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## LeAnne Hitchcock and Chas Bowie at Chambers

**A**n exhibition focusing on the presence or absence of the horizon in landscape photography, *Horizon* featured the work of emerging Portland artists LeAnne Hitchcock and Chas Bowie. Hitchcock explores the outer possibilities of representing place. By removing the horizon from her landscapes, she tests photography's ability to communicate a specific location. By contrast, horizons are still present in Bowie's pictures, but are complicated by his startling eye for the absurd.

In order to recognizably depict any place, an entire array of elements is required. Illusionary space must be constructed through associations. For example, to re-create the view overlooking the river Thames towards London requires the interaction of multiple points of visual information: water in the foreground, juxtaposed by the silhouetted city skyline and Big Ben in the mid-ground with the horizon lies at the furthest expanse. Traditionally, from this coherent organization of separate elements along a horizon line, emerges the illusion of space.

Hitchcock challenges the idea that place can only be represented by spatial illusion. Instead, she asserts that place is a holographic function: It exists as fully in a single dislocated element as it does in an array organized along the horizon

line. *The Thames* is a view looking straight down into the opaque water, recording a surface without depth that coincides exactly with the picture plane. Distinguishing between real and representation of a surface is moot, for Hitchcock's flat photographs are reiterations: actual surfaces that duplicate the source pattern of the water. In its final vertically orientation, the image is more related to the atmospheric quality of color field painting than to spatial illusion.

Hitchcock diffracts the image by separating it into the primary colors of light: red, green and blue. She searches not only for the smallest indivisible unit of the landscape, but also for the smallest indivisible unit of the process of photography, breaking the photograph, as a record of light, into its essential components. By disassembling the process of photography and its representational function, Hitchcock explores the intersection between photographs and color field paintings. Her titles, like *The Thames*, suggest that this object, having only qualities of surface and color, without a horizon, is still, in fact, a landscape photograph. But it is a direct observation in which place is dislocated from its cultural and symbolic context.

Bowie searches out real landscapes with found incongruities. He uses the tropes of conventional landscape photography, but complicates them with the absurd. These works seem to be the product of a road trip in search of the spiritual heart of America. In subject matter and composition, the photographs draw heavily on that universal road trip relic, the snapshot.

Hanging unframed on the wall they are presented as a series of road-trip snapshots. The subject matter is guided by the implied narrative of the road trip: gas stations, water towers, kitschy fiberglass statues, panoramic views from roadside pullouts, mineral crystals forming on a corroded barrel in the pink expanse of the great Salt Lake. Bowie's motivations as a photographer seem exactly in sync with those of anyone on a road trip; the preservation of memory. But his eye for the bizarre and incongruous leads him to preserve the image of a life-size fiberglass statue of Hulk Hogan in front of truck stop, as well as a dilapidated building resembling a wedding cake. However, Bowie's interest in kitsch is not ironic, but elegiac. The photographs have a mournful, faraway tone. The kitschy statues seem like abandoned monuments to

fantasies discarded long ago.

Ultimately, Bowie's work can be seen as a meditation on the role of faith in American consciousness. One photograph shows a painting of Jesus on a rusty water tower, surrounded by a nimbus of glory, his arms outstretched. Another image shows a statue of the Virgin Mary, whose warmth seems out of place under glass in the rigid and efficient architecture of an airport waiting area. Yet another shows an evangelizing gas pump emblazoned with the message: Jesus is Lord! These images are painful documents of the dissonance that

occurs between expressions of American spirituality and expressions of American materialism. Bowie's sense of the absurd leads not only to visual incongruities of scale and dislocation, but also to spiritual incongruities between the mundane and the sacred.

—Isaac Peterson

*Horizon: New Photographs by Chas Bowie and LeAnne Hitchcock* closed February 25 at Chambers, Portland.

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Above: Chas Bowie, *Untitled (Rozel Point)*, 2005, digital print; right: LeAnne Hitchcock, *Seine*, C-print, at Chambers, Portland.

