

Reading the Surface
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I've saved a photograph by Jochen Lempert as my desktop background so that I'll look at it every day. The black and white image is very simple, almost abstract. Lempert has captured small, light coloured pieces of matter floating in front of vegetation. All of this is out of focus and it's hard to discern what the floating things are. In some places their form is slightly clearer, almost in focus but far from crisp. They could be tiny flowers drifting past in the breeze or equally they could be small insects, circling on a still, hot summer's evening. Lempert's photograph has caught them suspended. They form a pattern across the image, in varying shades of grey. Everything is soft and blurred and the visible grain of the film he uses adds to this effect. Yet, like in many of his photographs, this evidently once moving scene has been caught in a harmonious composition.

Of course waiting for the right moment is nothing new to photography; the click of the shutter at the fortuitous time has always been key, termed by Henri Cartier-Bresson the decisive moment. Yet the significance of the moments Lempert is capturing is not always obvious or apparent. This is no high definition high-speed nature photography, revealing secrets of anatomy or perfectly freezing movement. Perhaps that is why I want to look at this image everyday, to consider and reconsider what it is that Lempert is pointing towards.

Lempert trained as a biologist and started taking photographs full time in the 1990s. He always works in black and white and prints his photographs with analogue methods. His subject matter is an extension of his former career; he finds images in the natural world, although often within a humble, everyday realm. Rather than the spectacular or the exceptional, Lempert shows the fascinating, subtle correlations and patterns that occur on a regular basis. The photographs that Lempert makes feel like a celebration of visual phenomena but also ambiguous propositions. They are being taken for the sake of themselves, they are not here to illustrate a point. They feel autonomous, they do not prompt the need for language to explain or expand the where, the what, the why.

Although it is possible to appreciate Lempert's individual images online, his work is best seen in the gallery. Here he arranges photographs, often taken years apart, to bring out visual similarities and quirky comparisons of the observable world. His prints could be seen as lacking in tonal drama, yet these shades of grey make his work distinct. Rather than feeling nostalgic of a bygone golden era of black and white photography, they feel simultaneously contemporary and anachronistic; they are far from the constant streams of saturated colour, sharp focused, high depth of field images we encounter today through Instagram or Twitter. The greys are

shades of a photocopy, they are the greys of concrete and tarmac, the greys of a dirty city pigeon. The greys of rain falling on a body of water.

Since its invention, photography has been an elusive medium to categorise. It emerged from scientific and technical developments, yet has always been associated with being a 'natural' process. The first commercially produced photography book was Henry Fox Talbot's *Pencil of Nature*. Whilst photography strove to be recognised as an art through borrowing stylistically from painting, it also found a practical application as it was deemed able to more accurately reproduce the forms and visual surfaces of the world.

Photographer, botanist and friend of Talbot, Anna Atkins created cyanotypes as a way to record the forms of different algae she was studying. In 1843 she published *Photographs of British Algae: Cyanotype Impressions* a book that is credited as being the first book illustrated with photographs. In homage to Atkins pioneering use of the photographic process, Lempert has created photograms from images of Atkins cyanotypes on his computer screen. They are impressions of impressions of impressions.

Aesthetically Roe Ethridge's work is a stark contrast to Lempert's, yet his images pose similarly tantalising provocations for the viewer to unpick. And as Lempert's photographs are influenced and shaped by his former profession, Ethridge's are intertwined with his work as a commercial photographer.

Ethridge creates glossy and saturated colour photographs. Some are staged, others documentary, but the boundaries between the two often blur so that such taxonomic categories begin to feel irrelevant. He often reuses images he has created for his commercial work, appropriates images from newspapers or uses stock photography. In bringing together these different forms of photographs he draws attention to the fact that changing their context alters how their significance is understood.

His staged portraits and still-lives might be from the pages of a fashion magazine. He uses models, beautiful women, made-up and looking glamorous, but their beauty becomes problematic. The lighting makes their make-up and hair too glossy, their expressions and poses are exaggerated. Their smiles and stares are confrontational, almost aggressive.

In his body of work *Sacrifice Your Body*, published as a book in 2014, Ethridge addresses ideas of American identity. A woman poses with an American football, in a leather skirt, with images of America footballs creating a pattern in the background. *Sacrifice You Body* is apparently a phrase soccer moms shout to their offspring as encouragement. However Ethridge's observations do not feel particular to America, but more generally about the artifice of national identity and image.

Similarly to Lempert's, Ethridge's photographs are all about the way we respond to and read the visual surfaces of the world. In one photograph brown and yellowing fallen leaves are scattered across a bright turquoise background. They partially cover a slightly scuffed logo, which consists of a pair of dark blue fin shapes and white lettering outlined in black. The lettering reads: SURFACE.

In a sequence of four photographs from *Sacrifice Your Body*, an empty Bonne Maman jam jar sits on the edge of a picnic table in the sunshine. The print of the lid, the iconic gingham fabric symbolising traditional rural France, is placed upon a wooden table with peeling paint that speaks of its authentic rustic quality. Yet by photographing them they are both made equivalent and obscured behind this further layer of representation. In the third and fourth photograph the jam jar is seen being knocked off the table by a lime green Nike branded American football. Is this meant to represent a clash of cultures, or was the jam jar simply a tool for target practice? A few pages on the ball appears again, this time lodged in a flowering shrub. There are layers of narratives in Ethridge's images, but there is never a straightforward way to interpret them.

Ethridge's photographs are far more antagonistic than Lempert's, as if he is constantly resisting a certain, easy aesthetic. Another series documents men fishing in an idyllic sunset. A flash has illuminated reflective signs in the foreground, distracting from the potential perfection with their messages: Caution Manatee Area, Beware of Alligators. What could have been a promotional photograph for a travel brochure has become something else.

Whilst Lempert creates harmony with naturally occurring phenomena, Ethridge creates it with the artificial; a close-up of dried noodles echoes the curled flex of a yellow telephone. Yet both piece together messages by sequencing images they have collected of the surface of the world.