

The Expanding Field

“...place is something more often sensed than understood, an indistinct region of awareness rather than something clearly defined.”<sup>1</sup>

I often imagine what it would be like to have the opportunity to observe the earth from the vantage point of the moon, as have done only a privileged and brave few, from the relative ‘silence’ of this outer space, contemplating the azure glow of our vital atmosphere. I also imagine being drawn in closer and closer to the earth, penetrating the atmosphere, crossing this threshold. At which point do we begin to see the beautiful yet violent swirl of typhoon tearing across South East Asia, hear the sounds of Middle Eastern warfare, smell the pollution of Beijing air and sense the global cries of the poor and displaced? In the space that precedes this encounter with the inherent chaos that belies our blue planet, the material and immaterial laws of the universe perpetuate: planets orbit, meteors soar and stars are born.

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Jon Butt’s *Field* presents a suite of land-based images spanning across media and degrees of mediation. These images collectively pose questions around the nature of things and the nature of our relationship to these things. Big questions. These works resist the descriptive potential of photography to inform and locate and provide us with the ‘where’ and ‘when’ of landscape photography. Instead, they offer us a formalisation of the questions that emerge from our wonder and keep us guessing. They are images of lands that defy the landscape construct but provide enough cues to send our imaginations and associations reeling. We are free to make our own time and place.

Cropped, abstracted and collaged, there is little in the way of contextual reference points in these lands other than the sense of our shifting vantage point. This allusion to spaces that are both vast and compressed inspires the sensation of our hovering above these places in a state of shifting dimensionality, simultaneously enlarged and miniaturized, as we imaginatively transition through these states of being.

It is said that photography is an abstracting process in itself, transposing a three-dimensional world into the realm of two dimensions. Escaping the need to describe and inform and just be, “...abstract photographs may record or register but do not testify or bear witness except to their own presentness. They reaffirm photography’s objectivity without recourse to factitious representations. They are not free, but they are unburdened...”<sup>2</sup>. Though Butt’s suite of images hover at the edge of the representational/abstract divide, they resist the signification of regular time and, yet, allude to other types of time.

Butt’s photograph of an isolated rock, *Atacemite (Map)*, is meticulously drawn upon with isographic markers, plotting and formalizing the topography of this geological sample. This time-consuming process exists in its own protracted time frame akin to a meditative state. In doing so, the directness of the drawing process brings the subject into the here and now. The digital collages of what appear to be fragmented rock faces, *Vortex 1* and *Folding and Inverting and Spinning*, exist as compressions of space and place. Once face mounted behind an acrylic sheet, they are transposed into the realm of image/object, and their glossy faces, now cut and polished, begin to resemble neat cross-sections of compressed stratified rock. Odd slices of geological time are revealed.

Other works such as *Relic* and *Field 3* allude to the process of entropy, a unified and underlying process embedded in all things. This process of transformation can be a violent and immediate or slow and subtle force, as materials and places are always in flux, eventually breaking down. The associations garnered from these two works take me to images of analogue photographs retrieved after a tsunami, where the volatile force inflicted upon the layers of emulsion render the image remnant with a ghostly patina.

*Field* reminds us of the forces around and beyond us that continue to shape our everyday lives; forces that we know are out there, and in some instances, in there. We enter the space of these forces through the realm of sensation. We cannot help but reflect upon our respective biological life spans in relation to the epochs of geological time, our vulnerability in the face of natural disaster, the microclimates we generate around our physical bodies and places we encounter, as well as our direct impact upon the interconnectedness of things.

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As I ponder this, I begin to hover away from the ground plane, looking down at this surface as it gradually transforms. Blades of grass become a green mass, the green mass becomes a neat geometrical form amidst others of varying hues. These forms are eventually framed by other land-forms, complex tributaries meet the ocean’s edge and the globe reveals itself through a curved horizon, gradually becoming a tiny spherical figure amidst a deep, black ground. I hover further and further until, one day, I penetrate the atmosphere of a brand new land.

Jo Scicluna May 2014  
For: Field, Jon Butt, Strange Neighbour Gallery, May 2014

<sup>1</sup> Tacita Dean & Jeremy Millar [Ed.] *Place*, Thames & Hudson, London, 2005, p14  
<sup>2</sup> Lyle Rexer, *The Edge of Vision: The Rise of Abstract Photography*, Aperture/D.A.P, New York, 2009, p27