

James Nizam: *Fata Morgana*

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Geometric shapes, in deep blues and dusty pinks, hovering above a desert horizon at dusk: the work in James Nizam's latest exhibition, *Fata Morgana*, can evoke a feeling of awe. It furthers a theme he has been exploring since the early 2000s. His pictures of the visible world – whether they are of interiors that create camera obscuras, or timelapse images of the night sky – are arguably about light. A dedicated study of how we perceive and think about that fundamental optical phenomenon, Nizam uses cameras and photographs as a means to explore its perceptual and compositional possibilities.

He is, in this way, a sculptor of light.

The exhibition takes its name from a kind of mirage: the effect of light passing through a thermal inversion that creates the illusion of objects hovering above the horizon. Nizam began thinking of the term when he was spending time in the desert photographing another phenomenon, the twilight arch. Seen at dusk opposite the setting sun, in gradients of deep blue that move toward pink, it is the shadow of the curvature of the earth. He calls its crepuscular colours his "palette."

The twilight arch can best be seen in places where the sky is expansive enough for dusk to be visible on both the eastern and western horizons. Nizam sought out optimal sites to capture it. After three years of field work returning to the desert, the majority of these new photographs were taken on the Great Salt Basin, in Utah, where the expansive sky meets the glittering white surface of salt.

The pictures, realized through multiple exposures, are more than documentary, though. They are visual mediations on how we see the natural world. Nizam adds different filters, which he calls "masks," into devices such as a bellows shade, to create patterns on the negative. This produces in the middle of the composition a geometric shape in the colour gradients, tracing the shapes on the inserts. They appear to float in front of the background landscape, a sort of apparition: a fata morgana hovering above the horizon.

Along with the prints, Nizam also displays the objects that help produce them, taking as much aesthetic appreciation in the apparatus as the vision itself. He presents, as individual artworks, the equipment and material to make the photographs. There are negatives in a light box, creating a sort of visual document, or proof of the way the images were captured, yet insisting they are viewed as pieces with their own pictorial integrity. And then, the equipment is also presented: the bellows shade, a view camera, the masks.

These inclusions focus the exhibition more. As both aesthetic objects and documents, these accompanying 'found' works bear witness to the process; they demonstrate how the images were produced but they also achieve a certain artistic autonomy in themselves. This is, of course, partially to insist that the pictures are not composed through digital alteration. If they were, they would no longer be about natural light, because they would have been produced by computer programs with no apertures or exposures. Without the equipment and negatives, the photographs might be mistaken for digital illustration – compelling for different reasons, perhaps, but no longer part of Nizam's decades-long

pursuit. It is also, more importantly, because the tools, too, become artworks themselves that relate to his fundamental subject.

Much like the way he presents his equipment, the fleeting nature of desert light in the photographs is also, in a sense, found. Nizam approaches it as such, their capture the result of technical know-how, patience, and chance. As night falls, the effects of the setting sun interact with the atmosphere, creating those deep yet diffuse tones, rendered in prints through filters and multiple exposures.

Through his new work, Nizam continues to search for a connection to light with the understated humility of a stargazer who finds as much beauty in the limits of his tools as in the universe itself. With his camera, he explores the edge of our ability to understand or perceive the world, considering the materiality of optics: what and how we see. In doing so, he reflects on the boundary between the cosmic and the terrestrial – images captured at the horizon line of our planet at twilight.

—Aaron Peck

Aaron Peck is the author of *Jeff Wall: North & West*, *Letters to the Pacific*, and *The Bewilderments of Bernard Willis*. His criticism has appeared in *Aperture*, *Artforum*, the *Times Literary Supplement*, and *Walrus*.