

A HOLOGRAPHIC PRINCIPLE: JOAN KAUFMAN'S *PAPER SHADOWS*

It is a different nature which speaks to the camera than speaks to the eye: so different that in place of a space consciously woven together by a man [sic] on the spot there enters a space held together unconsciously.

Walter Benjamin
"A Short History of Photography"

A product of the thinking of eminent Dutch physicist Gerard 't Hooft concerning the astrophysics of black holes, the Holographic Principle goes something like this: what happens in space as we experience it three-dimensionally can be completely represented employing only two dimensions. Volume, it is argued, is an illusion. Only area is real. Our universe, then, is a hologram, and all the "information" it contains – all that stuff akin to what kids once thought clever to write as an address on an envelope and which would include (but not be limited to) name, standard postal information, continent, hemisphere, Solar System, Orion Arm, Milky Way galaxy, the Local Group galaxy cluster, Virgo supercluster, etc. – can be *entirely* accounted for by dispensing with volumetric depth and instead heeding surfaces alone. A metaphor often employed to describe the Holographic Principle asserts that everything that happens in a room can be described by what happens in the walls alone.

Of course it's all just a conjecture – albeit, one taken quite seriously in astrophysical circles – and I invoke it as a means of diving into Joan Kaufman's photographic installation, *Paper Shadows*. The verbal substantive "diving" is quite deliberately chosen, for Kaufman's images, here, almost exclusively involve water. The sequence of works begins with a piece – *Paper Shadows # 1* – in which this substance, one of the four classical elements, demonstrates the Holographic Principle at play: in northern Ireland, Kaufman, photographing a landscape from on high, captures the shadow of an airliner reflected in the water far below. Never mind the fact that the very medium of photography itself argues a form of the Holographic Principle; in this particular instance, in this very image, it is the surface of things that matters – the bounded area of fluid mirroring the information that is the sky and the airplane that traverses it. Volume is inconsequential. Area is all.

Paper Shadows # 1 also perfectly encapsulates Kaufman's intention to offer us "a cautionary tale told through the uneasy pairing of human activity and the natural world – a riff on our collective hopes and anxieties." And so for us, here at the narrow, originary end of the 21st century, the imaged waters of northern Ireland cannot help but reflect not only sky, cloud and artefactual interloper, but also the dis-ease of a post-9/11 world where the shadow of a low-flying aircraft denotes not merely an annoying visual intrusion into a landscape unblemished by any other overt artefactuality, but also threat.

But about the water. "Water envelopes what exists before space was," wrote Ivan Illich in his 1985 book *H2O and the Waters of Forgetfulness*, a work in which the late Austrian philosopher examines our cultural, social and scientific demotion of this essential substance of all life

on planet earth from primordial and mythic element – the realm of, for example, Mnemosyne, the mythological Greek personification of memory – to utilitarian fluid, merely the stuff that swirls about in our toilets. “I shall refuse to assume that all waters may be reduced to H₂O,” he argues, and Kaufman’s images would argue similarly. *Paper Shadows # 5.1* proffers the images of parachutists – military? – descending from a sky shredded by jet contrails toward the shoreline waters off a darkening foreground beach. In *Paper Shadows # 5.2*, the viewpoint has been reversed; we look back toward a shoreline at parachute canopies fusing with the waters. Kaufman gives us water as a transformative thing; the parachutes become surrealistically intermedial things, imagistically caught midway between the transition from artefacts of silk and nylon to jellyfish-like things of the living realm of *Creatura*. It’s all about the surface.

But it isn’t always a world of reality-blurring transitives that figures in Kaufman’s photographs. Take *Paper Shadows # 6.2*, for instance. It’s a long, narrow photograph depicting a similarly long, narrow puddle of roadside water which reflects the shadows of ten figures, all male, with guns slung across their bodies. We rightly infer the image as comprising that of a group of well-armed soldiers, but this image, this reflection, is subtended by the intervening presence of a single artefact: a cigarette butt floating in the water. Water-as-mirror, at issue in Kaufman’s *Paper Shadows # 1*, is evacuated courtesy the intrusion of a problematic piece of detritus. We are, of course, in the real world, here, in the realm of the “either/or” where we shift back and forth between experiencing, in this instance, water as either embodying something akin to the Holographic Principle, or water as a volumetric element in and of its own right, capable of containing and so defying the informational assertions made on behalf of area alone.

And here, unlike that image of the photographically caught fleetingness of an artefact reflected in an enormous body of water (see *Paper Shadows # 1*), these disquieting figures seem unhurried, lingering even, perhaps intent on staying put. At one extremity of the image, some text on a piece of wood is reflected and reversed in the water, though clearly decipherable: “DEAD END”. A comment, to be sure, on the very nature of what it is these militaristic figures denote, but perhaps also reflective of something more self-contained – say, the image itself trapped within the transitory, impermanent container that is nothing more than a dirty puddle of water, a minor, transitory body of water that will shrink in area, evaporate, and so disappear.

As with several other works in Kaufman’s sequence, *Paper Shadows # 6.2* is but one part of a diptych; exhibited hanging above this long figurative reflection is *Paper Shadows # 6.1* in which Kaufman reiterates – eight times over through four pairings – the near abstract silhouette of another artefact: a helicopter, its rotating blade photographically frozen into place, the image bisected by a dark horizontal line extending directly through the silhouette and, aided and abetted by the linear repetition of imagery, which creates an uncanny resemblance to a line of barbed wire.

Maybe it’s a limit. “Lower limit speech/Upper limit music,” wrote the American poet Louis Zukofsky describing his poetics, and maybe, just maybe in this area between reflective puddle and barbed sky, Joan Kaufman establishes her visual poetics.

Heed these surfaces.

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