

February, 2013

Time moves still.

“To Taoism that which is absolutely still or absolutely perfect is absolutely dead, for without the possibility of growth and change there can be no Tao. In reality there is nothing in the universe which is completely perfect or completely still; it is only in the minds of men that such concepts exist.” ~ Alan Watts.

The title of the exhibition refers to the common adage ‘Time stands still’. Exchanging the word *moves* for the word *stands* aims toward a cognitive dissonance between the concepts of *movement* and *stillness*. However, in actuality, one can experience time as both moving and still. In this sense, the paradox collapses in on itself. Even with this conceptual somersaulting aside, I think it can be agreed that time is experienced as a dynamic continuum.

The photographs in this exhibition attempt to echo this experience of dynamic time and ever-so-slow movement. The subjects of the photographs can be separated into two intertwined categories: Trees that are isolated against an open sky and cropped so there is no rootedness or earth, and steep cliffsides along the developed coast. All of the photographs are printed with a very specific, warm, monochromatic tonality. Both subjects depict things in the world that appear static but are in constant movement. Of course, conceptually and in line with the Alan Watts quote, this can be said of any subject. The distinction for me is that these particular subjects express and disclose a unique kind of *slowness* in their appearance, both in actuality, but perhaps more so as photographs which are made in a highly atypical way. This requires a bit of an explanation.

The photographs in the exhibition were each made by combining between 40 to 100 individual image-captures. So, between 10 to 15 minutes passes as each complete image is made. (The images are composited later using software). Interestingly, this harkens back to early photographic technology that required very long exposures. An important and perceptible difference however, in the case of my work, is that the composite photographs both appear to be wholly instantaneous, yet reveal subtle clues regarding their extended temporality. For instance, the trees have an almost painful degree of resolution, which would imply an instantaneous exposure with an incredibly sharp lens. But, they also contain areas of softness and blur, moments when the wind may have picked up

during exposure, which imply movement and the passing of time. In the Coastline Cliffside images, a similar paradox can be found. In one sense, they appear to capture, all at once, a panoramic view of a perfect and fleeting foggy moment, where the seeping water, landscaping and architectural elements are compositionally frozen. In another sense, one can see that there are often distinct shadows and discrepancies of lighting, perhaps indicating that the sun had broken through the fog during part of the exposure. In a figurative sense, I like to imagine that the photographs in this exhibition are deeply breathing.

The Japanese concept of wabi sabi is worth discussing here. There are books written entirely on these two originally separate, but now intertwined words. One ends up understanding a *sense in which* an object or experience expresses wabi sabi, rather than understanding the term in a strict definitional sense. Wabi sabi is both an aesthetic sensibility and a philosophical outlook. That said, in the most basic sense, wabi sabi refers to beautiful imperfection that is unintended or evolves naturally over time. However, it's important to note that wabi sabi does not simply happen naturally. It needs a person to perceive, uncover, frame, and coax it into being. Architect Tadao Ando says of wabi sabi that "it celebrates cracks and crevices and all the other marks that time, weather, and loving use leave behind. It reminds us that we are all but transient beings on this planet-that our bodies as well as the material world around us are in the process of returning to the dust from which we came." Perhaps a fuller articulation can be found in Andrew Juniper's book, Wabi Sabi: The Japanese Art of Impermanence. He says, "Wabi sabi is an intuitive appreciation of a transient beauty in the physical world that reflects the irreversible flow of life in the spiritual world. It is an understated beauty that exists in the modest, rustic, imperfect, or even decayed, an aesthetic sensibility that finds a melancholic beauty in the impermanence of all things." For this body of work, more than any other to date, I carried these ideas with me when I photographed.

One particularly poetic translation of the individual word sabi is *the bloom of time*. The trees, isolated against an open sky and truncated from their source of life, their roots and earth, expose their transience in an undeniable way. When I scoured the landscape for trees, I looked for those that expressed a form that was very dynamic, particular, and peculiar, but never manicured to look good. I am especially attracted to trees that have been *badly* and asymmetrically pruned, normally to clear them from electrical wires and such. These take on an unintended beauty through the transformation of photography that they may

not hold in actuality. I approached each tree as I would approach a portrait of someone with whom I had a personal relationship, by spending extended periods of time observing and staring before photographing.

In contrast to the isolation and singularity of the trees, the cliffsides along the coastline are populated with a complex and disparate array of visual information that presented a distinct kind of challenge. These unique formations on steep cliffs are a combination of retaining walls, long zigzagging staircases with intricate pulley systems, rich and varying ground cover, and seeping rocks. Through time, these elements, both natural and manmade, have all evolved together and blended in some intimate and incredible ways. In addition, I am particularly drawn toward the potential instability of the cliffsides as one of the powerfully latent energies that the landscape possesses. The cliffsides are alive and active, but tectonically slow. They loom. When experiencing all of this entropy in person, it can be overwhelming, chaotic, and unsettling. However, I believe the wabi sabi is alluded to in these images through the transformative act of photography. Photography lends itself to extended observation, to long looks that allow for the organization of disparate objects and subjects to rise to the surface and disclose themselves in a way that can foster an unexpected synesthetic experience of visual harmony.

In all of the photographs of the cliffsides, there is some degree of fog obscuring the top portion of the image. Behind the fog are homes at the top of the cliffs. Given my long-standing interest in architecture, I thought it would be challenging to allude to the architectural without depicting it. What I find particularly interesting about these locations is that the placement of the architecture often trumps its design. In other words, more often than not, people build homes in these precarious and unstable locations primarily for the idyllic and unobstructed view of the ocean, not to celebrate the architecture in itself. This was more reason for me to emphasize the cliffs and let the architecture recede into a ghostly state. I am intentionally denying the viewer access to the architecture, *and* to the panoramic vista of the ocean. Another way of describing this is that the photographs depict a vantage point of someone turning one's back to *The View* (the ocean), as well as obscuring the origin of *The Point of View* (the architecture), and instead disclosing a counter view of the cliffside itself that is much more visually complex.

~Amir Zaki.