Impermanence

Imagine you want to view some of the spectacular photographs that the Perseverance Mars rover took of the red planet. You consult the NASA website and, in a flash, you're scrolling through its offerings. But that same flash describes your experience of the images. You see them on your screen and then you don't. A quick look and then they're gone. Alternatively, you could download your favorites and print them on an inkjet device. The result would be a stable material image, right?

Turned Towards the Firmament, Joachim Froese's new series of Martian landscapes, culled from the same NASA website, suggests that the answer is not so clear. He employs a combination of procedures devised in the early years of photography to generate warm luminous prints that foreground their materiality and reflect the Martian colour environment. The paper itself warps and dimples at the edges, features clamp marks and pin holes, and the impressed frame dissolves where the negative ended and the chemicals bleed freely into the paper. Holding this object in our hand or even just looking at it, we have a sense of physical permanence as compared to the fleeting digital picture on our screen. But Froese forces us to question this seemingly evident distinction. In his workflow, he has left out the fixing bath, a vital step that makes photographic prints permanent. Instead, he adopts a method first used by Englishman William Henry Fox before fixer was available. Talbot washed his prints in a salt solution which stabilized them but left them sensitive to strong UV light. Working in this archaic manner, Froese returns to the medium's very origins before fixer was available, reminding us that photography's identity has in fact always been associated with the fleeting, the impermanent, and the provisional. His photographs, which offer rich revelations about the distant landscapes of Mars, are as fleeting as the radio signals that delivered these images back to Earth. Are the homes depicted in the accompanying series *Dwelling* just as impermanent?

Froese finds himself among a growing corps of artists who have returned to photography's early procedures to explore the medium's foundational identity. They constitute what critic Lyle Rexer has termed the "antiquarian avant-garde," a group intent on reengaging "the physical facts of photography, its materials and process" in the shadow of digital imaging technologies. The revival began with artists such as Betty Hahn, who in the mid-1960s began using gum bichromate printing procedures that she found outlined in late 19th-century technical manuals. Others followed on her lead, such as Sally Mann, who has employed the mid-19th-century wet collodion process since the 1990s, and Adam Fuss, who has been making large daguerreotypes for the last 20 years. The latter of these procedures was the first to be publicly revealed in 1839. It yields small images on a silver coated copper plate which oscillate between negative and positive. Its inventor, Louis-Jacques-Mandé Daguerre, had his procedure purchased by the French state and made available to all for free. Over the same period of time, Talbot disclosed his own technology that employed the negative-positive process, which became the standard for analog photography up to the digital age.

Technically Froese draws on Talbot's and Daguerre's processes all at once, using the Englishman's negative-positive printing on paper, along with a gold toning technology widely associated with the daguerreotype. Stabilized but not permanently protected from UV exposure, the resulting photograph becomes an organic object destined to change over its life span. A viewer can only appreciate the prints for brief moments in a controlled environment, bringing us back to the original transient image we saw on our screen when scrolling through the NASA website. Are the two conditions all that different, Froese asks us to consider? And how do these impermanent prints of reddish rock beds, mountains, and wind-swept dunes on another planet compare to the more traditional fixed prints of small homes in verdant landscapes, which do not fade? Are the interplanetary visions mere apparitions compared to the familiarity and permanency of home? They otherwise look similar, except that the domestic photographs lack the deep red toning of the Martian pictures. What do they say about photography today, when few of us encounter physical prints, and what can they report of the medium's original status as an image?

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