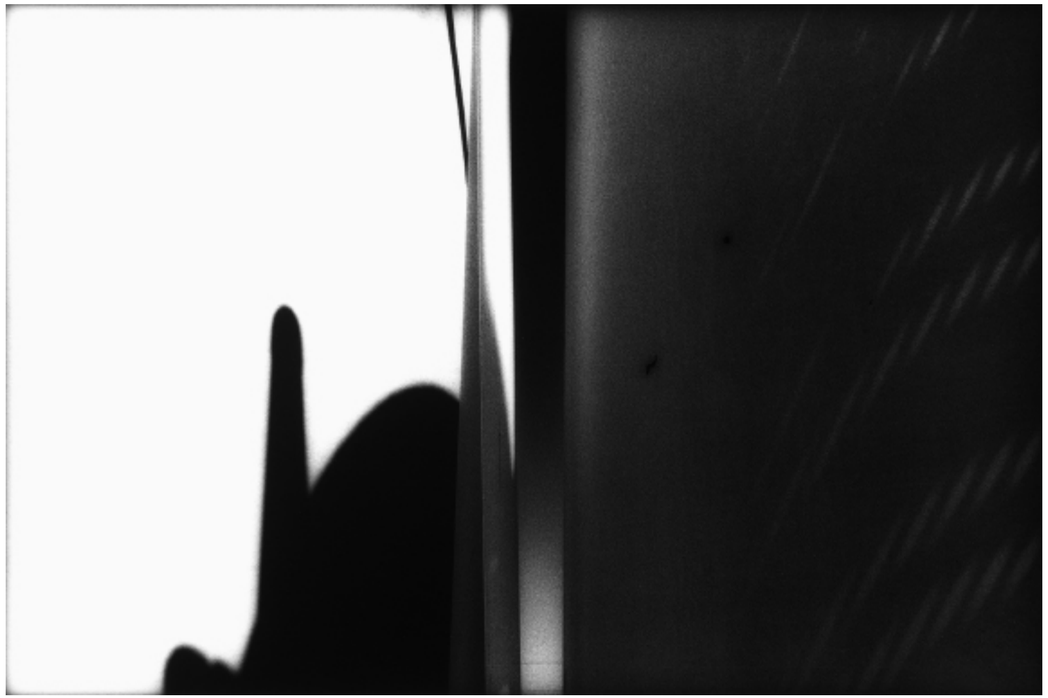




EVERYTHING IS ALSO SOMETHING ELSE

BURTON PRITZKER'S DETOURS ON THE PATH TO ENLIGHTENMENT

JAMES HOUSEFIELD

My paintings are invitations to look somewhere else . . .
—ROBERT RAUSCHENBERG

I try to bring the hidden to light, to make manifest the inner essence of something.
—BURTON PRITZKER

Because it is so very clear,
it takes so long to realize.
If you just know that flame is fire,
you'll find your rice has long been cooked.
—WU-MEN, *THE GATELESS BARRIER*

BURTON PRITZKER'S IMAGERY communicates a philosophy in which "everything is also something else."[1] This philosophical stand helps to make sense of an apparent paradox arising from his work. Although human figures are not a part of *Forgotten Planes,* his art is imbued with humanist motivations. Ultimately, Pritzker seeks to address the human condition, for his compositions try to reveal the invisible presence behind that which is shared in human experience. He arranges forms that he finds in the world around him so that they communicate something more than the sum of their parts. In these acts of composition, the stuff of our material world presents itself as the shadows of something else. Through images that appear to be the manifestations of memory or of imagination, Pritzker guides viewers on a philosophical road trip. Each image offers a detour on the road to enlightenment.

Enlightenment is a state of being associated with all the world's great spiritual traditions. Pritzker's art does not dictate a specific path to enlightenment; such a programmatic notion would be dogmatic. By contrast, Pritzker's work is ecumenical in the sense that it is open to all who wish to contemplate it. Like many examples from the history of art, it has the power to teach us how to look at it, if only we will pause long enough for active looking to occur. As an historian of art and design, and not a student of world religions, I will admit to feeling somewhat uncomfortable writing about enlightenment. I am well aware, as is Pritzker himself, of the spiritual quests that motivated much

of the art of the modern era.[2] For me to contemplate enlightenment in our own times required a greater leap. I found it helpful to change the ways I engage with art and with the tools of my work. I returned to writing longhand for the first time in years, working at a pace dictated by my head and hands. Only later did I turn to the computer. Rather than seeking themes and ideas in Pritzker's work, I wrote this essay after meditating upon images that had not immediately resonated with me. As you read on, I would invite you to tailor your responses to Pritzker's art in a similar fashion. Move slowly, even though slowness may not be the tempo of our times. Move meditatively. Follow Pritzker's detours, despite an awareness that they require us to leave the path of enlightenment we might otherwise have selected for ourselves.

Travelers on Pritzker's path confront dilemmas, points at which interpretation can go in multiple directions simultaneously. His image, *A Tracker's Dilemma* [p. 123], produces and engages with such confrontations. Which trail does one follow, that of the tracker himself or that of the tracker's prey? One who sets out on this path, like a tracker in pursuit of a wild creature, might confront other dilemmas. Are the tracks those of sand or sky, of vehicle treads or of a mysterious being's traces? The road, trail, or path is of less significance than the chain of events linking vision with spirit. Here, sand and sky—earth and cosmos—are continuous, not distinct. This is the world of human experience becoming a gateway to higher consciousness. As an unresolved tension reverberates in the viewer's mind, its echoes generate meaning from the image. Each dilemma creates its own detours on this road to enlightenment.

This need be no specific road. If the locale depicted in these images were, in and of itself, significant for Pritzker, the shimmering qualities of the pictures might be nothing more than references to the intense heat of the New Mexico desert. But more is at stake than the creation of a documentary recording of a place and its climate. The shimmering textures here are the work of light. Subjects, then, are of little importance to Pritzker. Their significance emerges, instead, from the presence they reveal as they register the proximity of unseen worlds or activate intangible shapes of light.

For those who know only the digital camera, everything of this world takes photographic form through translation into binary units of zeroes and ones. Pritzker, who knows deeper traditions, points to the ways that light's presence and absence give form to all things. "Light is the defining element of the medium—it informs everything," Pritzker explains. "I look at everything as the light that defines it. It is the context by which I am driven. Everything that I photograph is defined by light and form." Like his earlier photography, the works in *Forgotten Planes* seem to present the textures of landscapes we haven't discovered yet. These visual echoes are memories of objects from another existence, another realm, another universe. "There are other worlds, and they *are* where we live. . . . It's just that we're not in touch with them all the time," Pritzker says. His pictures are vehicles through which to contact a world that exists so near, yet so far from, the grasp of lived experience. These realms of existence, just beyond the reach of consciousness, are the glimpsed planes of another reality, intuited but not quite remembered. These are *Forgotten Planes.*

To speak or write of enlightenment in the twenty-first century might seem strangely unfashionable, even antiquated. Indeed, the surfaces of the compositions Pritzker assembles, with their distinct textures, appear patinated by age. Objects arranged within the borders of his images communicate directly, their messages relayed by the body's sense of touch. These tactile qualities, these textures, signal the crafted nature of Pritzker's work. His active role in the printing process begins in the darkroom and, at times, continues on to the printer's press. Light and shadow become tangible as Pritzker coaxes form out of the silver halides embedded in the gelatinous emulsion of photographic papers. Although his art depends upon cameras, Pritzker is more likely to refer to himself as a print maker than as a photographer. Given the intensity and tactility of the qualities that printer's ink can produce, it is not surprising that he has investigated different printing processes as means to communicate his vision more fully. His prints are inspired by the work of Francisco Goya (1746–1828), especially the textures of the *Caprichos* series (1799), and the *noirs* of Odilon Redon (1840–1916), graphic works dominated by the color black; as in these artists' work, the dark light of Pritzker's

imagery has the power to transport a viewer to a place somewhere out of this world. And like Henri Matisse (1869–1954), Pritzker uses black as a color to evoke time and the processes of memory.[3] These are the textures of memory, a luminous darkness of enlightenment as it gestates in the imagination.

Goya, Redon, Matisse: each of these artistic predecessors is also well known for the presence of vibrant color in his work, despite engaging in path-breaking explorations of black as a color. Like them, Pritzker knows color. In a series of dramatically colored photographs titled *Paper Constructions,* he arrayed cut-paper constructions so that their delicate materials seem to possess the ethereal quality of light beams and the massive weight of architecture. Solidity gives way to transparency. In their vivid coloring, these photographs recall the modern architecture of Luìs Barragan (1902–1988), in which a structure's masses seem to float, melt, or dance as light plays across their colored surfaces.

If there is a single word to describe the unity of Pritzker's work, it is "architectonic." Pritzker's eye measures the material weight of objects as if their geometric forms were building blocks to be arranged anew in his compositions. This vision is tempered by a deep understanding of the architectonic tradition in painting, encompassing artists as varied as Paul Cézanne (1839–1906) and Piero della Francesca (1415–1492). "It is hard for me to escape architecture in my work, because architecture *is* form and light," Pritzker explains. "And that is what I think photography is, form and light." Ultimately, the architectonic qualities of Pritzker's imagery speak to the modern sensibilities of Cézanne or Barragan, while also harkening back to Pritzker's education as an architect in the early 1960s.

Although an architectonic sensibility unifies Pritzker's art, his chosen media stem from his dissatisfaction with what architecture offered him at a critical moment in his early career. That dissatisfaction led to a "Eureka!" moment that changed his life.

I graduated with a Bachelor's degree in architecture from Berkeley [1965]. When I got out of school I went to Europe and worked for architects in Madrid and Copenhagen for a year. I came back and threw out everything I'd done. I started over, on my own. I kept making it more and more personal, until I finally

came to the conclusion that architecture is a very personal thing and it is about experience. There's hardly any building that doesn't give you an experience. As I designed, I tried to think about the experience: how would I feel in this space? At this time, in the late 1960s, I was at a crossroads; I didn't know what I wanted to do. Architecture was only mildly satisfying. I started writing, drawing, doing photography, and sculpting, all while making architecture. I'd been working for . . . maybe between five and ten years. One day I took a picture that was a record of this house [I had built]. In this picture—I saw it come up late one night in the developer in my darkroom—I thought "*This* is what I've been looking for!" It had everything I was trying to create in the house, but it was all there, more clearly in the photograph than in the building.

What great architecture can do in three dimensions, Pritzker sought to achieve in two dimensions with camera and darkroom.

Now it is the picture plane that delivers the experiential qualities of space, light, and time that formerly motivated Pritzker's architectural dreams. "When you think of architecture, it encloses space; when light comes into it, it starts to be about time, too. Space and time are like architecture to me. However long the shutter speed is, that element is time; there's light defining it, whether it happens in 1/30th of a second or two hours." Those three terms—"space," "time," and "architecture"—form a modern triad. Together they recall the title of a book often referred to as "Giedion's Bible" because of its significance for modern architects: Siegfried Giedion's *Space, Time, and Architecture* (1941). Following the principles of Heinrich Wölfflin, Giedion taught generations of architects to recognize that their powers of vision are conditioned by their epoch and its ways of seeing. Pritzker's images have the power to teach new ways of seeing. Such new vision could apply to the world around us as much as to the worlds within his pictures' planes.

Pritzker has repeatedly signaled the impact on his work of *Katsura,* an architectural book long out of print and thus too little known today. Japanese architect Kenzo Tange collaborated with Bauhaus masters Walter Gropius and Herbert Bayer to write and design the book, which is equally propelled by the photography of Yasuhiro Ishimoto. The resulting collaboration is as much an homage to modernism as to the seventeenth-century Japanese architecture of the Katsura Imperial Villa complex. Tradition and modernity con-

verge in this volume, much as centuries of thinking about the experience of space are collapsed by its words and images. As Tange, Ishimoto, Bayer, and Gropius rediscovered the past, they found a place where the flow of time could be experienced by a visitor possessed of a lyrical state of mind. Pritzker's photography shares much with the ideals and motives given form in *Katsura*.

Tange's words introducing the book serve equally well to introduce Pritzker's aesthetics as represented by *Forgotten Planes*.

> We believe that every element in this tradition was originally inspired by a personal experience or emotion, by the way something felt or looked or otherwise affected the senses. These sensations are organized into textures and patterns which spread out limitlessly through space and time. The constant flow from texture to pattern, from pattern to space, from space to time, never ends. It does not resolve itself into a plastic entity, and you never feel as though you have seen the end or the whole of it. At most there is a mood which seems to give unity amid the temporal flow; almost never is there an attempt to stop time.[4]

Or, as Pritzker might say, "everything is also something else." Given the degree to which his art depends on the emotional resonance a viewer experiences in an encounter with one of his works, it should come as no surprise that he readily proclaims his interest in the heritage of Romanticism. Yet his imagery is neither theatrical nor melodramatic in any sense. Like the Romantics and, in a different vein, like the designers of Katsura, Pritzker's art adapts personal experiences in order to create a space that draws upon and encourages each viewer's subjectivity.

Katsura (the palace) and *Katsura* (the book) together form an apt metaphor for Pritzker's photography. For the moderns, like Gropius and Tange, Katsura was an exemplary work of architecture in which the continuity of time and space could be experienced. Unlike palaces designed to display military power or material wealth, the palace complex of Katsura is a sequence of spaces in which personal rituals are rehearsed. Every aspect of the landscape and architectural designs forming Katsura contributes an essential element to its unity or coherence. Within each element of the palace complex, a similarly taut sense of composition defines the use of a limited number of materials. At times, Pritzker's imagery is built of such limited materials that one or two elements together form entire conversations. Out of two unidentifiable forms, a passage into mythic time and cosmic space opens in a photograph titled *Death of the Minotaur* [p. 123]. Had Pritzker added or subtracted any elements, this simultaneous expansion into time and space would not have occurred with the same power. Instead, light and shadow describe just enough to offer a viewer the opportunity for meditation. Pritzker's work allows and encourages freedom of contemplation.

An act of contemplation spurred on by Pritzker's work creates spaces of wonder, clarity, and possibility, like those fostered by the ritual spaces of Katsura. Katsura architecture and Pritzker photographs serve as devices to focus our minds. Similarly, at Katsura, gardens offered spaces for meditation where thoughts could be guided by a precise landscape. In Pritzker's architectonic compositions, as in Katsura's gardens and tea houses, spaces of quietude emerge. This calm is the beautiful harmony found through peace, identified with the term *wabi* as used by the Japanese tea master Sen no Rikyū (1522–1591). Rikyū brought to the traditional "art of tea" a larger experience that encompassed the setting and all the tools of the tea ceremony. His notion of *wabi* embraced an elegant yet rustic simplicity, in which the textures and irregularity of the objects of the tea ceremony might contribute to the sense of tranquility promoted by the ritual. Such an aesthetic of paradoxes is found in the tea houses and gardens of Katsura, and in Pritzker's compositions. *Wabi* melds with *sabi*, "the bloom of time," or that beauty which comes with age. *Wabi-sabi*, as conjoined in Pritzker's art, is an aesthetic of dynamic tranquility. Like Ishimoto's photographs in *Katsura*, Pritzker's eye for detail focuses on elements that contain traces of larger structures, while emphasizing the dynamism of the *wabi-sabi* aesthetic. In the print *Sometimes an Entry Is an Exit* [p. 123], textures speak to the tranquility of *wabi* and the aging grace of *sabi*. Entry and exit coexist. Time flows over a space of tranquility.

Within this aesthetic of tranquility, a sense of effortless simplicity outweighs the potential for reading Pritzker's imagery in purely formalist ways. Circular forms abound in *Forgotten Planes*, where they characterize *Fall to Innocence; He Tried to Leave, But Couldn't; Magnetism of the Circle;* and *Man in the Moon*, [pp. 123, 24, 130, 49] among other prints. One might see these

recurrent forms as indicative of the sturdy geometric elements underpinning Pritzker's compositions. But his circles are more than this. One title explains these forms in four words: *When Emptiness Looks Full* [p. 123]. Paradoxically, the image in question includes no visible circles. Pritzker's reference to the circle and to the coexistence of emptiness and fullness stem from his interest in *zenga,* or Zen ink painting, especially the standard type of painting called *ensō*. A time-honored tradition of the painted circle or *ensō* emerged from the meditative practices of Zen Buddhism's gardens and tea ceremonies, like those at Katsura. Such circles, painted freehand, are deceptively simple; a successful *ensō* is the product of long practice. It encapsulates a moment of meditative clarity. As art historian Steven Addiss has summarized, "The mysterious Zen circle . . . has many meanings. . . . Going beyond words, it becomes an aid to meditation in which the mind reaches the fullness and emptiness symbolized by the circle."[5] Like the *ensō,* Pritzker's compositions are deceptively simple, products of contemplation that become gateways for meditation.

If Pritzker's art is characterized by compositions that are strong but not overbearing, the titles he chooses for his works seem strangely heavy-handed. This aspect of his work makes greater sense when considered in the context of Zen Buddhist teaching practices. His titles function in ways analogous to the *kōan* practices used by Zen masters. Perhaps the most recognized *kōan* is that attributed to Hakuin Ekaku (1685–1768), "Two hands clap and there is a sound; what is the sound of one hand?" Meditating upon the tensions inherent in a *kōan* phrase leads a Zen practitioner toward "an experience of insight for which intellectual understanding is neither a substitute nor an aid," as Victor Sōgen Hori notes.[6] Describing his own work, Pritzker emphasizes, "It's not a question of thinking, it is about feeling." Sometimes a Zen priest leads his students to a new state of consciousness through meditative *kōans*. At other times, a priest may induce a new plane of consciousness by striking a student with a bat. In Pritzker's titles, the *kōan* collides with the whack of the bat.

When the surface of things is disrupted, photographic images may take a viewer to another realm. Pritzker's images reveal

the energetic nature of matter as it transforms in the flow of time. Some curators have typecast Pritzker (mistakenly, I insist), as a photographer of cattle, citing his *Texas Rangeland* book.[7] But those aren't simply Texas longhorns in his images; they are atoms in motion. A bull at a certain time of day can become a mountain. Horns merge with the air and earth and barbed wire. For several months I decorated my refrigerator with a postcard announcing the exhibition *Forgotten Planes,* a card that reproduced *Moment of Realization* [p. 123]. At the time, my son Max was three years old. Over the course of those months, Max directed my attention to the postcard repeatedly, interpreting it differently each time. I looked forward to each discussion as a new exercise in seeing, wondering if I might acquire a young child's innocent eye. "What is the name of the mountain in the sky?" he asked one day, pointing to *Moment of Realization*. In that moment I understood the deliberate instability of Pritzker's imagery. A three-year-old's questions echoed in my mind like Zen *kōans*. Although I did not yet understand it as such, these exchanges led to my own *Moment of Realization* that everything is also something else.

Pritzker's imagery does not create visual puzzles or tricks. Such artworks would be too easily dismissed as "one-liners," whereas Pritzker strives for—and achieves—something more. At times he captures shape-shifting forms. At other times, he coaxes metamorphosis out of inanimate objects. In *Mistaken Identity* [p. 123], for instance, metal pipes transform themselves into an elegant young woman's neck adorned by a necklace. Or is that a scar, tracing the body's transformation in healing? Metal becomes flesh and reveals unlikely beauty. Pritzker's sturdy compositions do not close off interpretation. While demonstrating a strong *gestalt* force, they encourage the play of a viewer's perception in order to multiply potential meanings.

It would be a misreading of this essay to call Pritzker a Zen priest. He shares more with the modern architects who found inspiration in the ways of Zen at Katsura. Pritzker is an architect of spaces for contemplation. Rather than erecting these spaces out of bricks and mortar, stone, glass, or steel, he builds them in the minds of his viewers as he bends light and shadow through silver halide emulsions and printer's ink. Pritzker detours the

road to enlightenment away from its roots in the dogma of any religion, whether Eastern or Western. The architectonic forms of Pritzker's compositions offer detours for travelers on the road to enlightenment. Just as detours guide travelers on alternate routes, leading voyagers to their chosen destination by way of unanticipated paths, Pritzker's art offers a different passage to fulfill the journey.

Everything is also something else.

1
Unless otherwise noted, all quotations are from the author's interview with Burton Pritzker on July 30, 2009.

2
See, for instance, Maurice Tuchman, editor, *The Spiritual in Art: Abstract Painting, 1890–1985* (New York: Abbeville Press, 1986).

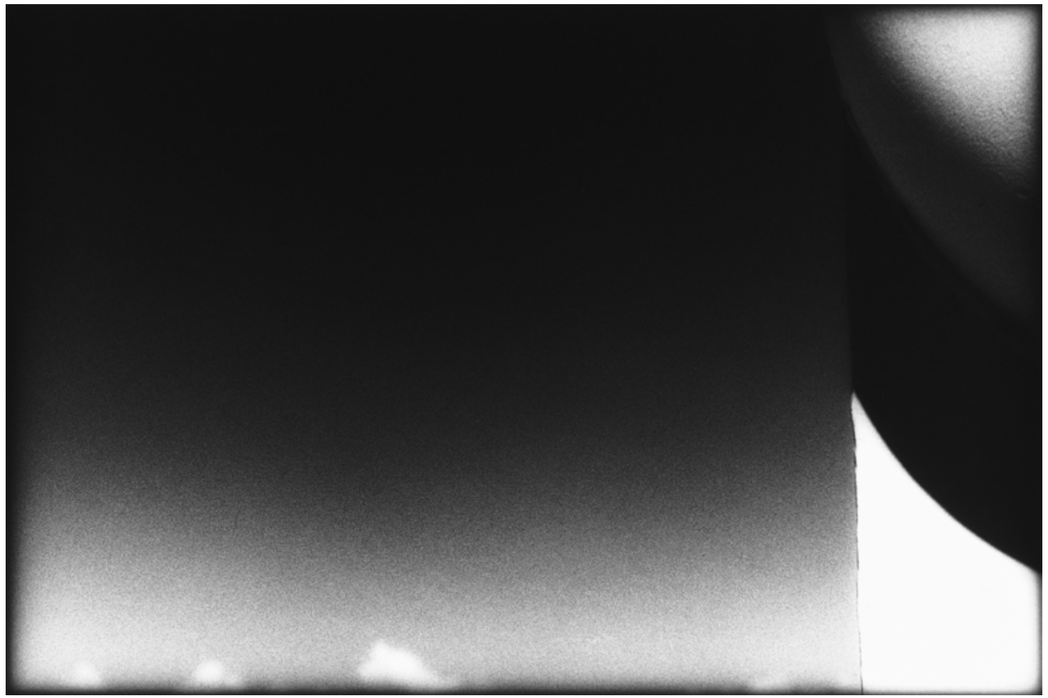
3
Here I am thinking of Matisse's use of black in painting and graphic work of 1914–1917.

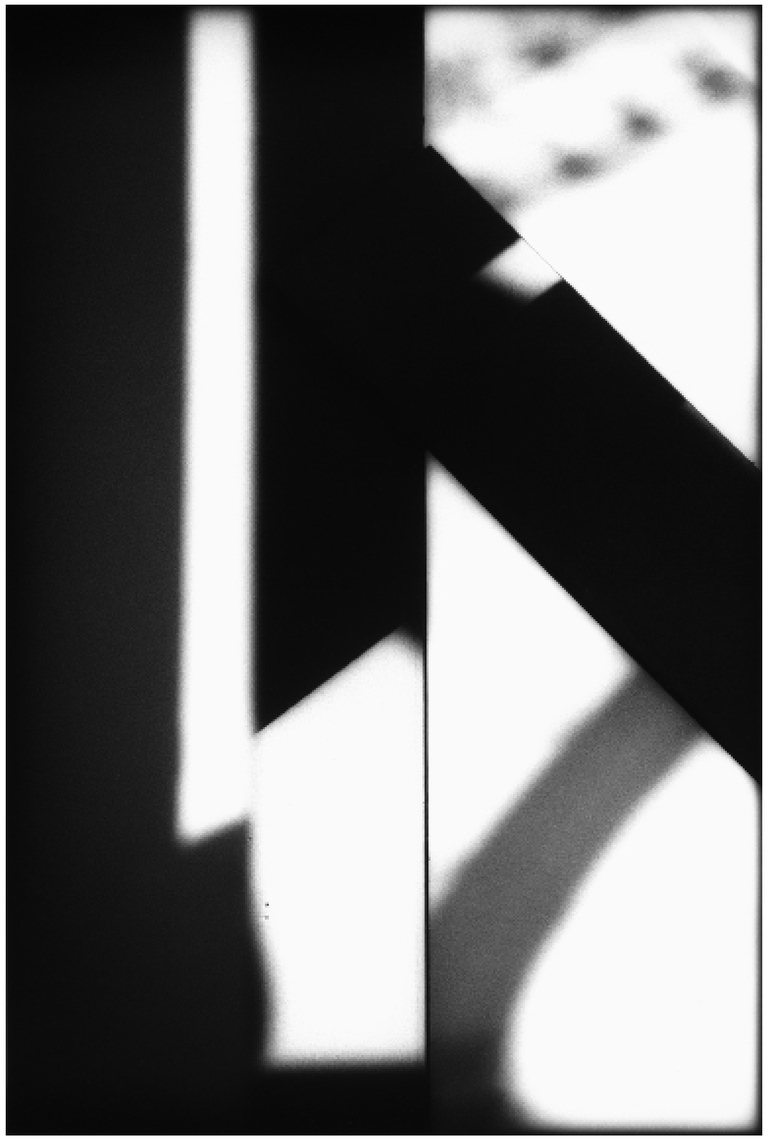
4
Kenzo Tange, "Foreword," in Walter Gropius, Kenzo Tange, and Yasuhiro Ishimoto, *Katsura: Tradition and Creation in Japanese Architecture* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1960), v.

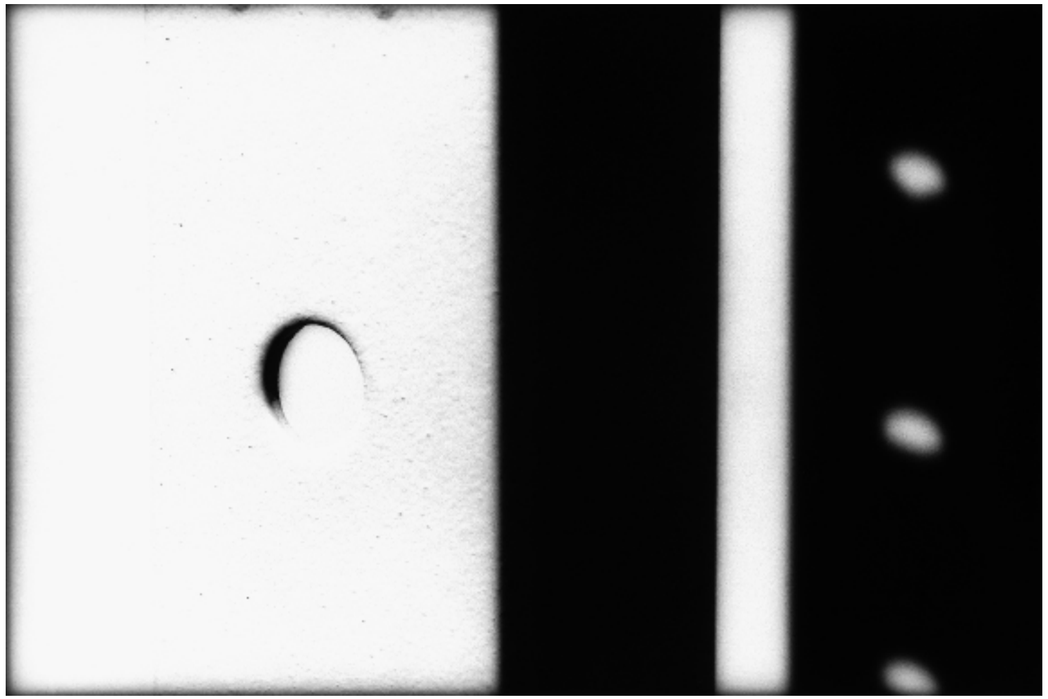
5
Stephen Addiss, *The Art of Zen* (New York: Abrams, 1989), 63.

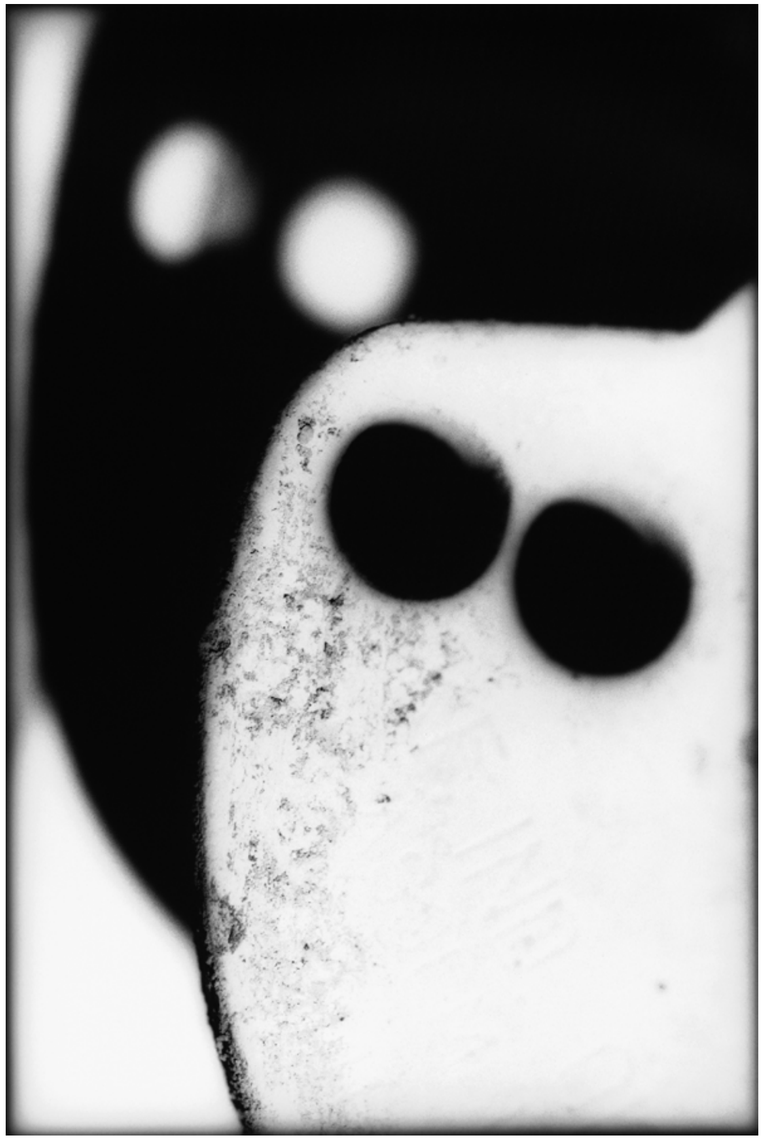
6
Victor Sōgen Hori, *Zen Sand: The Book of Capping Phrases for Kōan Practice* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2003), 4.

7
Burton Pritzker, *Texas Rangeland* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2002).



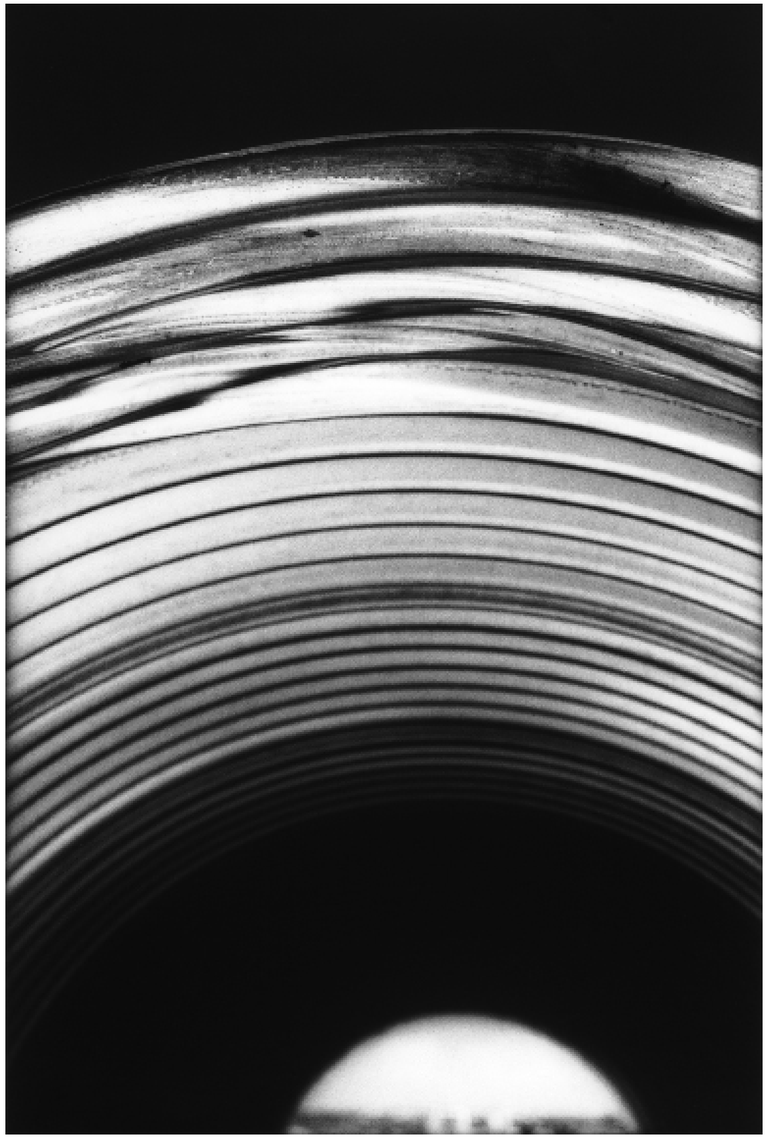


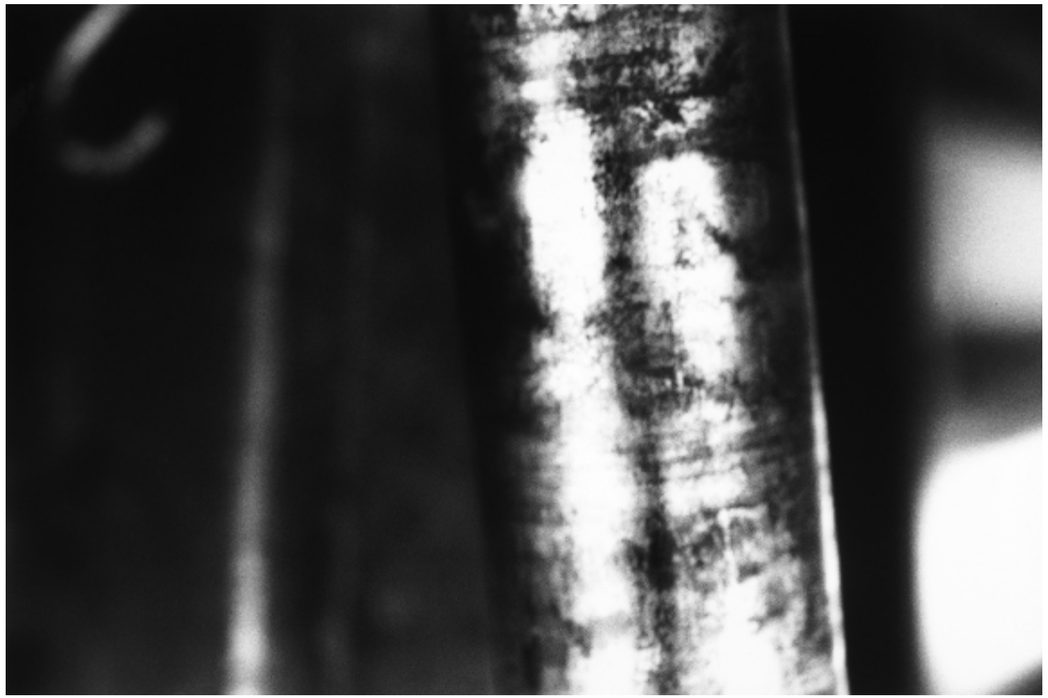


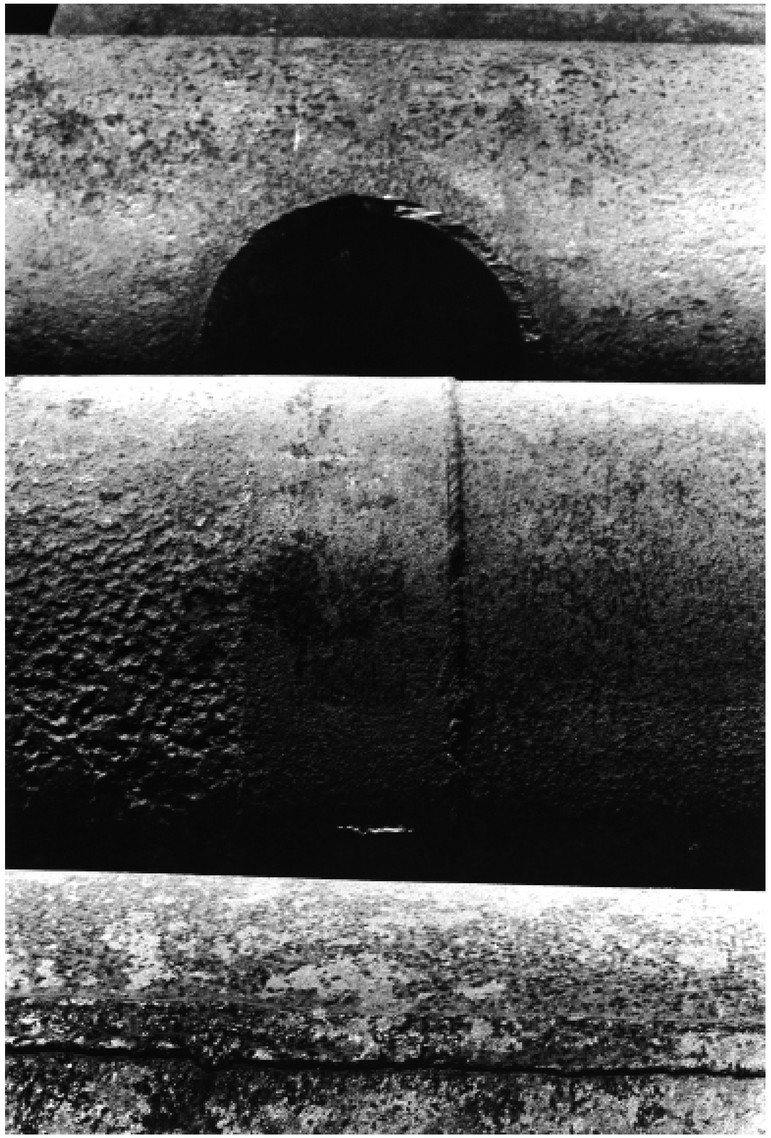


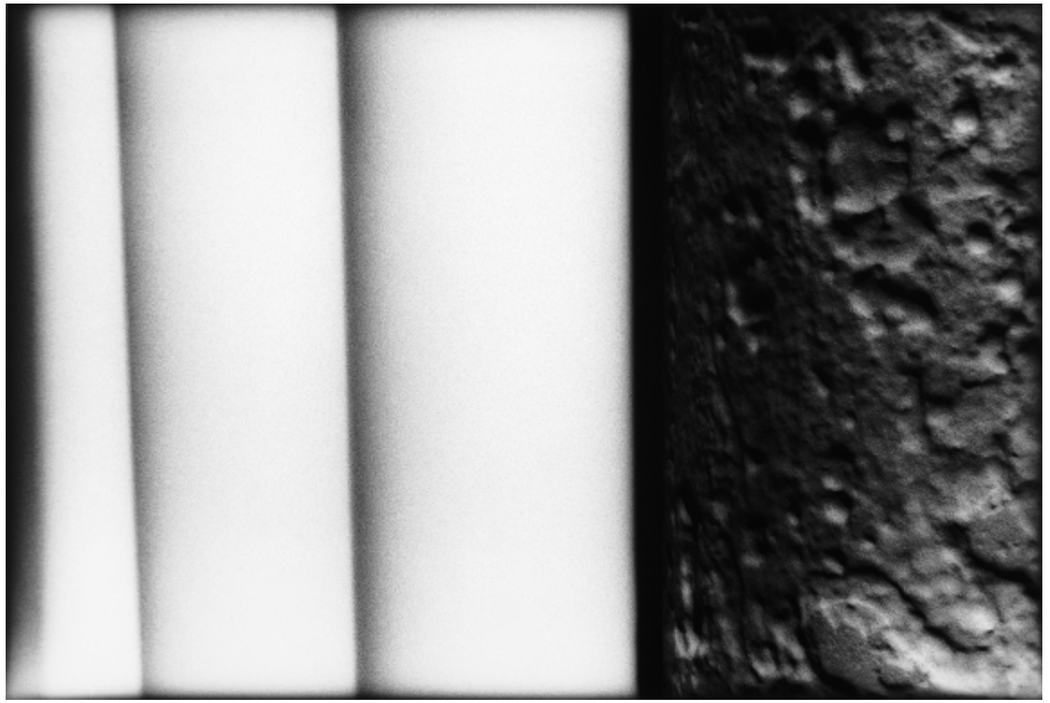
Light is the defining element of the medium—

it informs everything



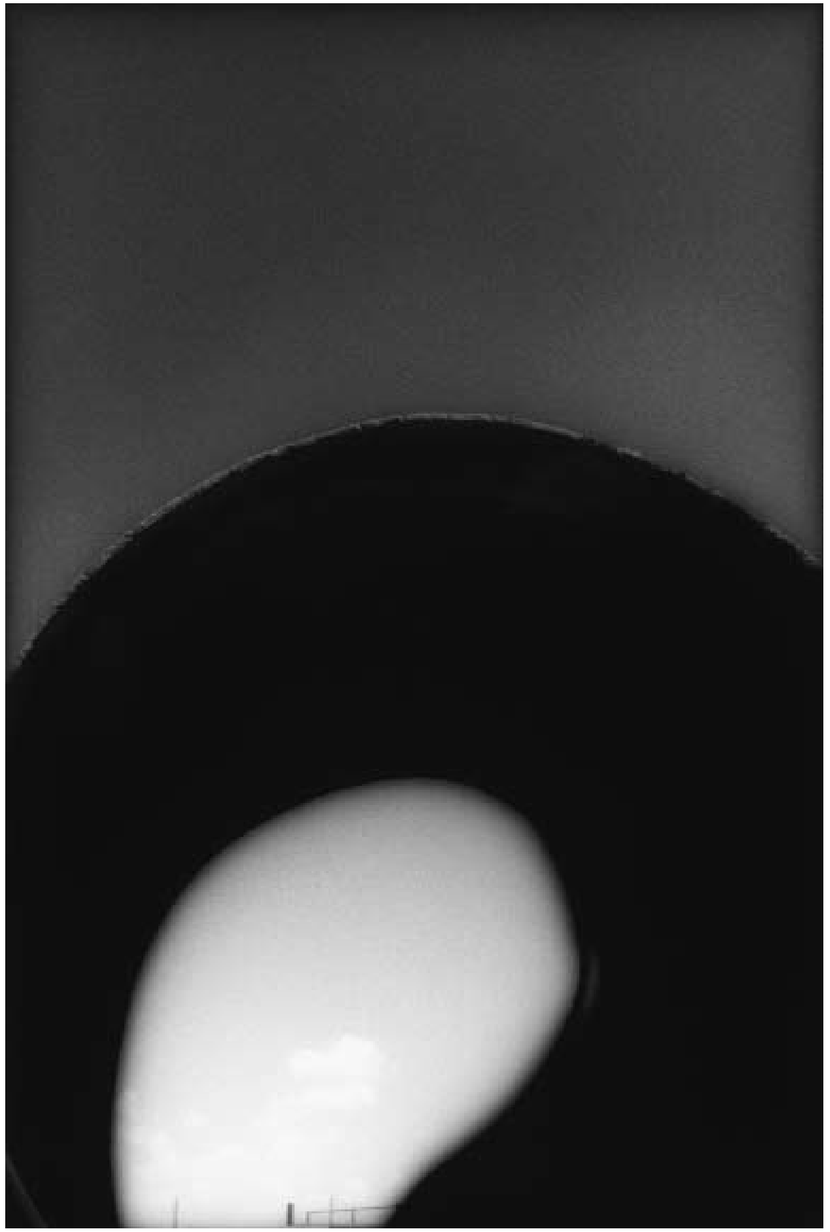




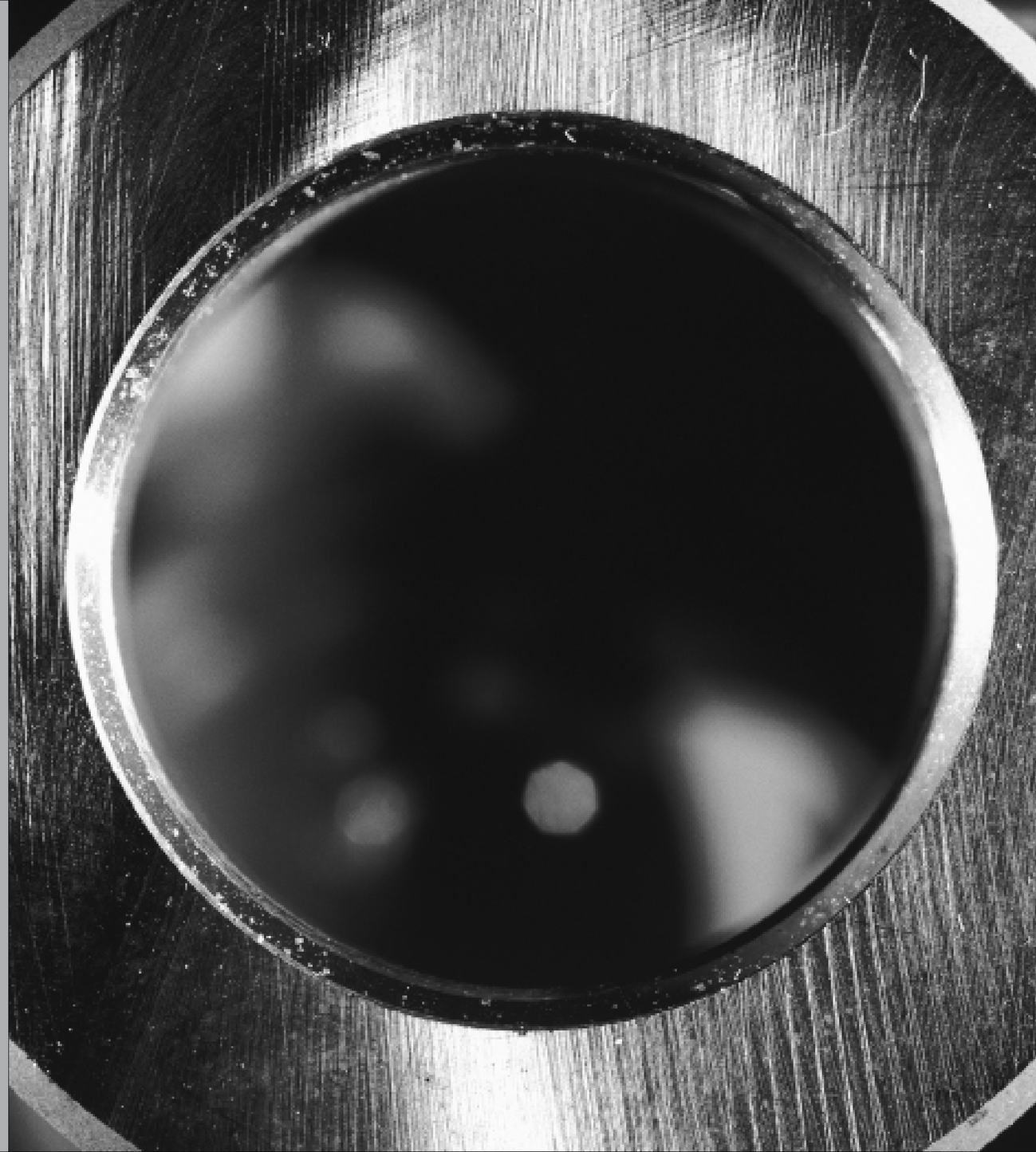


images
participate
in some reality

beyond
the material
world



coexistence of emptiness
and fullness



LIST OF PLATES