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“NEW WORK”

A Graduate Thesis:

By

Joe Bialkowsky

Presented in fulfillment of a Masters in Fine Arts (Photography Concentration)

From the:

College of Imaging Arts and Sciences:

At Rochester Institute of Technology

May 23, 2001

The following members of my thesis committee have agreed to accept this written portion of my thesis as the completion of a Masters in Fine Arts:

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“New Work”

My thesis show “new work” presents eleven very different images linked by eleven horizon lines dominating the composition. There are three African desert scapes, three seascapes, two pictures of Rochester International Airport, an image of a desk, a Rothko, and an 17th century Dutch landscape. Only two of the pieces are “actual” horizon lines, in that the earth was photographed right at the point where it meets the troposphere. Five were made in my apartment, two in museums, one on final to runway 31R at JFK, and one is a picture of ones and zeros, or nothing at all depending on how you look at it. Every one of these images depend on the frame of the camera to create landscapes that exist only through the photographer. In presenting these images it occurs to me that the photographer is a writer of non-fiction. Because of the very nature of photography the images are to be seen as real. This presents an interesting paradox in the context of my work. The perfect horizon is not found in nature, only through the photographic frame can the perfect horizon be achieved. The contradiction is in the definition of non-fiction. Here, obviously, we must realize that non-fiction merely means based in reality, which photography is, but at the same time malleable to the edge of the definition. As I am always the first to admit I try to make beautiful pictures. But if we use Kant the paradox continues, “The beautiful in nature is connected with the form of the object, which consists in having [definite] boundaries. The sublime, on the other hand, is to be found in a formless object, as far as in it or by occasion of it *boundlessness* is presented and yet its totality is also present to thought.”¹ The horizon in these images is created using a frame to allow it to become infinite. These images are sublime in what they become and beautiful in their fiction.

¹ Kant, Immanuel. Critique of Judgment. Translated by J.H. Bernard. New York: Macmillan, 1951.

I

Getting to this body of work was a process for me. I first had to relearn, what I already knew. I made a major mistake upon first entering RIT and it took me most of a year to recover. The end result is this show, and I believe fully that my time at RIT transformed me from a student into an artist, by allowing me to recognize that I already was one.

My mistake was to introduce false narratives, which I will discuss shortly, into my work instead of recognizing the ones that were there to start with. The second mistake was to make work for those who would critique me instead of making it for myself. My first body of work was airplanes. I love airplanes. In the course of time I have been here I have become a pilot myself. I wanted to have a body of work that was incredibly simple and to the point. Simplicity is an aesthetic value I strive for, as seen in minimalism. In basic terms it would read as aesthetic presentation that is uncluttered with political agenda, where the aesthetic “subject” is paramount in importance to the reality of the subject. This allows for the aesthetics to become the subject and not merely the framework. Furthermore to help define the simplicity in my work we can consider the overall subject of these images to be the *mathematical* and *dynamic* sublime found in Kant.² The infinite dimensions of the sky as opposed to the tangible dimensions of the ground have a simplicity in that there is no definition. It could be argued that the metaphor is the conquering of the unknown through technology, but I would say the

² Kant, Immanuel. Critique of Judgment. Translated by J.H. Bernard. New York: Macmillan, 1951.

airplane is observed against the sky not in opposition to it. The sublime here is simple in that it has no definition. At the time of the critique of these images, I had not yet come to understand the implications of what my aesthetic was. Or better yet, I had not been able to translate what I strived to attain into English. One of the critiques that struck me was this, “these are stock images that I have seen a hundred times before.” I was taken back by this critique as negative, and it may well have been, but I did not see that it was exactly what I was aiming at. They are the everyday images you see and hear in the sky, but I want you to look at them for the banality, and think about them as art objects framed out of the day to day world. Their banality is their strength. Again consider the photographer as the writer of non-fiction. In showing reality the writer has made a decision about reality. He has decided what is important enough to portray, and I am not showing you an airplane because I want to comment on air travel or technology, I am showing you an airplane so you can see it. In transforming the image from a frame cut from the everyday into an art object, I can achieve an aesthetic of the banal. There may be little or no difference between one of my images and those of a corporate report, but here the context becomes important. The point is not to show the airplane in a romantic way such as to attract potential customers, but to display the view of airplane and sky as something worth considering aesthetically and perhaps as a creation of the artistic sublime from the mundane. When critiquing landscape photographers in the grand tradition of Ansel Adams and company, there is no question about the awe inspiring sublime and overwhelming beauty of nature, I see these images in the same way. Although the sky does not possess the ability to inspire awe as easily as the mountain, its infinite boundaries and unimaginable scale are tantamount to the mountain, hence its

simplicity. The airplane deserves more observation by its ability to exist in such an immense environment. The dual nature of the sky to possess the sublime in its most potent form and its aesthetic simplicity make it very worth noting philosophically and artistically. My argument towards my aesthetic is that simplicity does not come easily and that is what gives it immense power aesthetically and philosophically. The false narrative, I mentioned earlier, was my attempt to give meaning to seemingly meaningless images of airplanes. Here is the artist's statement from the airplane show.

The airplane has transformed the physical landscape. The vastness of the landscape shrank with the railroads and later the interstate system, but the airplane has made it minuscule. Mountain ranges that used to take months to cross, pass in minutes. The towering Rocky Mountains are bumps on an endless horizon. The months at sea to travel from Paris to New York become a movie and a nap.

While the airplane has recreated the landscape it has become a part of it. Camping in Montana a hundred miles from the nearest town you can look up and see planes heading from Seattle to the east coast. While sitting around a campfire in the snow, hundreds of people are on a plane above drinking coffee and reading magazines. Distance turns abstract. In the time it would take to walk from the campsite to the car a few miles away, people on the plane will be in New York taxis 2,000 miles to the east.

I had no idea that my work had art significance, and secondly I had no idea that I really knew what I was doing. I came up with this statement to justify the work, out of a need to feel legitimate as an artist. Of course, those who critiqued me could not see the substance of this statement in the work. How could they? I do not believe the statement to be wrong or fabricated. I do believe that I tried to use the ideas in my head to validate the work on the wall. Why I find airplanes interesting is not the point. The point is that I put the airplanes on the wall because I find them interesting. I responded to the negative critique in the wrong way. I was already very insecure about my ability to speak intellectually about my work and this made it worse. I can remember telling the story, about fishing in Montana. I was in complete and total silence, sixty miles from the

nearest town. The isolation was at the same time wonderful and terrifying. I looked six miles up at the contrail of a jet. It was wonderful, and maybe one of the most sublime things I had ever seen. It made the feeling of remoteness even stronger and at the same time more comfortable. It was an experience that is very similar to the aesthetic I described earlier. Montana is called “big sky country” for a reason. For me this view of an airplane is a much stronger experience of the sublime than any I can recollect. The feeling comes from the sheer size involved. Looking up and seeing a tiny silhouette of an aircraft against such a massive sky whose volume is incomprehensible reminds me of how small we are, and yet up there people are drinking coffee and reading magazines, and they do not feel so small. It occurred to me how much perspective plays a role in understanding the size and power of things. And while this may have not been an important element to the airplane images, it is very much a part of the thinking that led to this thesis. I told the story as an analogy toward the ideas I was trying to incorporate with the work. I believe I was trying to describe how the airplane has made the world smaller (some of the bullshit I tried to make the work seem legitimate). Someone commented, “Yes, I know what its like to be in the middle of nowhere and you look up and see an airplane.” The comment was a negative response toward technology’s invasion of nature. This response was not at all what I was fishing for. I never wanted to incorporate these ideas into the work, but felt I needed to in order for these pictures to become art. But all the while the idea of experiencing the sublime in both nature and technology became important. I realized that seeing a machine flying through the atmosphere in so remote a location was part of the contemporary landscape. I will say this, that contrary to many

who see any invasion of the untamed by man as negative, I see it as a beautiful and profound comment on modern life.

I would have to say that as an artist one of the most depressing things is to know you make strong, while not knowing why. I began a long process of focusing on the content of my work. For the first time in my life I took an idea and tried to make work about it. All of the things that I now know were successful about the airplanes disappeared from my mind and I made art to impress my professors and make me a legitimate artist. My work suffered because I was no longer using the frame of the camera to create the images that I see, but to prove that I had the intellectual capacity to make good art. I have long believed that the best and longest lived art work is that which is brilliant aesthetically, which in turn, makes it brilliant intellectually. I was making work which was neither and that kind of work is short lived indeed. The work from my show following the airplanes was very poor in the critique. I do not recall what the idea was exactly because it was completely fabricated for my professors. I realized if I was going to become an artist instead of a student, I had to find out what I was really doing artistically and discuss it.

It took two events to reverse the downward trend I had taken. The first was a small show at RIT of work by graduate students. I took four images from the body of work following the airplane show and reorganized them. The images had been coupled with others in triptychs and diptychs, in their first showing. I was attempting again to place a narrative on the work which was non existent visually. Again, as with the airplane show the critique was very negative. 'The work no longer gave the viewer a chance to see the mundane world in a beautiful way, but left the viewer confused. When

I selected four of the images and put them up, this time on there own, I realized that they were good. What was strong about my work hadn't disappeared, my understanding of it had. It came rushing back to me how much I adore making art, and how passionate I was about the images. The second thing that fixed me was a fellow artist who helped me remember that art is fun and beautiful, and pointed out that I make art in that mold.

I started taking pictures that I loved again and I took a lot. When the last review of my work came up that spring, I had twelve images selected from over 600. It had been the single most intense and successful working period of my life. In two months I photographed everything. I didn't stop to consider what the work was about because the question was answered in the making of the work. I finally came full circle. Everything that was successful about the airplanes was in this work and I knew why. Even now typing this paper, I realize how simple that answer was all along, and how important the process of finding the answer was. I had always assumed that there would be a revelation that allowed me to justify my work intellectually. I had never known how powerful visual language is. There is almost no way to describe what makes a good picture good, you just know. Gerhard Richter when asked to comment on his paintings says, "talk about painting: there's no point.....when you convey a thing through the medium of language you change."³ My failing was trying to convey an image with the wrong language instead of describing why I take the picture. By looking into my images and asking what is it that compels me in the subject matter I found the answers I was looking for. I was trying to find some profound artistic need in making images, instead of looking for the simple reasons. These images are sometimes of subjects so banal it seems

³ Cora, Bruno. "Gerhard Richter: The Experience of Painting and the Knowledge of Reality" From Gerhard Richter (Prado: Gli Ori, 1999) 23.

ridiculous to consider them aesthetically. When I have my camera and am with friends they often see me take a picture and say, “What in the hell are you taking a picture of?” or, “Why are you taking a picture of that?” I have difficulty explaining why I would have no interest in photographing a sunset because I would be transforming something sublime into something beautiful. This for me represents a step in the wrong direction artistically. The sublime sunset is best viewed in real life. My goal would be to take that which is disregarded as an everyday occurrence and make it beautiful, or that which is beautiful and make it sublime. I make beautiful things out of what is essentially not, generally speaking. The frame of the camera is important here in its ability to re-contextualize an image. The argument becomes philosophical, as I am assuming that my images, before they are framed out of the everyday, are not sublime in and of themselves. Consider a busy city street. The images and sounds are constantly changing, amongst this is a blue sheet of plywood propped against a fence to enclose a construction site. Observed amongst the rest of the imagery in the city it is of no consequence. But if the frame of the camera filters out the rest of the city and leaves only the space where the plywood meets the street, the image is placed in a new context. It may be obvious what the image is of, but what it conveys has changed. It is now a study of line and color, it is a landscape. Only through the camera is this transformation achieved, taking what was not sublime, but merely a part of something larger, and giving it a forum for itself.

Two words that are overused in my explanations of my work are “beauty” and “simplicity”. From my perspective I use them interchangeably along with the sublime. I have found that in order to translate my personal visual language, I must show the connection between “simple” and “beautiful” and “beautiful” to “sublime” I find that in

the context of my work the interpretation of these words and their relation to one another is important to approach my working method. Each is in reference to an essential element of my work. Consider simplicity. It would be an error for me to link this alone with the aesthetic theories of minimalism, but minimalist theories are very important in describing my aesthetic. Two driving forms of minimalism are dominant in my work. The first is described as an, “extreme and reductive formalism of the Post-Painterly abstractionists, who sought to purify painting of everything but its most irreducibly essential properties”⁴ And the second theory is this, “The use in high art of objects from low, everyday life with minimal or no modification imposed on them by the artist”⁵ Both of these theories adequately describe the influence minimalism has had on my work. The latter should be obvious considering my subject matter and the discussion of the last paragraph. The former is not as obvious. A “simple” reduction of form and content to only essential properties is for the minimalists a way of approaching an ideal. For me it is to create clarity in seeing, or more to the point, to make the image less cluttered. The simplicity I seek is in the sublime. It may seem a hypocrisy to link these two words as the sublime usually refers to that which is beyond human understanding, in Kantian terms, but here I see a connection. Consider the point where the sky meets the earth in the horizon line. Here is the most simplistic form of landscape aesthetically. It is also simple in terms of the sublime. It is a basic equation, equal amounts of earth and sky, it is the same equation that minimal art is based on, that of positive and negative space, bare essential form. But at the same time this composition is the ultimate form of the sublime

⁴ Hunter, Sam and John Jacobus. Modern Art: Painting Sculpture Architecture. 3rd ed. New York: Prentice Hall, 1992.

⁵ Hunter, Sam and John Jacobus. Modern Art: Painting Sculpture Architecture. 3rd ed. New York: Prentice Hall, 1992.

because it deals with infinity. When shown in the format of my thesis work this line extends to infinity. The sky is endless, and incomprehensible. Where the mountain range may have more power to inspire awe, it is comprehensible, its mass is calculable, and its power is limited. The horizon line is not. It is my attempt to create a simplistic form of the sublime and therefore to create an ultimate form of the sublime. The more simplistic, the more powerful.

Beauty is something I often use to replace the sublime, because I am an artist and the form I wish to create is one of sublime pleasure. In referring to the sublime and to beauty Kant makes a distinction, “The beautiful in nature is connected with the form of the object, which consists in having [definite] boundaries. The sublime, on the other hand, is to be found in a formless object, as far as in it or by occasion of it *boundlessness* is presented and yet its totality is also present to thought.”⁶ If used in the context of the horizon line this quote is very fitting. There is a boundlessness in the horizon itself and its totality can be considered within the image, yet the formlessness is in the infinite space suggested by such a line and by the immense size implied. The form of the horizon line is beautiful and its implications are sublime.

For every time I depress the shutter, I may have pointed the camera ten times and decided against photographing it. There were problems with the third body of work. The main problem was that the images were not connected. That is true. I wanted to put all 600 on the wall. I had photographed so intensely for so long that in editing the work I could not select similar images for fear I might introduce an unwanted narrative. And while the show may have failed on some levels, overall it was an incredible success for

⁶ Kant, Immanuel. Critique of Judgment. Translated by J.H. Bernard. New York: Macmillan, 1951.

me. I had figured out what I do, become incredibly confident in my work, and started loving art again. The statement from this show led directly to my thesis show.

The contemporary landscape is not the natural sublime, but the mundane, and over-familiar. By reducing this world through the photographic frame, a form of beauty is found. These sometimes cold and banal images create a standard of beauty isolated from a world that is seemingly ugly in its repetition.

As I have stated before, there is an essential need to use the frame of the camera as an editing tool. I refer to the contemporary landscape as that of repetition. Here I am referring to the everyday plasticity of contemporary culture - the world we try to escape from by vacationing to places where the natural sublime is in tact. I felt the need to create beauty out of the world that is passed by. I mentioned earlier the blue plywood and transforming it to a singular experience worthy of inspection. The shift from this last body of work to my thesis work is seeing the work as sublime as opposed to merely beautiful. I mention cold and banal in reference to these images, which in some cases is true but overall this refers to the subject matter. The importance artistically for me is again the simple beauty that can be found in an everyday image. A sidewalk is everyday and over familiar, but if transformed into an artistic form through the camera it can become beautiful. The purpose is to recreate an object into a formal relationship which allows it to become artistic. Of the foremost minimalists the majority worked with sculpture. This makes sense as a sculpture can be created completely as a formal relationship, where something based in reality has to be transformed in order to suggest an artistic formality. This is one reason that I am not a true minimalist, nor wish to be, but use minimalist formality as an outline for observing the subjects I might photograph.

II

While having a thesis show of twelve seemingly unconnected images could have been problematic for the viewer, it gave me the basis for understanding the system I use in photographing. As I said, I tend to photograph the banal and through a specific method of editing create my art. J.M.W Turner, a man who is well known for painting sublime landscapes full of atmosphere and light, made a painting in 1844 that is incredibly modern and similar to my work. He took the railroad, the ultimate symbol of the destructive nature of industrialization and turned it into the sublime. *Rain, Steam, and Speed* (Figure 12.) was the result of a train trip Turner took in which he spent most of the ride hanging his head from the window, something I am very familiar with. When asked by a friend why he would paint something so ugly he replied, “to prove that I can make even the ugly beautiful.”⁷ The significance of understanding this painting is important in helping to understand my own work. Turner is a painter of the sublime. His atmospheric canvasses are never still, they suggest the motion and conflict of nature. When describing his reasoning for painting the train, Turner is humble. His attempt to make something ugly beautiful is a simple way of describing the conflict of the natural sublime and the technological sublime. Jeremy Gilbert-Rolff describes the “techno-sublime”, as this, “The limitlessness once found in nature gives way, in technology, to a limitlessness produced out of an idea which is not interested in being an idea of nature, but one which replaces the idea of nature. Nature sublimated in a sublime that comes

⁷ Butlin, Martin, and Evelyn Joll. The Paintings of J.M.W. Turner. Vol. 2 New Haven: Yale University Press, 1977.

after it and in, or with, with which it is now obliged to live”⁸ What links this work to mine and what makes it a sublime painting is the insistence of harmony. The industrial sublime, as viewed through the train, is linked to coal and smoke, loud cold and destructive creations of steel and backbreaking labor. For Turner to represent the train as beautiful and in harmony with nature is the ultimate comment of optimism for the future and a shift from the thinking of those who find the ultimate experience of art in God. Although Hegel finds the sublime in God, he also sees the apparent need for technology in a dialectical relationship with nature.⁹ There is a need for technology and its existence becomes sublime by its appearance. Commenting on Gunpowder, which we can use in place of the train, Hegel suggests this need, “ Humanity needed it, and it made its appearance forthwith”¹⁰ In the traditions of the past art which deals with man in the everyday is banal and cowers beneath the power of the natural sublime i.e. God. Turner has changed the paradigm by placing beauty equally into nature and man. The feeling of the sublime one encounters with nature is now a feeling of the sublime in the creations of man. The connection with my work is the need to disassociate myself with the grand tradition of landscape painters. My images are created solely through the lens of technology. If my images are to be seen as sublime it is not the sublime of God but that of man. Now the awe inspiring power of the mountain can be recreated through man. This concept might become easier to grasp if one is to remember what the reaction was to

⁸ Gilbert-Rolff, Jeremy. Beauty and the Contemporary Sublime. New York: Allworth Press, 1999.

⁹ Hegel, G.W.F. Aesthetics: Lectures on Fine Art. Trans: T.M. Knox, London: Oxford University Press, 1975.

¹⁰ Gilbert-Rolff, Jeremy. Beauty and the Contemporary Sublime. New York: Allworth Press, 1999. Pg. 118.

a skyscraper, airplane or train when seen as a child. This is the power the train had to the world a century ago. Technology has become natures equal in its ability to inspire awe.

Part of arriving at an understanding of ones own work, is in finding its place in art history. I have long been resistant to the idea of my work as post modern. My concept of the postmodern, when placed on photographers, is the work of Richard Prince, Sheri Levine, and Cindy Sherman. My work has always been based on aesthetics and to have it labeled postmodern would, for me, place it in the decidedly anti-aesthetic art historical slot of the aforementioned artists. The problem all along has been that the work is not straight foreword enough to be modern. If the era of the postmodern is an age of lost innocence, as Umberto Eco would describe it, then my work would have to be very self aware. It is not. My work could be described as “innocent” in an age of lost innocence. The use of the television and computer to create images along with images traditionally made speaks of the postmodern appropriation of mass culture. It is and is not. For the Richard Princes the appropriation is the art, the loss of artistic innocence, (beauty, form, originality) is the postmodern statement. With my work the appropriation, or photographing of technological landscapes, is an “innocent” use of the imagery around me, albeit a calculated postmodern innocence. I am describing the use of television as if it were a landscape, not blind to the implications of an information society, but using it without worrying about its political statement. In a way I used it because it was there. The postmodern definition of Carl Jencks is applicable to my work as he is describing postmodern architecture. In his words the postmodern is, “double coding: the combination of modern techniques with something else.”¹¹ My work is based in

¹¹ Jencks, Charles. What is Post-Modernism?: London: Academy Editions, 1989.

modernism, as the aesthetics are paramount. The double coding is in the use of any and all sources for the execution of the work. In one of the pieces (Figure. 8), the computer is solely used to create the landscape. When the work is shown I do not mention the use of the computer because I do not want that source to be considered as a subject of the work. Here again I say I am using the source “innocently” with full knowledge of its postmodern implications, all the while denying its importance. Again in the words of Jencks, “I can’t deny the conventional beauty of the past, or the current technological and social reality.” My images are very form based, created using a formula making them modern, on the other hand the sources are eclectic bordering on sporadic, which is postmodern. What differentiates these from other postmodern photographs, besides the emphasis on a modernist aesthetic, is again the innocent use of the sources. The height of postmodern appropriation created the ultimate skepticism regarding the drive for straight forward originality found in the modernists. My use of appropriation is not a vain attempt to usurp modernism, but a reinsertion of modernism into imagery derived from a postmodern world. This said, I will say my work is closer to what Edward Rothstein believes will be the post postmodern, “Post postmodernism will be a variety of modernism.”¹²

If I had to describe what I wanted my thesis to be through reference to my influences, I would say this; I want the clean lines and minimal perfection of Donald Judd (Figure 18.), I want the brilliance of Andreas Gursky (Figure 15.), and I want the raw sublime beauty of Mark Rothko (Figures 16. & 17.). These were my goals. I want to start with Gursky, because after seeing his retrospective recently I finally understood

¹² Rothstein, Edward. Modern and Postmodern the bickering twins. The New York Times on the Web, October 21, 2000.

what it is that is so brilliant about his work. Up until this realization, I believed only that he made pictures that were so monumentally big that they had to be good. But now I see why they are so intriguing and why he is so brilliant. Gursky recreates the world in a way it could never be seen. By this I don't mean the transformation of the real that is inherent to any artwork, but an irony of seeing. Gursky's images seem very real and very straight forward. What makes Gursky's imagery, "Knock-your-socks-off," in the words of Peter Galassi¹³ is that there is an underlying strangeness to the imagery. They are too perfect. The images have a sharpness and clarity that is hyper-real, thus becoming imaginary. The best example of this found in Gursky and which most echoes my work is *Rhine II* (Fig. 15) In this image Gursky found an unnaturally straight section of the meandering Rhine river in western Germany. In order to give the image a minimalist perfection he removed several distracting elements of the scene via computer. The result is a river scape horizon line that is too perfect for nature and can only be created through Gursky's eyes. This image is depicting a very natural scene in a hyper-real way. When one considers the hard straight lines of minimalism such as in Donald Judd's sculpture, or Sol Lewitt's wall drawings, it seems in opposition to the organic shape of the natural world. There is a mathematical purity in these works that is echoed through Gursky. The river scene does not exist, and furthermore what was natural becomes a landscape built to fit the mold of artistic composition. Gursky achieves the sublime in the way Turner did, but taking it to another level that is so simple it is brilliant. Like Turner's train, Gursky uses technology and molds it with nature in a perfect harmony that evokes the sublime in both nature and in man. In the words of the director of the Museum of Modern Art,

¹³ Galassi, Peter. Andreas Gursky. New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 2001. pg 7.

“Gursky presents some of the most original and impressive contributions to recent art.”¹⁴

By taking what was almost in opposition to nature by its lack of emotion, minimalism is transposed onto the natural world creating a post-industrial landscape that combines the best of landscape painting with the most stripped down form of modern art.

I want my show to have the clean lines and perfection you see in Donald Judd. (Fig. 18). The construction of the space for the show was done mainly to remove any distraction from the work. I wanted the hard and sometimes soft edge of the horizon to dominate the space, in the way Judd’s boxes dominate a space with almost eerie simplicity. By breaking down form to a mathematically precise working method, Judd adds complexity to the form. Galassi makes the most to the point description of the overlap between minimal and conceptual art, “...rigor of conception, precision of execution, and stringent rejection of ostentatious affect are not barriers to drop-dead beauty. On the contrary, especially in concert they can be excellent means of achieving it.”¹⁵ Judd’s minimalism also flowed into the work by means of the horizon line. In several of the images from this show the line is almost perfect, something rarely found in nature, with the possible exception of the seascape. There is something unbelievably powerful in the rigid simplicity of the unmarred horizon. In Gursky and Sugimoto (Fig. 14), the more minimal the image becomes, the more sublime its impact. God’s horizon line is not one of mathematical simplicity, but one of chaotic complexity, when it is reduced to form it becomes the sublime of man. The chair of my committee commented, that if you draw a line through a rectangle you will have a landscape. It is too perfect to

¹⁴ Galassi, Peter. Andreas Gursky. New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 2001. pg 6.

¹⁵ Galassi, Peter. Andreas Gursky. New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 2001. pg 35.

be a landscape but as humans we are unable to divorce the equation of top and bottom from the landscape.

The question of subject matter has come up when discussing my work. The subject is the point where earth and sky meet creating the horizon line. The subject is that point where space is defined. The one image from the show with a definable subject is *Untitled* (Fig. 1). In this image the subject is not the foreground, as it should be in a landscape, but the wing of the plane in the “empty” space above the horizon. The natural sublime in the landscape is that the earth is man’s and definable and the sky is God’s country and indefinable. Here the sky is dominated with the subject and the land is below as an afterthought. Again Turner comes to mind in that this is the sublime of man. Mark Rothko turns up in my work in *Untitled* (Fig. 3). Mark Rothko’s paintings are monumental in the same scale of Gursky’s photographs. Rothko’s are sublime in size and color. They are not landscapes but there are landscapes in them. Rothko takes simplicity to the extreme. For an entire career he made paintings about color and light that never became boring. My image of Rothko is not here to comment on Rothko. I am not trying to convey what it is like to be near a Rothko, but to show the viewer what it is like for me to be in front of a Rothko. By specifically framing a line in his painting and changing what was a huge vertical canvas into a horizontal photograph, I make landscapes within his paintings. You can not see the Rhine in Gursky’s view without the computer and you can not see the horizon line in Rothko without my camera. The computer, for Gursky, removes the elements of the natural landscape that he found distracting and that obscured the line of the composition, without this tool the view in Gursky’s mind could never be realized. In Rothko I see landscapes, but taken as a whole, Rothko is vertical and color

fields are dominant. Using the camera to transform the vertical to the horizontal and emphasizing the line that separates the colors, a landscape is born, which was previously only viewed in concept. A second piece in my show is directly influenced by Rothko and that is *Untitled* (Fig. 6). It is not necessary to the image to make this connection, but is important in the way I construct an image. A second, much different, Rothko inspired this image directly. (Fig. 17), is a basic composition of dark over light. What makes this a painting of form and color, and not a landscape, is that the dark, or earth, is on top and the canvas is vertical. I looked for this form in my day to day business and found it in a shadow on an airport parking ramp. I did not need to track this Rothko down to photograph it and then invert it. I could find it in a huge slab of asphalt. The light is now on top where the sky should be and it becomes a landscape.

Gerhard Richter (Fig. 13), makes paintings ranging from fields of complete gray, to picturesque landscapes, to complete abstractions. While he may not admit to it; the similarities between the works are striking. One could argue that his abstractions are just as much landscapes as his “real” landscapes. He makes his paintings from photographs, and when asked what they are, he replies, “I’m not trying to imitate a photograph; I’m trying to make one. And if I disregard the assumption that a photograph is a piece of paper exposed to light, then I am practicing photography by other means: I’m not producing paintings that remind you of a photograph but producing photographs”¹⁶ Richter is conveying the sublime through painting through photography. The influence here is in the realization that photography is more than representation. It is not a new idea to say that a photograph transforms reality. Of course, it can never convey the true

¹⁶ Elger, Dietmar. Gerhard Richter Landscapes. Ostfildern-Ruit: Cantz Verlag, 1998. pg 9.

qualities of the moment it depicts. It has long been known that photographs do lie, or tell half truths. What is important for me about Richter is his understanding that by painting reality in a way to create a photograph, he is commenting on the intellectual capacity of photography, and elevating it to the status of painting. Using painting and photography interchangeably allows the photographer to be elevated intellectually. Richter is placing importance on the ability to reproduce a reality that the artist wishes to see. For me, photography has always been barred in this way. If Mark Rothko paintings were photographs, viewers would always question the subject. Painting is allowed to go beyond the subject into the realm of the abstract without this crutch. By removing this distinction Richter can paint landscapes and abstractions on the same day. In a world where the photographed landscape is overused and thus loses its punch, the painted photograph can regain it. I found that I needed pieces of both. I could create a landscape that becomes real because it is a photograph, while retaining the power of creation found in painting. In *Untitled* (Fig. 4), I photographed a painting by the Dutch landscape painter Phillips Konick. Up until the point I happened upon his painting, while searching for Vermeer, *Landscape 1619*. (Fig. 19) I had never heard of him. What struck me was how simplistic and engaging this painting was, especially surrounded by over painted landscapes in which the landscape itself is only a backdrop to man's activity. My photograph of Konick is in no way a comment on him, but a reaction of my camera. Two interesting situations developed out of making this image. First of all, I realized that Konick was not so unlike me. Although he made his landscapes in the tradition of the natural sublime, he fixed them to fit his aesthetic. When you see the original painting there are hills, rising on either side of the flat horizon. I do not know of any Dutch

landscapes with hills, as the whole country is flatter than a pancake. The second situation is the interesting one. Landscapes are hard to convey, as the frame hinders the magnitude of the image. When I set out to photograph Konick, his frame made it hard for me to crop out his mountains so I could have my perfect horizon line. I come back to Richter in that as he says he makes photographs, I would say this is not a photograph of a Konick painting, but a photograph of a landscape.

The four images in the show taken from the television *Untitled*, (Fig. 2,4,10,11), could be used to connect the work as a whole. As I stated earlier, the problem I faced as a new student was in recognizing the significance of my own work. As I have also stated, simplicity of form and aesthetics have ruled my methodology for making work. Through making and talking about the work presented here, I realized that the content which I felt I was lacking was embedded in the aesthetic, or more the retrieval of the aesthetic. In the search for horizon lines I wanted to try as many sources as possible. It never occurred to me that the content of the work was in the way the sources were gathered. I photographed horizons on the television because they were there and accessible. If I look to modernism for my influences, then it must be understood that it is through postmodern glasses. The landscape seen through the television can be seen as an example of an information driven society where more world experiences are found through technology rather than through real life. The creation of a natural sublime landscape from the technological sublime of mass information culture, is a response to technology similar to Turner's response to the railroad age. Where Turner places the train in harmony with nature, I have created the picturesque out of technology placing the two in harmony. It is an optimistic look into the future of art dealing with lost innocence.

My work has always been positive whether it deals with technology or nature. There is a love of the time and culture that inspired it, as opposed to so much current postmodern work which does nothing but complain about social ills and longs for the past instead of embracing the present. Don Grey, an artist and critic, in a letter to the Senate Subcommittee on Education wrote, “is it any wonder that most contemporary art is itself meaningless and purposeless except to scoff at society and genuine art, and mimic the depleted views of its creators and adherents? Like other aspects of our society, such art is essentially diseased . It is eroded by psuedo-creativity, dehumanization, triviality, venality, and sterility.”¹⁷ I bring this up at the end of the paper to leave an impression of the most stripped down reason for my making work. I mentioned before a feeling of creating “innocent” work in a postmodern world of lost-innocence. This comes from a longing for beauty and optimism in art. The general feeling in much contemporary critique is that, art driven by optimism and beauty has less intellectual power than that of “serious” art. The idea of the tortured artist is a cliché and making work with strong negative implications while criticizing some social standard is much easier intellectually, than making positive work that looks toward the future with an open hand.

¹⁷ Gray, Don. Letter to the Senate Subcommittee on Education. April 5, 1990.

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Colophon

I would like to thank the following people for making this show possible:

My Committee:

Chair: Jeff Weiss
Dan Larkin
Tim Engström
Elliott Rubenstein

My Parents Janie and Bill and my Sister Sarah

Kara Crombie
Jim Johnson
Andrew Wainio

And

Amanda Bauer

You have all contributed to this more than you know, and I thank you.



Figure 1. Joe Bialkowsky *Untitled* 2001 30"x40" Type C Print on Aluminum



Figure 2. Joe Bialkowsky *Untitled* 2001 30"x40" Type C Print on Aluminum

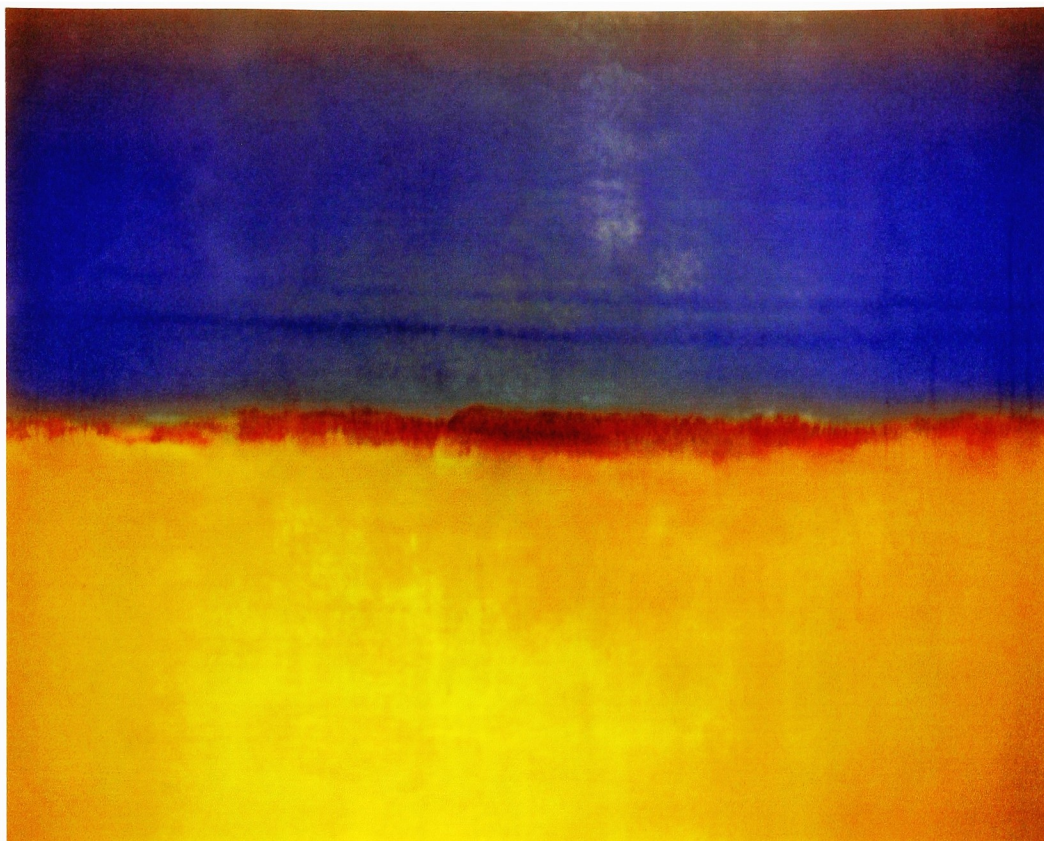


Figure 3. Joe Bialkowsky *Untitled* 2001 30"x40" Type C Print on Aluminum



Figure 4. Joe Bialkowsky *Untitled* 2001 30"x40" Type C Print on Aluminum

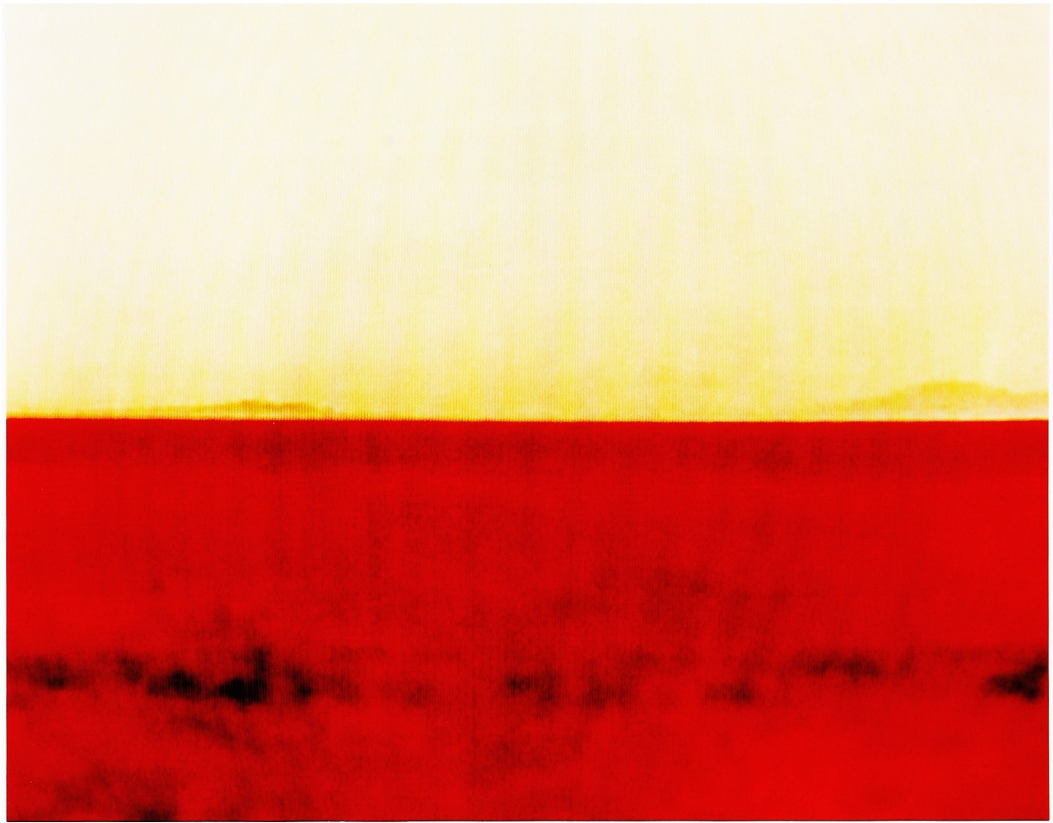


Figure 4. Joe Bialkowsky *Untitled* 2001 30"x40" Type C Print on Aluminum



Figure 5. Joe Bialkowsky *Untitled* 2001 30"x40" Type C Print on Aluminum



Figure 7. Joe Blalkowsky *Untitled* 2001 30"x40" Type C Print on Aluminum



Figure 8. Joe Blalkowsky *Untitled* 2001 30"x40" Type C Print on Aluminum



Figure 9. Joe Bialkowsky *Untitled* 2001 30"x40" Type C Print on Aluminum



Figure 10. Joe Bialkowsky *Untitled* 2001 30"x40" Type C Print on Aluminum

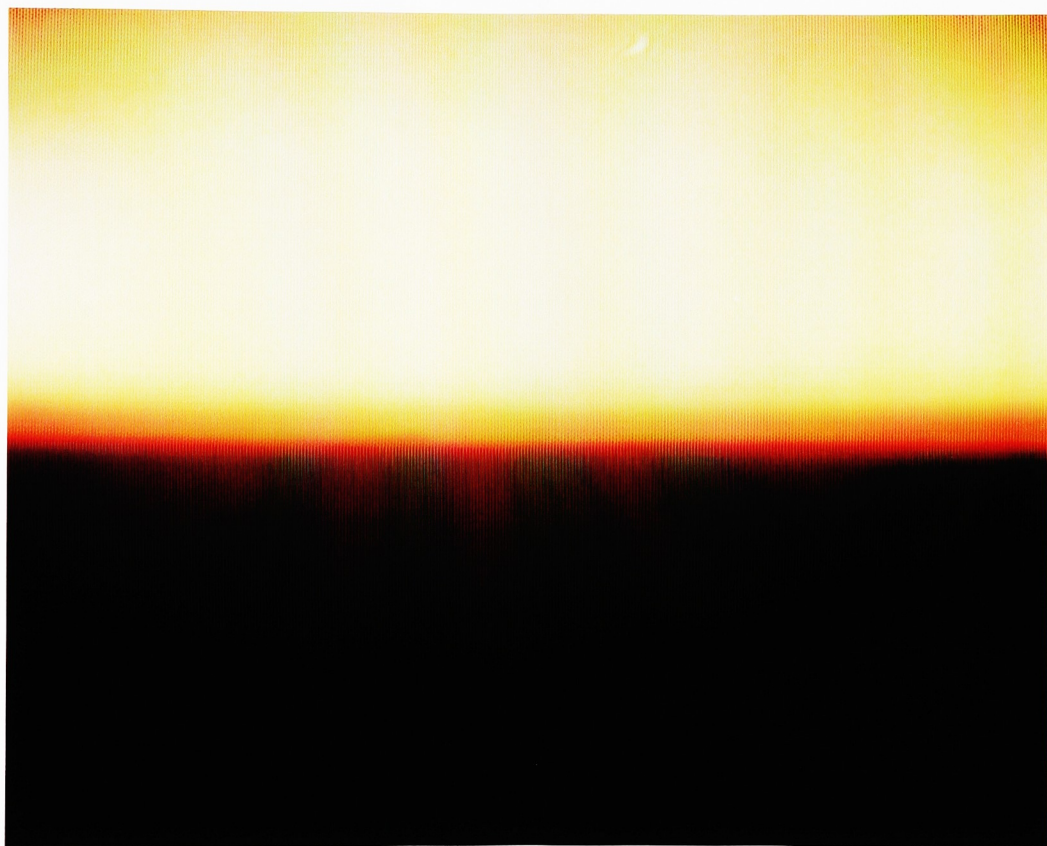


Figure 11. Joe Bialkowsky *Untitled* 30"x40" 2001 Type C Print on Aluminum

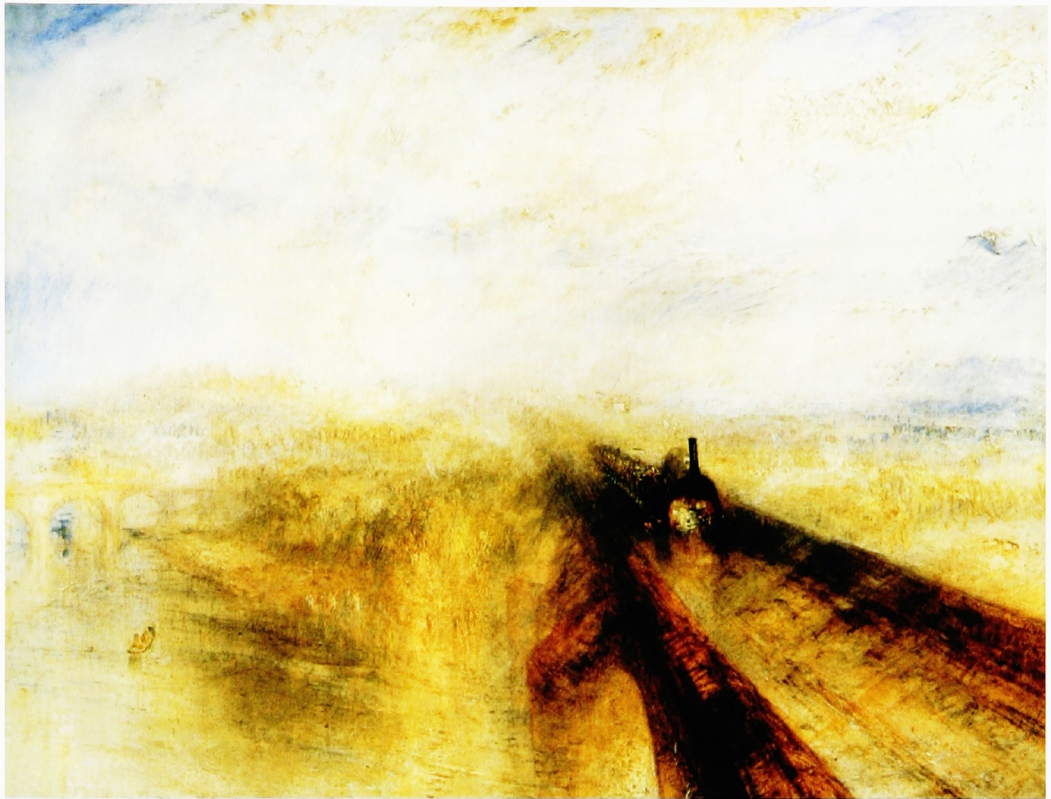


Figure 12. J.M.W. Turner *Rain, Steam, and Speed-The Great Western Railway* 1844 Oil on canvass 91"x122" National Gallery, London



Figure 13. Gerhard Richter *Seestück (Morgenstimmung)* 1969, (237/1) Oil on Canvas cm 80x100 Museum of Contemporary Art, Rochechouart



Figure 14. Hiroshi Sugimoto *Caribbean Sea, Jamaica* 1980 Silver Gelatin Print



Figure 15. Andreas Gursky *Rhine II* 1999 Color C Print 6'8 1/4"x11'8 3/4" Collection the Artist

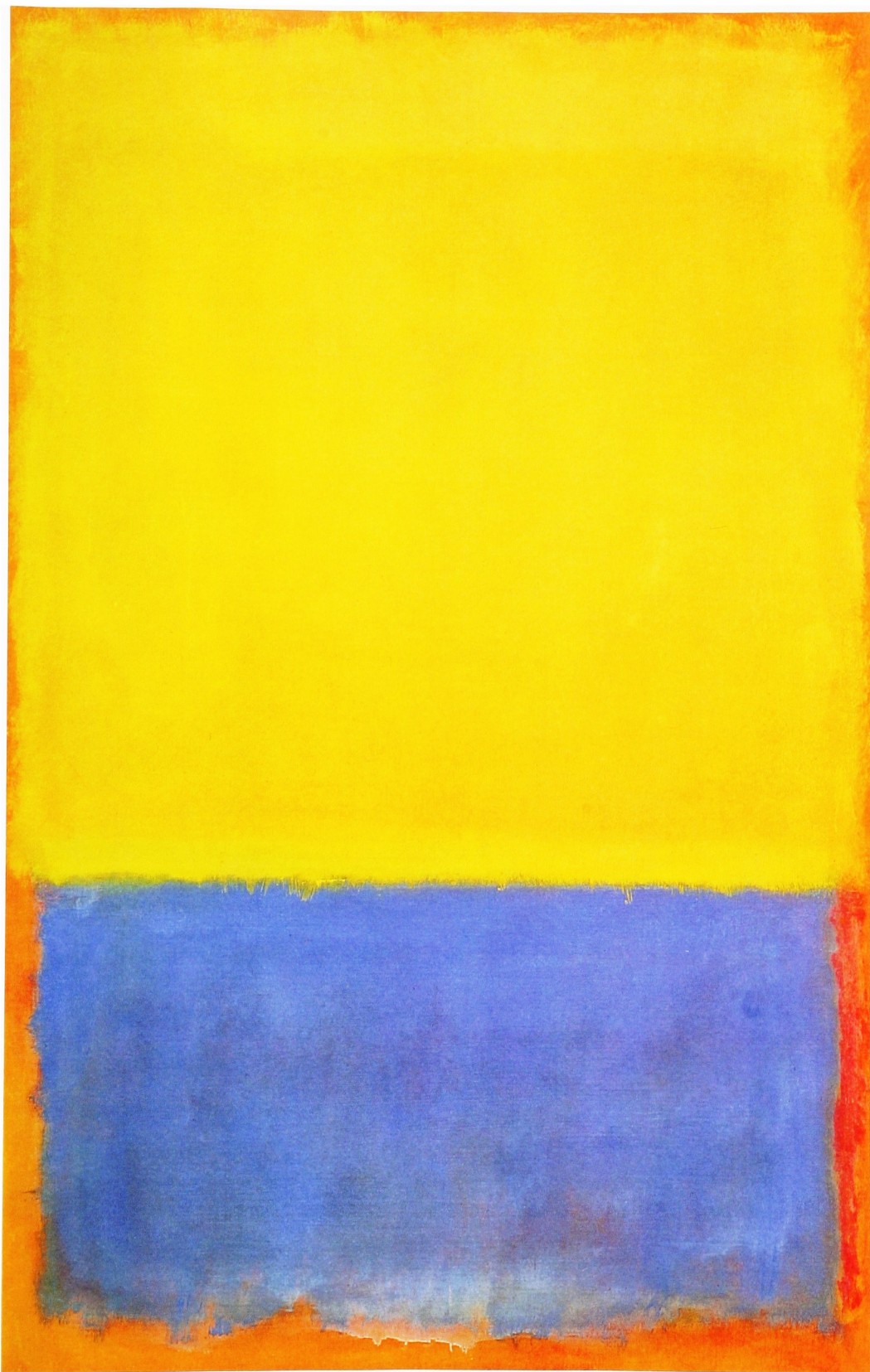


Figure 16. Mark Rothko *Yellow and Blue (Yellow, Blue on Orange)* 1955 Oil on Canvas 102"x66" Carnegie Museum of Art, Pittsburg



Figure 17. Mark Rothko *Untitled* 1969 Acrylic on Canvas 68"x60" John and Mary Pappajohn, Des Moines, Iowa

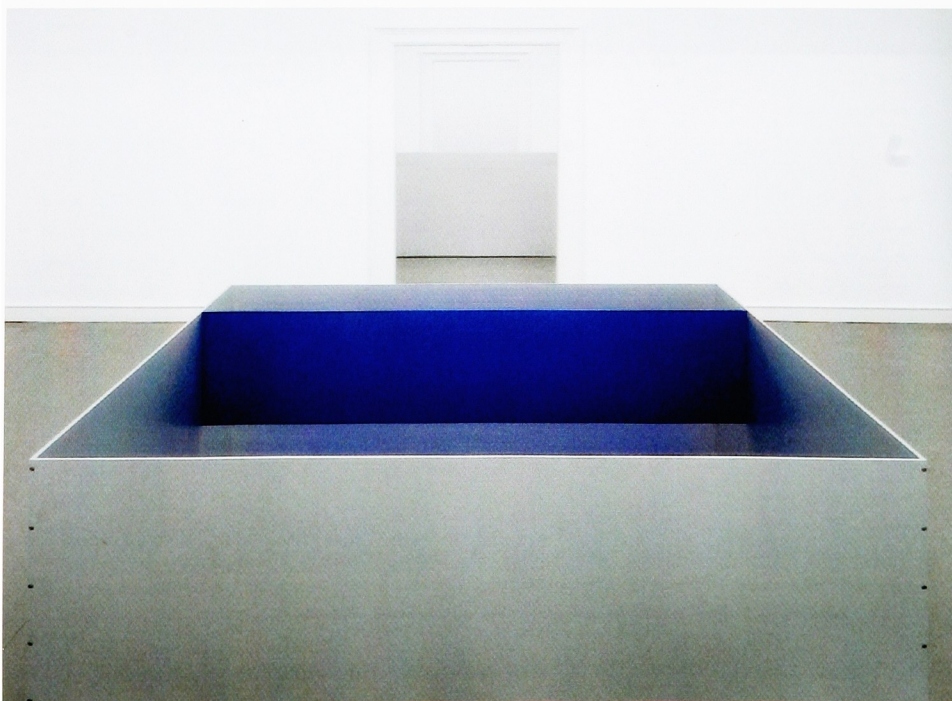
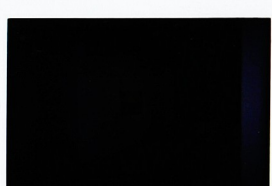
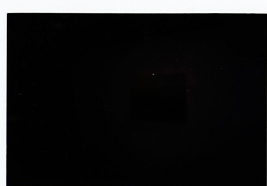
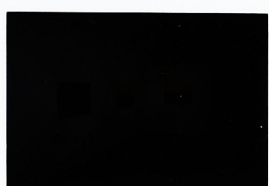
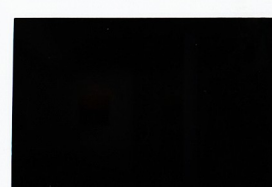
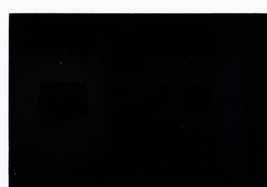


Figure 18. Donald Judd *Untitled* 1989 Anodized Aluminium, Plexiglass 39"x79"x39" Annemarie Verna Galerie, Zurich



Figure 19: Phillips Konick *Landscape* 1619 Oil on Canvas Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York



Untitled 30"x40" C print
on aluminum



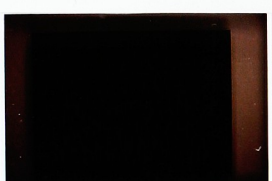
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Untitled 30"x40" C print
on aluminum



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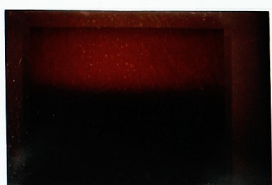
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Untitled 30"x40" C print
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