

Two very different visions of what we might call landscape. One describes a space that is dark and knotted, ambiguous in scale and depth—an eye probing the darkness, seeking to make sense of the tangle of undergrowth. The other, a collection of loosely framed images of an unnamed place. Both bodies of work set out, quite deliberately, to confront the viewer’s received ideas about space—here, the space of Western landscape—by subverting the spatial logic of the camera.

Paul Gaffney’s images of the Ardennes Forest near Luxembourg were shot in near darkness, in the gray hours after dusk and those just before dawn. Michael Ashkin’s photographs of Long Branch, New Jersey, were taken between 2002 and 2007, tracing the redevelopment of an oceanfront neighborhood purchased through eminent domain and replaced with luxury condominiums. Though visually distinct, both bodies of work share a

similar emotional ground tone—a kind of slow-burning anxiety. But it’s not immediately evident what the source of this anxiety is or even whose it is: Does it belong to the photographer? To the viewer? Is it something in the image or is it an effect of the space itself? Spatial anxiety, writes architecture theorist Anthony Vidler, emerged as a specifically modernist phenomenon—an effect of the disruption of the subject’s stable relationship to space as it is lived and felt. It is a consequence of the conditions of urban life and of the capture of the subject in “spatial systems beyond [its] control”: the vast, empty public squares and boulevards, the crowded transport networks and social spaces, the exaggerated scale and tempo of the modern metropolis. Photography, as Vidler remarks, is one of many art forms that have been used to represent this displacement.



But the camera is not just a tool for representing hegemonic spatial systems and their impacts. As a concretization of the perspectival gaze, and an instrument for the control and organization of space, the camera is complicit with the same spatial systems that it describes. As well as a prosthetic eye, however, the camera is also an extension of the body and an agent through which affects may be created and shared. Part of a circuit in which photographer and viewer, space and its image, are also implicated, the camera produces spatial anxiety as an operational affect that is built into the fabric of the image—independent, to some extent, of its content—and incorporated into the process of perception itself.

The Ardennes Forest is a managed wilderness, its stands of oak and conifer planted by humans. Gaffney deliberately sought out the wildest, most impenetrable corners of the forest, his gaze drawn to pools of illumination in the darkness. Shot in limited light, his photographs, though they give the impression of an eye seeking order, resist the camera's logic. At variance with our inherent preference for open ground and clear views, for patterns that compose themselves into recognizable places, they are barely legible as landscapes. Space pushes back against the camera's attempts to control it. The anxiety that Gaffney's images give rise to—born out of our inbuilt fear of darkness, of blindness, of unseen presences in the night—is a primordial one. In Gaffney's hands, the camera becomes an animal eye capable, unlike the human eye, of seeing in the dark, but incapable of rationalizing what it sees.

Ashkin's photographs—which appear hastily composed and unfocused, their content banal and nondescript—lack the cohesion we expect of the topographic image or the photographic series. The images are bound together by virtue of little more than their inclusion in the same volume, and by the familiarity of the processes of building and dereliction that they describe. This could be one place or it could be many places, photographed over a matter of days or a matter of years. If the fragment, as Vidler remarks, “demands a context, a possible and easily visualized site from which one might imagine it was initially snatched, and to which it might, just as easily, be envisioned as returning,” then Ashkin presents Long Branch as an impossible site—a collection of fragments that fail to cohere into a recognizable place.

Seen individually, Ashkin's photographs of Long Branch are subject to a kind of excessive visibility. In the middle ground, where one would normally expect to find the subject of the image, the eye is left to range undirected through empty space. The camera's gaze is strangely impassive—and this impassivity is not the objective stance of the photojournalist, nor the measuring gaze of the surveyor, but the uncoded perception of a machine that assesses space according to a logic in which the human no longer plays a significant part. The indifference of Ashkin's images, their failure to give coherent shape or form to the landscape, is precisely their point, and it is the source of the anxiety that they create.

Gaffney's photographs call on a concrete kind of anxiety, one in which the cultivated wilderness is envisioned as a landscape of fear. In his work, the subject is addressed directly, incorporated into an imagined wilderness over which it has no control. Ashkin's images suggest the exclusion of the human

subject. They bespeak space as a commodity, and the landscape as an abstraction—a site transformed by economic vectors acting on a global scale. And in so doing they engender a disquiet that is more insidious: an effect of the sightless vision of a different kind of instrument, as indifferent to the individual as the hungry movement of predatory capital itself.



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Page 58–59, 62–63: Paul Gaffney, from the series *Perigee*, 2015–2016.
Page 61: Michael Askin, from the series *Long Branch*, 2002–2006.



