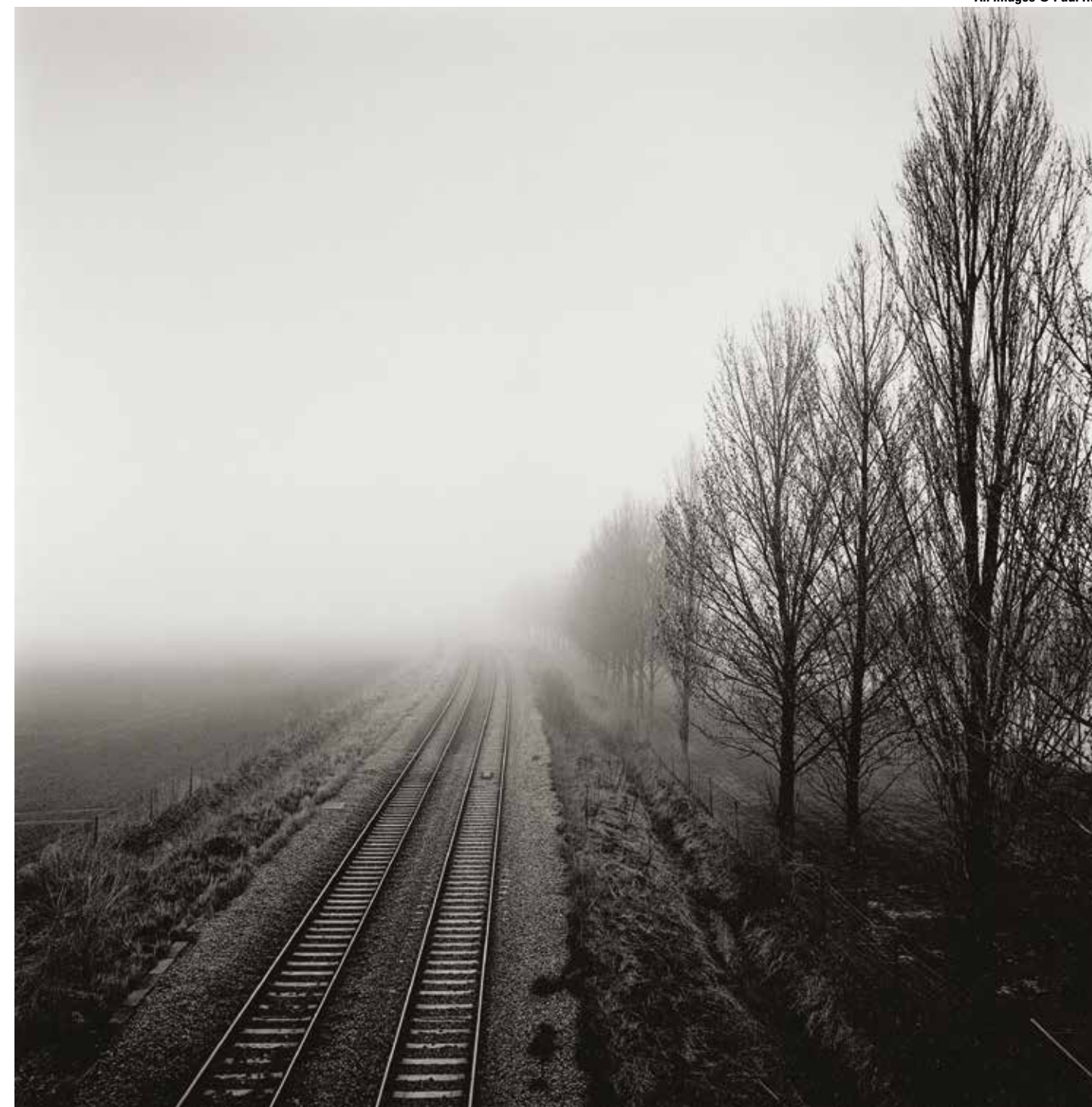


Paul Hart demonstrates an intimacy with the Fenland landscape that few others can equal, having spent more than a decade capturing its ditches, buildings and trees. Tracy Calder previews his new exhibition.



Opposite **Holbeach St. Matthew** from *Farmed*. Above **Park Farm** from *Drained*.

The Fens – a low-lying wetland landscape covering almost 400,000 hectares of eastern England – is not the most obvious choice for a long-term photographic project. There is an alien feel to the land here, a lack of beauty in the traditional sense. To create art in this environment requires time, curiosity and sympathy. It takes effort to coax hidden truths out of the soil.

Artist Paul Hart demonstrates an intimacy with the Fens that few others can equal. He has been photographing the fields, drainage ditches and skeletal trees here for more than a decade. In 2016 he published *Farmed*, the first in a trilogy of books exploring the complex relationship between man and this unique environment.

Hart works with black & white film and medium-format equipment, choices that seem to suit the slow, meditative approach

he favours when capturing the landscape. He values the craft of photography, overseeing each picture from negative right through to the final print. His skills as a master printer are clear – there is a luminosity to the water-filled ditches and rain-soaked roads that looks natural, and yet can only be the work of someone comfortable, and supremely confident, in the darkroom. Hart studied art and design at Lincoln College of Art, before >



West View Farm from *Farmed*.

undertaking a degree in photography at Nottingham Trent University. After graduating in 1988 he spent six years working in advertising photography before deciding to focus on long-term, self-initiated projects.

His first book, *Truncated*, was published by Dewi Lewis in 2009, and features an ageing pine forest plantation in Derbyshire. Finding order and beauty in the dense forest

‘To create art in this environment requires time, curiosity and sympathy.’

interior must have been tricky, but patience, curiosity and quiet observation resulted in a book that went on to win a number of international awards. The series comprised 37 silver gelatin prints, each produced by

Hart, and each celebrating the individual characteristics of his subjects. ‘Paul Hart’s images of single trees function like portraits, highlighting character and nuanced individualities – with one important difference,’ wrote Gerry Badger in his introduction to the book. ‘Trees do not react like people when a camera is pointed at them. Tree “portraits” depend solely on the sensibility of the photographer.’

Teaming up with Dewi Lewis again for *Farmed*, Hart spent six years capturing the scars and cuts inflicted on the landscape by agribusiness. Buildings emerge like ghosts out of the mist, roads run parallel to straight and featureless ditches, and electricity pylons march purposefully across the landscape.

In 2016 the project was distilled into a book featuring 56 silver gelatin prints. *Farmed* was reprinted last year and a number of images from the series are now held at the V&A and the MoMA Art Library Collection. ‘The landscapes in Paul Hart’s series, *Farmed*, are at once beautiful and beleaguered, full and empty, alive and dead,’ said Collier Brown in his opening essay to the book.

Drained became the second book in Hart’s Fenland trilogy, and was published by Dewi Lewis in 2018. This title focuses on an area of land, barely above sea level, a few miles from the Wash (a vast shallow bay of the North Sea). The book features 46 silver gelatin prints, again made by Hart. As the title suggests, drainage features heavily here: paths of water snake into the distance, roads are wet with drizzle and lines of crops lead the eye towards the horizon. The balance between sky and land is perfect. ‘Paul Hart is a photographer interested in the slow harvesting of hidden truth from the ordinary places that most of us pass by,’ wrote Francis Hodgson in the book’s introduction. The series was awarded the Wolf Suschitzky Photography Prize.

While the final book in the Fens series, *Reclaimed*, will be printed by Dewi Lewis next year, Fen Ditton Gallery near Cambridge is offering visitors an opportunity to see work from *Farmed* and *Drained* in an exhibition entitled *Land Lines*, curated by Amanda Game. Work from two artists who have inspired Hart (Mark Steinmetz and Fay Godwin) will also be shown alongside the pictures.

Fen Ditton Gallery is new to the scene, having been established in 2018 by artist and photographer Lotte Attwood, but it’s not the first time Hart’s images have graced the walls here. Prints from *Truncated* appeared as part of the gallery’s *Trees Observed* exhibition last autumn. Game and Hart clearly work well together, and *Land Lines* is testament to their love of an often misunderstood and underappreciated landscape.

SEE THE IMAGES

Land Lines runs from 27 September to 20 October at Fen Ditton Gallery, 23 High Street, Fen Ditton CB5 8ST. fendittogallery.com.



Lundy’s Farm from *Drained*.



Bishop’s Farm from *Drained*.