

WITHOLDING PATTERN CHTHONIC PORTENTS AT CAMBRIDGE DARKROOM

A tangle of twining charred stems; a bony mass of striated rock emerging light-scraped from deep shadow; a bleached white twig on a bed of broken pebbles: episodes from John Stathatos' sequence of meditations on texts from the pre-Socratic Greek philosopher Heraclitus.

The black and white images of the first two sets, beautifully printed by Harold Goorvitch, and the third set of two transparencies in light boxes on the floor, have a common format, 135 x 110 cm. Apart from the Greek texts and English translations painted on the walls of the gallery, there are no captions, titles or dates mediating between the viewer and the images, so that no escape into anecdote or topography is possible. The adjacent texts and the fugal effect of similar, but not identical, images elicit a sense of heightened significance, which is not the electric actuality say of Ansel Adams or the being-there quality of Fay Godwin. We are presented with a naked landscape of extremes in which tumbling stone walls are the only overt sign of human activity. The presence of the photographer is that of a brooding, dispassionate

Three Heraclitean
Elements. Fire: Dry
Light, 2 by John
Stathatos



eye, making no claim to technical virtuosity or percipient insight. The linguistic density of Heraclitus' complex, poetic and serene writings made them problematic for the ancient Greeks; now they are far more so because the greater part of his work is lost and we rely on fragments in transcription. There is a comparable drama of withholding in Stathatos' sequence.

Stathatos has described his interest in the 'resonances and accretions of meaning' of the photograph: here layers of metaphorical meaning are built up by the use of one element to suggest or represent another. It is in the nature of the sequence to lend itself to reflection on the temporality of process: each moment in the cycle refers to other moments: stillness - the immobility of the image caught by the shutter - represents movement; movement - the movement from one image to another - re-presents unchanging flux. Fire is apprehensible not only in the blackening of the branches but in the upwardstreaming form of the bush. A kind of stroboscopic effect results from the repetition of the image, enhancing

the temporal vertigo described in *Camera Lucida*, by Barthes ('Three tenses [or times] dizzy my consciousness'): more vivid than the moment of engaging with the photograph and the moment of the photograph being taken is the unseen moment when the bush is ablaze. There is an echoing vision of flame in the flicker of light over rock-face. A bark-stripped twig provides the reference to water.

The bristling haptic quality of the fire images, where dry seed-husks are silhouetted against the blackness of carbon and shadow, leads into the larger, starker world of the chasm carved by seasonal torrents which, again, we infer and sense but do not see. These are powerful and arresting images - the slow upheavals and massive presences of the middle section are reminiscent of a late painting by Hans Hofmann - none of which stands apart: the whole sequence forms a composite of accreted resonances with its own rhythms and internal logic. This is Stathatos' strategy for evading the 'burden of representation': the photographic sequence stands alongside the fictional or imaginary narrative in articulating its own

parameters and utilising for its own purposes the photograph's peculiar purchase on time.

The internal logic of the sequence gives it momentum and a reverberative effect that picks up on the formal and compositional strengths of the images, but it is flawed by a number of equivocations. The role of the texts within the sequence is not altogether clear: while they invoke the further dimension of an ancient tradition of thought and a more recent tradition of multi-media intertextuality, they also arguably short-circuit the visual charge of the imagery. The identity of the sequence is problematic: are we presented with three sequences or one? There is also a disparity between the exhibition and the catalogue, where the water sequence is placed between the fire and earth sections rather than at the end, and in addition each section is given an Eliot-ish subtitle. The catalogue itself has an elegant object-quality which is at odds with the impact made by the prints, which, inevitably dwarfed in reproduction, also battle with wide cream-coloured margins.

In his richly-allusive catalogue essay Ivan Gaskell identifies Stathatos' art as 'the art of landscape as history'. The parallel could also be drawn with Carleton E. Watkins' 1860's images of the American West, described by Max Kozloff (in *Photography and Fascination*) as 'landscape portraits', although Stathatos' depiction of the elements focuses on mutation and process rather than the monumental stillness Watkins found at Yosemite. As Kozloff notes, the spiritual vision of landscape involves a concomitant disengagement from historical reality. Like that of Rilke, who also found an objective correlative in a dry rocky landscape, Stathatos' rarefied spirituality is inseparable from a certain *hauteur*. The communion with the elements which the sequence embodies is private, sequestered; the absence of human figures intensifies its removal from the mess and indeterminacy of ordinary life as well as its dream-like intimacy. The dialectic of cosmology is viewed in an unpolluted litter-free zone far from the malls and traffic jams of late 20th-century urban landscape.

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Chthonic Portents showed at until 12 May at Cambridge Darkroom