

Image, Layer, Filter: *Walking the Land* Ian Brown

Catalogue Essay commissioned by Beardsmore Gallery, London

September 2007

The photographic technique of layering many different negatives is by no means an innovation. Historically, the process is linked to the study of eugenics: In the late nineteenth century, Sir Francis Galton attempted to identify common physical traits of specific types of criminals by blending standardized portraits of convicts.¹ This same method is still used in various psychological experiments the world over. Since the very beginning of the genre of landscape photography, practitioners have “sandwiched” negatives together. This was done partly through necessity (landscape scenes would often require a second exposure for the sky, to compensate for the lower sensitivity of photographic emulsion to blue light) but also through creative choice; one of the pioneers of pictorialist photography, Henry Peach Robinson produced works by combining elements from several different negatives. Indeed Robinson, and his contemporaries who were working commercially, would have had a stock of different skies to lay behind new images that they made. On this, perhaps a little superficial, level and also because of their uncanny resemblance to abstract impressionist paintings, Brown’s images (for it is not possible at this point to think of them as photographs) may almost be interpreted as a contemporary form of pictorialist photography. Yet it is ironic that the method that Brown has employed to make these works, which categorizes them in this way, actually obliterates almost all pictorial detail from the final images. This process works as a filter to remove visual clichés of romantic landscape painting and photography: It allows the viewer (and the artist) to re-examine the idea of landscape and it reduces the overall spatial and temporal experience of travelling through it to a pure, singular impression of the place which Brown witnessed.

The act of constructing these tableaux digitally is central to how Brown (who has a more painterly background) understands his own practice. Again, in a similar manner to the early pictorialist photographers who deliberately left brushstrokes in the chemical emulsion on the papers that they sensitized so as

to mimic the unique hand of an artist, the lengthy process of building up the density of an image – literally layer by layer – and making judgments as to their individual opacity and ultimate presence within the final image is for Brown, essentially the same as working on a blank canvas with paint. There is of course an inevitable conflict between this meticulous process (and the artist's intent of making something that is *by his own hand*) whilst employing such a mechanical and often arbitrary instrument (the camera) with which to do it. This is amplified by Brown's actual style of shooting, which is done *from the hip*, that is without making conscious choices about framing and composition (and sometimes even focusing); things which are traditional values to the genres of landscape painting and photography.

Despite the organic aesthetics of the images, the work has a certain automatic aspect: By making a photographic exposure at regular intervals (which is ultimately a form of measurement), Brown has made a kind of map of a particular route or journey. Holding one of his prints gives the impression that the entire journey has been objectified – you have walked each footstep and seen every blade of grass that the artist passed – and it is summarized within a single document in your hands. It is a bit like looking at an Ordnance Survey map of an area with which you are familiar, and imagining yourself following a route that has been traced on top of it.

Operating with these two often-opposing media (painting's organic nature versus photography's inherent mechanics) actually presents an appropriate space for Brown to explore some of his social and cultural concerns. As with many artists who use photography to document their environment, there is invariably some form of scrutiny of the conflict between Man and the natural world. Brown's more recent studies are preoccupied with agricultural land, for example, set-aside fields where native plants grow back and almost re-take previously cultivated land.

The way in which Brown's images conspire with the viewers' subconscious is perhaps their most peculiar quality. By defamiliarizing the viewer with the actual scene that was photographed (originally, almost prosaically) with the homogenized mass of visual information that appears in the finished piece, the viewer is left with a nebulous impression of the place Brown visited. This is not necessarily the case with the images made in more exotic locations, such as Arizona, Kenya or New Mexico, but certainly the ones

made closer to home: a forest full of bluebells, a field of ragwort, a day at the beach; they contain just enough detail to play upon distant memories yet without incurring any nostalgic sentimentality.

However, not all of Brown's images are entirely comfortable to look at. The mass of lines and forms can be aggressive, particularly where Brown has photographed places which are rife with regular forms, such is the case with urban spaces in particular. Although, the fact that Brown makes no distinction between urban and rural locations (and that the darkness in some of the images made in woodland can also have a malevolent quality) is an assertion of the democratic nature of the work. Whilst his work veers towards the territory of land artist Richard Long, Brown is not necessarily preoccupied with sites or routes of particular social, historic or geographic importance. There is no hierarchy in his choice of locations: A simple walk around central London, a footbridge over the M4 motorway, the path down by the railway where you might take the dog for a walk... All could be part of everyday human locomotion. They are a celebration of our varied surroundings and perhaps show gratitude for the ability to move around freely in them.

It would be quite easy to see this work as a seamless transition from Brown's abstract paintings (notably the *Elegies* series, first exhibited in 1991) to these, with only the intervention of a change in the medium used to create them. However, this series has been made over the last twenty-five years in conjunction with, rather than resulting from, earlier projects and so embrace conceptual ideas already explored and resolved in previously exhibited works. These images should then be considered in relation to the various changes in opinion towards landscape painting and photography, and, perhaps more importantly, the dramatic shifts in attitudes towards both our urban and rural environment itself. Roland Barthes suggested that cameras functioned as "clocks for seeing."² Brown's tableaux comprising of layers of time over an extended period could be interpreted in this way as lapses of time recorded on a stopwatch. In this respect, and by the range of subjects and places explored, they are almost autobiographical and are vignettes into Brown's various concerns and motivations throughout his entire career.

¹ Sir Francis Galton: 'Composite portraits made by combining those of many different persons into a single figure' *Nature* no.18, pp.97-100, 1878

² Roland Barthes: *Camera Lucida* p.15, 1980