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APRIL 5, 2010...8:50 PM

Empathy and Michael Van der Tol's Camera



Fog Over Snow, by Michael Van der Tol

If a photographer takes a time-lapse picture of fireworks to create an image of molten sky, is it art or visual culture? With today's digital tools, have reality and photography divorced?

After talking with [Michael Van der Tol](#) about his upcoming show at [arts&architecture's](#) photography gallery, I'm still trying to understand how he uses wax paper and tissue to create texture on the multiple-exposure prints in *Forests of Lost Dreams*. The shots look real enough to anyone who has been out on a foggy day in winter woods, but their ethereal feel shares nothing with visual culture that I can discern. That's suits Van der Tol just fine.

Art rarely shares physical bonds with reality; that's the beauty of it, everyone trying to make sense of the (psychologically) insensible. When a photograph makes you stop and stare, and perhaps not feel too nauseous, it hits the art button. When was the last time visual culture, that wasn't overtly sexual, did that? Van der Tol doesn't want stares, he wants empathy for the scenes he captures.

"I love the structured nature of trees without leaves. It offers a lot to the (contextualized) imagination," he says. That sounds a lot like an artistic statement to me, and Van der Tol more than anything hopes to bring people into those woods. He wants to share his unbridled love for the outdoors, that moment of seeing a physical landscape for the first time, and perhaps the last. He wants to do this because these places are disappearing fast, and he's slightly uncomfortable about the role he's playing in their demise.



Self portrait

Van der Tol is vice-president of engineering for a small company in Kanata that "designs semi-conductors, you know, the kind that go into consumer electronics and that people buy and then throw away. That's the ugly side to it. Landscape photography is a release, a focus on the moment that might never come again."

His camera may sound like a factory-made catharsis, an alter-ego to the next button-down, quarterly report from the high-tech industry. He sees his product as an invitation to share a scene from the Canadian Prairies or Italy that may change a viewer's world – if it resonates. If it doesn't, at least the invitation card is pretty.

Pretty is easy to reproduce with today's photographic hardware. Digital cameras have lowered barriers to entry so far that professionals grit their teeth. Like a true free-marketer, Van der Tol loves the change. "Digital can unleash creativity in people who didn't have access before. All it means to me is that now there are a lot more people going to come up with great ideas."

Often he'll use his iPhone despite its low resolution to try out new things; just like his teenaged experiments with film and video. The goal is instinct and experience, not perfect exposures. In that sense digital photography may be sweeping aside the technically perfect images of manufactured visual culture we've grown to depend on.

Forests of Lost Dreams assumes the perfection we know in nature and then sets out to alter its visual reality. Van der Tol's use of wax paper and tissue was simply a new technique he stumbled on and wanted to try out, not a trick to fool the eye. That wouldn't get anyone into the woods.

Van der Tol's show runs at arts&architecture from April 7-18.