

Oil and Water: Michael Flomen, Evan Lee, and Laura Millard

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Michael Flomen, *Breakthrough* (2005). Photogram, selenium-toned gelatin silver print

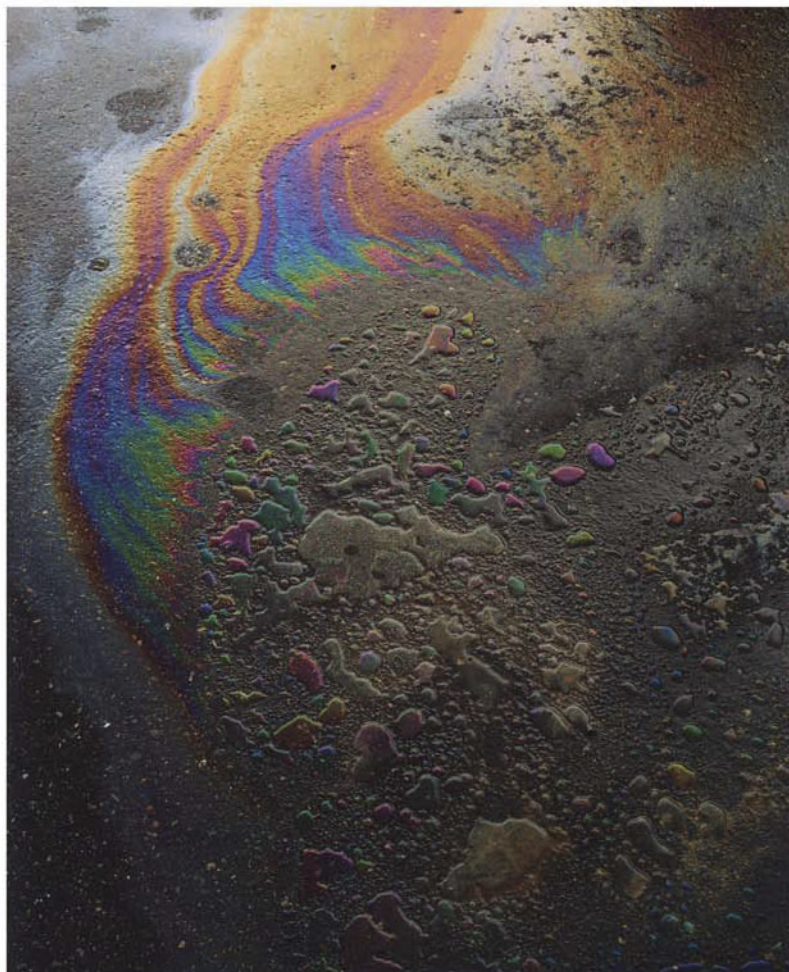
In myth and popular legend, water is the first mirror. The origins of photography, “the mirror with a memory,” are narrated visually from the same symbolic depths. Its creation story is thereby extended back in time, as Mary Price has noted, through metaphors that long predate the invention – she mentions Narcissus.¹ Closer to our times, we find a wealth of watery figures, from underwater swimmers to flooded graves. Reflecting pools and brimming eyes have been used as metaphors for photographic process and language, for seeing, feeling, and expressing through a lens. A rainy street contemplated through a spattered window – a field of refractions and reflections – can be taken as a photographic sign. A violent thunderstorm, watched through the same window, rehearses the birth of cinema.

With these themes and typologies in mind, we approach the work of Michael Flomen, Evan Lee, and Laura Millard and discover something quite different. Water is not a figure, but a medium-within-a-medium whose pure presence is expressed in apposite combinations: trace and touch; solitary poetics and cosmic spectacle; oil and water.

Michael Flomen’s fascination with the elements drives an intuitive process that would be inconceivable without his knowledge of photographic materials. He works without a camera, exposing large hand-made negatives by moonlight; he makes photograms of the shadows cast by snowflakes. These activities are solitary and mysterious. A piece of acetate loosely brushed with a photographic emulsion is submerged in a pail of water and exposed by the light of a firefly. This negative will be processed and later enlarged on black and white paper. Another negative will be prepared with the same energetic brushwork, then plunged into a pond where it will be flicked with light. Or, in the case of the photograms, a large piece of photographic paper will be unrolled on a frozen field in a snowstorm. The artist will wait nearby, listening to the particles hitting the paper, and when he judges the accumulation sufficient, he will flash light across the surface. A photogram is a negative; the tones are reversed. The path of the beam turns black; the snowflakes or icy crystals cast white shadows. Flomen is a master printer, so his treatment of the images that result from these improvisations draws everything possible from the materials – the shadows of real things, such as bubbles or blades of grass, co-mingle on these photographic surfaces with other realities, such as brush strokes.

In an image such as *Site* (2004), the forms suggest a great primordial soup – I see a beak and a human ear, and the bubbles form eyes that are looking back at me. In this image, I am lost in time; in others, I am lost in space. In *Breakthrough* (2005), there is no hint of scale, no signposting of the landscape. At first glance, its rounded peaks could be sand dunes or an ancient mountain range, recorded from a satellite. *Breakthrough* is a photogram. Knowing this changes everything. Now I am reading the features of the image in one-to-one correspondence with nature, as I would a graphite rubbing. The visual is supplemented imaginatively by touch.

Evan Lee’s *Stains* (2003) are urban phenomena, the brilliant discoveries of a *flâneur* with downcast eyes. Lee identifies the subject of this series as “pavement that is stained by oil, gas and other mixed fluids dripped from cars. When this pavement becomes wet from rain, the mixture of water and oil results in highly chromatic visual phenomenon known as *thin-film interference*.” Light reflected off the top surface – in this case, the oil slick – interferes with light reflected off the pavement forming rainbow-like colours. As Lee continues, “Amongst the urban debris – litter, pigeon feathers, pieces of wet newspapers, candy-wrappers, twigs and pebbles – the patterns go unnoticed, but photographed against the particulate nature of the worn asphalt, they seem to me to reflect the cosmic possibilities of the sky above.” It is useful to compare Lee’s image with Ernst Haas’s *Oil Spot* (1952), an image that was part of his shift from Europe to New York, and from black and white into colour. Haas included the



Evan Lee, *Stain #11* (2003), from the series *Stains*. Digital type C print

reflection of his body in the puddle, thereby establishing human scale and signing the work (and the place) with inspired subjectivity.

Lee does not work, or enter the work, in Haas's shadow. He collects these pieces of the heavens as found images, liberating them to the imagination. Crucially, he makes nothing of the chaotic realities of the environment. The works are placeless in space. Their affinities are with painting, and he describes them in painterly terms of autonomous, disinterested beauty: "The ground plane in these works is illusionistically transformed into an infinite space that has no perspectival logic, akin to notions in abstract and Far East painting."²

Laura Millard combines large format colour photographs of frozen lake and river ice with painting that "responds to the movement, surface and sense of space in each image."³ The process began with photographs in which Millard was exploring the shifts between micro and macro views. Her images captured air bubbles, frozen currents, and the marks made by skates – forceful elements that she immediately connected with drawing and painting, and subsequently began to mimic and counter by applying oil paint to the photographic surface. Into her all-over compositions, Millard secretes paint in drips and blended strokes; she also sprays and gestures with the brush. *Rupture* (2005) admits the force and fluidity of abstraction to a frozen moment. There is no contradiction, and, indeed, why should there be?

Millard credits Rosalind Krauss's insight that painting in the 1970s was being conditioned by photographic indexicality, effectively opening up a space for painting outside the strictures of its codes.⁴ Millard's work holds up a mirror to this innovation, thereby minimizing the importance that Krauss (following Benjamin?) places on the caption and claiming more space for painterly intervention. Critic Christian Giroux justly characterizes Millard's approach as "ecological, her miniature brushwork like a kind of ground cover."⁵ An ecosystem's survival depends on the interconnections of different organisms and cultural constructions. Flomen, Lee, and Millard understand the energy of these harnessed oppositions. They look to the earth and see the heavens. Oil and water become fire and ice.

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1 Mary Price, *The Photograph: A Strange, Confined Space* (Stanford, Cal.: Stanford University Press, 1994), 138.

2 Evan Lee, artist's statement, 20 May 2004, curatorial files, *Le Mois de la Photo à Montréal* 2005.

3 Laura Millard, artist's statement, gallery handout for the exhibition *Rhythm and Change: The Bow in Contemporary Art*, Glenbow Museum, Calgary, 2005.

4 Millard cites Rosalind Krauss, "Notes on the Index: Seventies Art in America (Part 2)," *October* 4 (fall 1977), in her artist's statement, curatorial files, *Le Mois de la Photo à Montréal* 2005.

5 Christian Giroux, "Laura Millard," *Canadian Art*, winter 2003, 89.