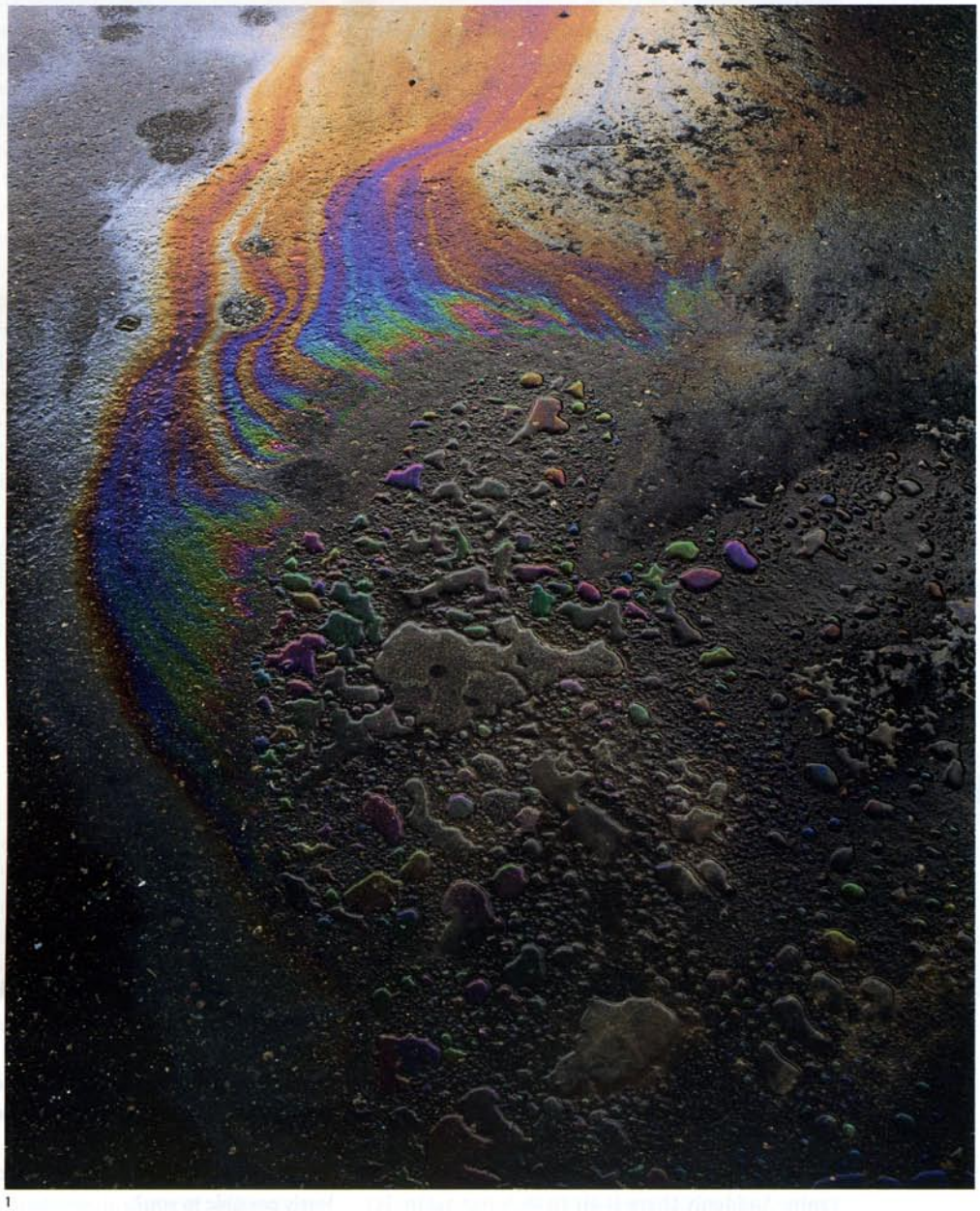

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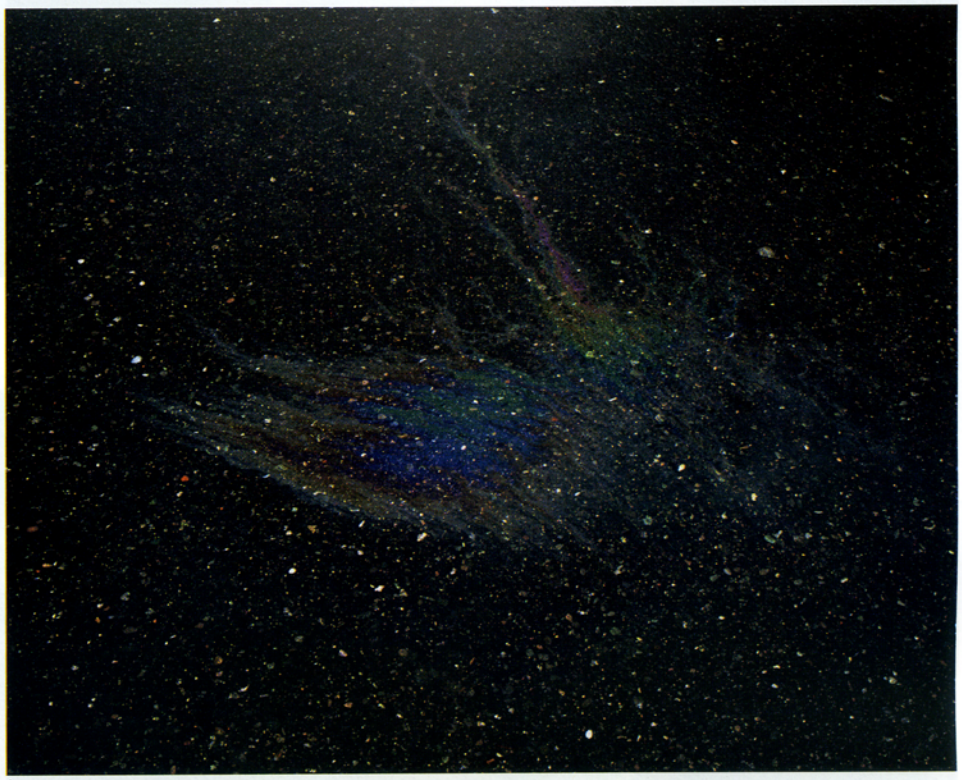
Multiple Benefits

Evan Lee's Photographic Variety

by Lee Henderson



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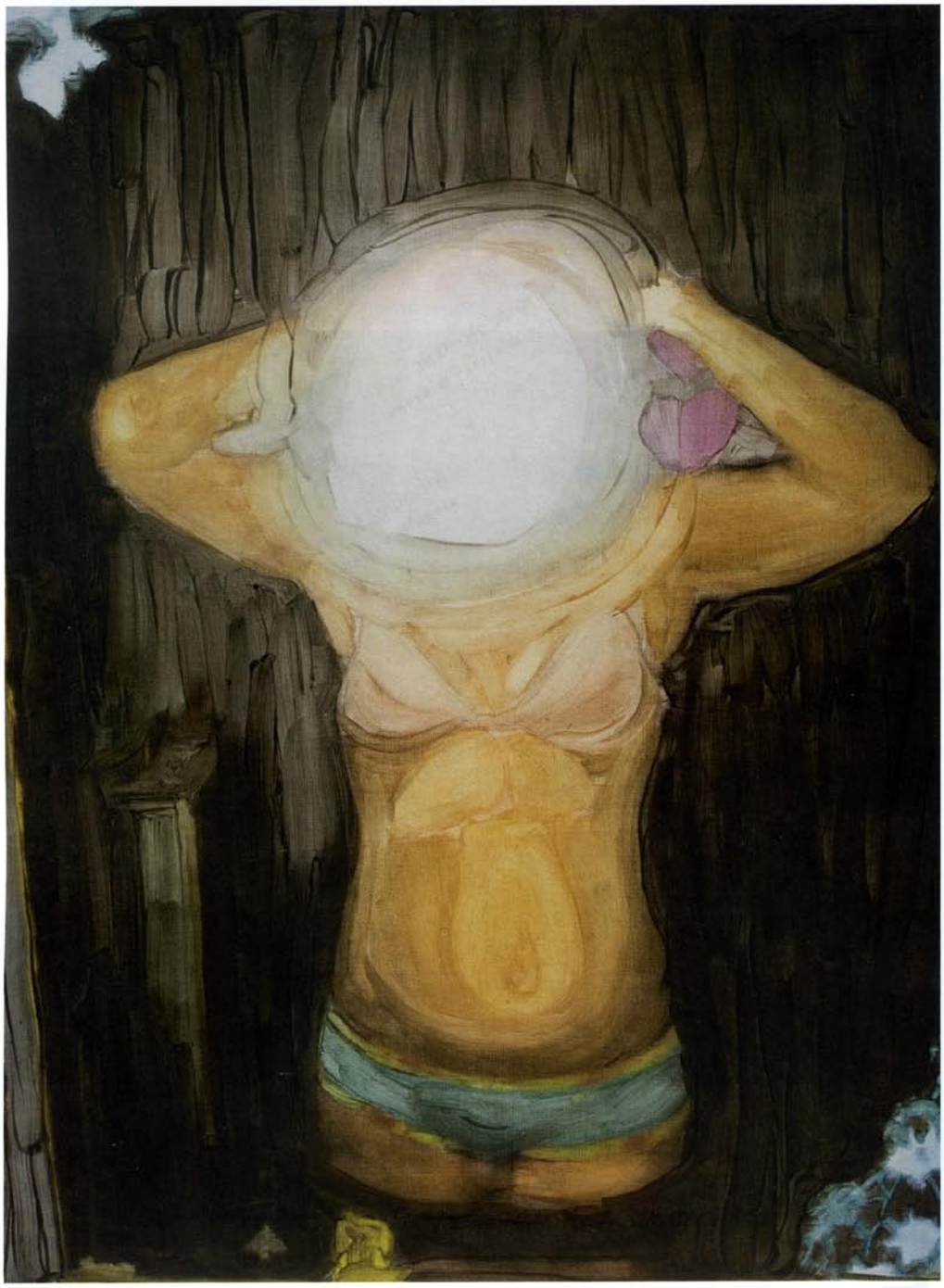
1. Evan Lee, *Stain #11*, 2003, digital C-print, 36 x 30." Images courtesy the artist and Monte Clark Gallery Vancouver/Toronto.

2. *Stain #10*, 2003, digital C-print, 30 x 36."

Erudite and exquisite images come easily to Vancouver artist Evan Lee, whose experimentations around photography present an eloquent reaction to the nature-versus-technology parallax of image making in the modern world. He is engaged, intelligent and patient in his subject choices as well as in his means of production, constantly seeking new approaches to new and different studies and new means to contrast his research and intelligence with his talent for seeing and depicting the world beautifully. Lee's pictures do not always rely on standard chemical or digital processes, since a drawing might result from a photo source as often as a photograph might come from the inspiration of a painting or found JPEG. A photograph might also not be a photograph, as in the case of his still lifes, which are made with a scanner tipped on its side.



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1. *Flasher #2*, 2009, giclée print, 14 x 11."

2. *Flasher #5*, 2009, giclée print, 14 x 11."

3. *Flasher #16*, 2009, giclée print, 14 x 11."

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As a photographer, Evan Lee has steadily moved away from reproduction. His most recent project is a painstaking recreation of an Associated Press aerial photograph of Sri Lankan boat refugees in Vancouver's harbour, where he has lowered the perspective to eye level using 3D-simulation technology. He is forgoing the benefits of multiples, which is the historical revolution of the camera, and making unduplicable but still photo-based images. In doing so he is pushing photoconceptualism further into its roots in history painting and Impressionism, even as he applies new technology to explicitly contemporary subjects. To look back at Evan Lee's work over the past decade is to be impressed at the one thing that remains constant through it all: change. Lee's art is about adapting.

And so it should be. The face of photography has changed so drastically and incontrovertibly since the dawn of photoconceptualism in the 1970s that for today's artists the term is hardly any kind of style or era; it is more than ever an ethos.

Photoconceptualism is seeing with a skeptic's eye the images that are taken at face value. Critical of an image that's taken for granted, Lee's pictures are skeptical, they are critical, but what keeps them afloat is that they are never cruel or reductive. When the propinquity of the day is to treat photographs as our second skin and self-portraits are evermore revealing in their flesh and in their accumulation, Lee's artwork challenges that gratuitous perspective. He moves to make images in discourse with, but outside of, the Flickr millions.

Today we are undeniably deep in avatar world. The cameramen are ubiquitous, inexpensively tinkering with their Adobe toolkits. What the photoconceptualist's pictures ask of us, now that we have camera, developing lab and publishing in our pocket, is to consider more closely this whole process. Or more specifically, photoconceptualism asks how this era of photography alters the purpose of the photograph in our life. *Every Part from a Contaflex Camera, disassembled by the artist during winter*, 1998, is Lee's inkjet print of a digital image of just that stuffing, the guts of the dead Contaflex resting in peace afloat on the black velvet void of an optical scanner bed. Digital technology is being used to literally deconstruct the old camera.

Born in Vancouver in 1975 and by natural inclination artistic, visual and adept with his hands, Lee ended up in the Fine Arts program at the University of British Colombia in the mid-1990s. By chance the artist happened to enroll in what might have been the last studio (+theory) class taught by Vancouver photoconceptualst Jeff Wall, who was already renowned here and abroad. Naturally, that short study with Wall left an indelible imprint on Lee's practice, as it did on the photography of Scott McFarland, Lee's friend and colleague in Wall's undergraduate class that year. After impressing Wall in class, McFarland and Lee quickly came to assist their former professor in his studio as well as gain the attention of Vancouver's curators and galleries. Lee and McFarland were both featured in Chris Brayshaw's seminal group show "Configuration" at Catriona Jeffries gallery in 1997. This was soon followed by representation at Monte Clarke's Gallery, where Roy Arden and Stephen Waddell also exhibit. That gallery has been Lee's consistent exhibition space ever since, and the work he's made has long been associated with the latter-day school of photoconceptualism, even while Lee is not strictly a photographer.

Without a doubt there's been a great affinity in Lee's work to the ideas surrounding Wall's pictures and lightboxes. It's in Lee's series

of photographs "Stain," 2003, that you can see him most directly quote his mentor's work in that they are of urban blight, tightly cropped photographs of rainbow oil puddles in East Vancouver alleyways—chemical pools, maybe harking to the complex baths of a colour photo lab. Like Wall's metonymic use of the bath, pool and other camera technologies as a stand-in motif for the artist himself, these alley stains are Lee's self-reflexive photographer-mirror images, too. Like Wall's pictures using the decaying Romanticism of the overpass to draw art historical parallels, Lee's "Stains" document happenstantial "drip paintings" in oil, like latter-day, mechanical, accidental Jackson Pollacks painted by broken-down vehicles. These photographs depict a synecdoche spill that refers back to other abstract art and to the likes of what we've seen recently in the Gulf of Mexico and everyday, down around the wharfs at Granville Island and other port cities. Lee's happen to be the leaking engine oil spills of a neighbourhood in disrepair.

From these oily Wall-ish pictures, Lee developed other photo projects in the same vein, and he has carried on the foot soldier, Lee Friedlander-esque documentary approach to street scenes and camera framing while also developing a rich in-studio practice. Perhaps what stayed with Lee from his experience studying with Jeff Wall was the maturity—Lee's images aren't wasteful, dandyish, corny or ever adolescent. And Lee's artworks share this deep metaphysical curiosity with Wall about every aspect of the photographic process, from subject finding to material choices in the final execution.

Some years after shifting his photo-based work away from traditional film and the darkroom lab back to drawing (timeless portraits in graphite of Chinatown matriarchs) and into the field of photo appropriation (some of his father-artist's fading Kodaks enlarged, etc), Lee also began experimenting with scanner beds and giclée printmaking.

The series "Stellar Curves," from 2005, those cosmically named drafting sabres, were Lee's first experiment on the scanner capturing their Platonic whorl and flow on the barren glass bed, reminiscent of Man Ray's Rayographs. Then came an eloquent, light-hearted series of Fred & Ginger-like ginseng roots. The "Ginsing Roots Studio" series works, scanned in a tribute to the many anthropomorphic shapes of these traditional herbal dietary supplements, are witty and beautiful, as different from each other as Bernd and Hilla Becher's water towers and blast furnaces, and speak to the Becher's interest in "buildings where anonymity is accepted to be the style." Especially meaningful to the Chinese community (Lee's roots) is the ginseng. The shapeliness of the root is considered something of a lifeline in the palmistry of gardening—the word itself means human-shaped root or root of mankind and the energy it provides when ingested is considered a stimulant, even an aphrodisiac. Among the ginseng roots Lee chooses, there look to be many beasts with two backs, figures with legs entwined in a dance of love, a writhing ballet under the cover of dark earth that is undeniably romantic.

By tipping the scanner on its side and positioning it on a pedestal next to a table, Lee was able to display a composition of objects against the scanner bed glass and create what he calls "captures," and a series titled "Dollar Store Still Life." As part of the Contemporary Art Gallery's 2010 exhibition "Triumph of the Carrot: The Persistence of Still Life," Lee's scans featured a sfumato of domestic objects burdened by intensely shallow depth of field in front of ink-black backgrounds. Scanning them gives these decorative tchotchkes a moonlit, nighttime feeling of departure. Lee's choice of plastic berries, seashells, decorative stones and fishing tackle bought cheaply is elevated by this evanescent, somnambulant quality; with the scanner as the camera, they look like Dutch masters' paintings.

Then Evan Lee hit upon the tactic for using his Epson 9880 giclée printer to nozzle the ink onto the backside of analogue photopaper, the side

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with the Kodak logo across it. The inkjet pigment, it turns out, resists the paper and settles in unintelligible pointillist blobs on the surface that Lee then takes a brush to and spreads around to finish the image. An additive of transparent acrylic paint helps to finally affix and dry the image as well as to actually tease out the velvety pigment through painterly action, all in order to arrive at the semblance of the original photograph.

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1. *Every Part from a Contaflex Camera, Disassembled by the Artist During Winter*, 1998, 2006, giclée print, 50 x 38."

2. *Ginseng Root Study #16*, 2005, giclée print, 7 x 5.5."

3. *Ginseng Root Study #1*, 2005, giclée print, 7 x 5.5."

Lee's first works using this unique giclée method employed (but not hired) Internet models for his "Flashers," 2009, a series of inkjet prints based on images Lee found on the Internet that young women take of themselves exposed in front of a bathroom mirror with their own digital cameras. Lee's "Flashers" addresses the controversial sex aesthetic online of self-made pornography, the privilege of the gaze in the era when explicit imagery has gone rampantly amateur and infinitely reproducible. It is never clear how much public exposure any of these young women thought their pictures would get, but there's no naïveté to the images—the poses are all naughty by nature. But do these trulls know the extent of their own infamy? Do they endorse it? Once the lab became an unnecessary middleman, the amateur photo endeavour exploded with cleavage and spread eagles. The line between sharing and exploitation has permanently blurred. Now our avatars on Facebook and other networking sites can share flagrant images and kinky information with people who might never otherwise know us—a kind of flashbulb celebrity in a high school-sized petri dish, where *Vanity Fair* tropes of the rich and famous can be adopted in photos to entertain a few, and every spread eagle that's uploaded is plenty shared over the online rhizome. In the fluid shapeliness of his brushstroke depicting the voluptuous naturals who are his models, Lee's collection of "Flashers" asks us to find in these tragic Internet beauties in our day what Edgar Degas's many images of his various "woman at her bath" works were to his era. Jeff Wall found his compositions by way of the "ersatz unity" of Manet's bourgeois scenes, and Lee finds in Degas's chambers and stages the provocations of his impromptu burlesques. Exposing the exposure, poeticizing the indecent and individualizing the slag reputation of these common pop-ups, Lee's amateur artist-models are webclicks and portal banners turned into balletic *étoiles*.

Photoconceptualists like Richard Prince and Thomas Ruff have also borrowed heartily from amateur porn to make hardcore art. Where Ruff and Prince and others have made series using extreme subject matter, Lee chooses the demurest louche models who send out images with their faces consciously obstructed behind flash glare bouncing off the mirror.

In the Victorian age, or so goes the history books, painters and novelists adapted to the invention of the camera and movie camera by eschewing realism and continuity for abstraction, conceptualism and disassembly on down through the decades. Photographer Paul Strand felt that the way for his medium to succeed as an art form was to avoid all imitations of prior painting—les beaux-arts styles—that for photography were "a meaningless mixture, not painting and certainly not photography," and

to embrace the new format's modernity. But like the mythical Ourorobus snake that swallows its own tail, fine art photography is now having to adapt and become abstract in response to the new realism of mass digital photography. Digitalism has made a salon of every home, every person.

In his prescient 1989 essay "Photography and Liquid Intelligence," Lee's professor Jeff Wall describes this revolution in image making as a movement away from a wet process to a dry process, "and in that movement, the historical consciousness of the medium is altered," he writes, finding metaphorical value in the aridity of the switch to digital film. To Wall's credit, the medium's alteration is visible everywhere in the proliferation of pictures online and in the metaphysics this has wrought in fine art photography.

Lee is present and acting for his medium's alteration; seen through his artwork, the changes to photography are all liberations. Lee might carry a few motifs or a technique forward with him from the last project to bridge a series, so after "Flashers" he went looking for more kinds of flashes, explosions, flares, other sorts of extreme exposure points, spotlights. And he wanted to depict the subject in the same unique giclée method on the back of Kodak paper. After hours Googling burning flags and mirror glares, he began to comb through aerial images of British Columbia forest fires. He started going into the provincial Forestry Service database looking for the right point of view and the right amount of fire. The resulting images are striking for their wonderful, swirling resemblance to the works of Emily Carr and Van Gogh. But these are painted from a bird's eye view looking down from above and not from the position of the believer on hands and knees on the tree-lined floor looking up. The weirdest quality of these pictures is how, from a distance or reproduced at a small scale, Lee's "Forest Fires (after found BCFS Aerial Photos)" series retains all their original photorealism—but up close there's not a single grain of the found photograph that hasn't been brushed like paint into existence. When I asked Lee why he thought it was that the photograph is still so present in the image when his giclée technique eliminates all the evidence of the printout, he said it was the aerialism of the composition. Nobody but a cameraman, he said, could ever take such an image at that helicopter height. The camera, then, is associated with flight like no painting could be. So no matter how impressinistically Lee paints the image, the perspective itself retains the trace of the original photograph. The only thing making these anything other than prints of photographs is the fact Lee had to paint them. The Epson blots the Kodak paper in an UltraChrome K3™ rainbow spill, like Ben-Day dots. And once he's started brushing the picture into existence, there's no turning back. Unlike in a painting where errors can be fixed, Lee has found no way to correct a mistake with this technique. He figures that each finished image goes through nine or ten giclée printouts and brush attempts to get the effect he's looking for. Each forest fire in the series is a practiced improvisation, a single session produces the whole picture like painting with a cloud.

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1. *Untitled (Stellar Curve) #9*, 2004, giclée print, 52.5 x 41."

2. *Forest Fire, Brookmere, BC (after found BCFS Aerial Photo)*, 2010, found photograph, unique manipulated pigment print on reverse of Kodak photographic paper, 29 x 38.5."

3. *Forest Fire, Kwoiek, BC II (after found BCFS Aerial Photo)*, 2010, found photograph, unique manipulated pigment print on reverse of Kodak photographic paper, 29 x 39."

Painters can often be cited as people obsessed with a single driving perspective, or their medium requires them to be in order to feature in the market. Robert Adams once said of photographers that "we try hard not to be sentimental, not to feel more emotion for a subject than it deserves." Perhaps this need for some detachment explains why Lee seeks variety and why he will move on once he feels he's communicated what he wants to from a subject. He has made highly composed images full of artifice and illusion, as well as working from his personal and family life. Paul Strand said that "your photography is a record of your living," and Lee has provided us with a wide-ranging and unsentimental autobiography. ∎

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