spot
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Distillations

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DAVID FOKOS
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Ansel Adams was fond of quoting a maxim of Steiglitz's: the purpose of fine art photography is to make an image that reveals "what you saw and felt." The feeling part, in his mind, was what made art photography different from ordinary documentation. David Fokos' exhibition exemplifies this maxim to the fullest. He talks about the first photograph he ever made that really expressed his feelings about the New England coast: "There wasn't any real subject matter — it was a photograph of a feeling."

Fokos' photographs are austere and minimalist and contain relatively few objects. But there is subject matter. The subject is the horizon, where sea and sky meet, in virtually all of the photographs in this exhibition True, this is a rather minimal subject: a mere line in most cases. But the variations within that theme that Fokos finds are what make the subject fascinating to him and to the viewer.

Incoming Ferry, Oak Bluff, Massachusetts, (1997), introduces the main theme of the show: sea and sky. This is one of the few images in which something obviously moves. The long exposure causes the ferry to become two or three slightly blurry lines, parallel to the horizon line. Rather than interrupting the viewer's contemplation of the still sea and the cloudless sky, the ferry becomes almost a part of the horizon itself. It is not recognizable immediately as a ferry, but rather, becomes an abstraction like the flat planes of sea and sky.

The theme of movement becoming stillness is a recurrent one. Fokos in his artist statement explains that his long exposures cause the waves of the ocean to average out to a sort of flat, still, totally calm-seeming sea. In *Daybreak, Chilmark, Massachusetts,* (1999), all we see are two rocks with mist around them and the horizon line. What we see as mist is really the average of the waves breaking on the rocks over several minutes. The waves become a blur, an abstract element, rather than discreet events, just as the moving ferry became two blurred lines. But even in this very minimal composition, Fokos does not omit his habit of directing the viewer's eye to the horizon: the forground rock is somewhat square, so that its sides point to the vanishing point on the horizon. The rock behind it, though, is resolutely round, with nothing rectilinear about it. This, again, is a recurrent theme: rigid geometry offset by softly curving, organic lines.

Two photographs, both of mooring rings in Boston Harbor, that particularly exemplify this contrasting of rigid rectilinear composition with organic-looking curves. The mooring rings cast dark, mirroring shadows on the perfectly still water, the rings and their shadows creating oblong shapes enclosing the concrete rounds, the whole effect being somewhat like cells with nuclei. In the background *of Mooring Rings, Study #1, Boston, Massachusetts,* (1997), we see a very misty bridge and some trees, in light values against the sky, again, where the sky and water meet. In *Mooring Rings, Study #3, Boston, Massachusetts,* (1998), that line between water and sky disappears, as the mist apparently obliterates the horizon, and all we see to mark the horizon is a few misty trees. Again, Fokos' subject seems to be the horizon: its appearing and disappearing, the objects that mark the line of the horizon and the different tonalities that can happen where sky meets ocean.

A few compositions break some of the rules that Fokos has seemed to establish in his signature seascapes. One is *Missing Rail, Boston, Massachusetts,* (1997). This image shows a strikingly different reltion-ship between sea and sky: the sea is totally white, and the sky begins at a very dark line at the horizon. The whole composition is radically bisected by a guardrail

that swoops from the lower right to the middle left of the picture. Perfectly crisp droplets of fog or rain adhere to the smooth metallic rail; and we see every detail of the texture of the concrete below the rail. One part of the rail is missing, conveniently, so that the composition does not become too static. This is perhaps the most dynamic of the compositions in the show; furthermore, it is a masterpiece of exposure and printing and tonality.

The most idiosyncratic image is *Star-row Drive, Boston, Massachusetts,* (1998), where Fokos photographed one end of the underside of a freeway bridge arch. Here the "horizon" is the bottom of the arch, where the arch meets the ground. The lines converging to this horizon come from above, down to meet it, rather than from below, curving upward, as in all the other compositions. This image almost seems to be meant as a joke in the context of the all the other pictures, a sort of weird upside-down version of the rest. It is a delightful comment on the difference between man-made landscapes and landscapes made by the earth.

Fokos uses a slightly wide angle lens (210mm), a very small aperture and long exposures to make 8" x 10" negatives, which in the early 19905 he began to process digitally. He does all of his manipulations of the image digitally; then the paper is expoed using a laser printer to make his 36" by 36" prints. Fokos prints on color paper to get the warm tonalities he prefers. This beautiful, subtle tonal quality is very evident in such prints as *Two Rocks, Chilmark, Massachusetts,* (1995).

Fokos photographed one place — the coast of Massachusetts — almost exclusively for 20 years. This dedication to one place and project illustrates the value of focused attention on one subject or place. A person who can sit still for long enough to make a long exposure is also a person who can be patient enough to photograph the same beloved landscape for many years without getting bored of it. These are unusual qualities in the current art scene, which appears to be almost solely about novelty and pop culture. Fokos' meditative, quiet compositions may be a sign, though, of better things to come.

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