

An impossible analogue – on the photography of Joe Clark

by Thomas Cuckle

The photographic subjects Joe Clark chooses for his works are diverse. They have included incandescent petrol stations, geometric solids in styrofoam, silhouetted palm trees, city skylines and sun-bleached sticks. But the focus of Clark's photographs is often not where it initially seems to be. The content of Clark's Seagrass series – eight compositions of seagrass fragments superimposed on Adriatic sea views – is not the flora and environs of a Croatian island, but rather the categories of the camera and the visual condition of contemporary image making.

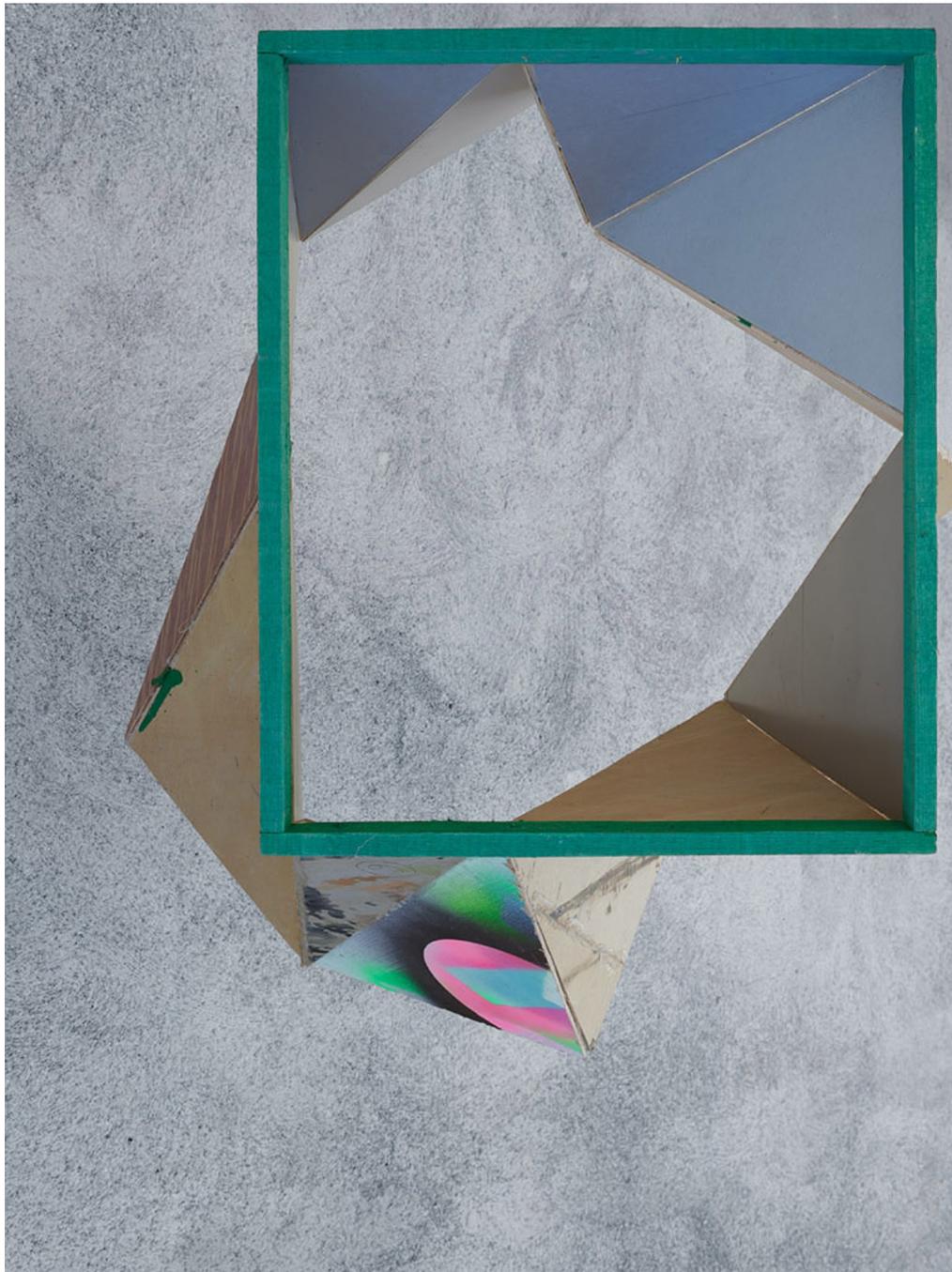
In Vilem Flusser's 1983 text 'Towards a Philosophy of Photography', Flusser proposes a concept of the 'apparatus' of photography in which the autonomy of the photographer is subordinated to the 'camera program' – the rules of photography inherent to the camera. Flusser goes so far as to say that the apparatus of the camera contains every possible image that can be made; the photographer's role is to discover the hidden possibilities of the camera within a predetermined set of 'categories'. The photographer then is not really interested in the world which is seen through the camera's lens, but rather in discovering the possibilities within the 'camera program' itself.

While the objects that Clark points his camera at are ever changing, it is this idea of photography 'apparatus' which he is primarily concerned with. The construction of the Seagrass series – the set up and immediate revelation of its artifice – functions as a formal unraveling of contemporary image making. The compositions which may be assumed at first viewing to be the result of a Photoshop collage, are actually produced by a physical composition – the organic fragments were fixed with sea water to a glass sheet held in front of the camera plane and lit to control their tonal values. The works appear to be abstract compositions and are revealed to be something else. But the illusion never resolves itself to become clearly one thing or another and so the opposing elements of virtual image making and the physical reality of its production are held in tension, the images oscillate between possibility and impossibility.

Central to this tension is the idea of the photograph as an analogue of reality. In *Sunset Sequence* the artist sets out to produce a true analogue image, to capture a moment in space and time and the photographer's spatial relationship to it. In this work the sky is photographed from three angles, each time with a mirror



Joe Clark, *Sunset Sequence #3*, 2013, C-type, 42 x 56 cm



Joe Clark, *Frame #2*, 2013, C-type, 57 x 46 cm

placed parallel to the camera plane. The mirror provides information about what is happening behind the camera: in one shot the mirror shows the darkest part of sky, while behind it the sun is starting to set; in a second the horizon both in the mirror and beyond it is a hazy dusk; in the third shot the camera faces part of the sky where night has already fallen while the mirror shows the fringe of the sunset itself. But in this attempt at spatial location, the specific locality is lost – the shots could have been taken almost anywhere and on any day. Thus the subject of each image becomes not the locality, but rather the structure that Clark set up to capture it – the subtext of the work is that against all intentions to the contrary, a photographic analogue of the world is an impossibility.

This idea of an 'analogue' image – one which represents something existing in real space – finds its opposite in the proliferation of images produced via a virtual space. Now well established, computer technologies have allowed the advertising industry to partially replace the discipline of product photography with virtual rendering and have brought the visual tropes of 3D modeling into popular consciousness. Clark has an ongoing fascination with the tension between the analogue and the virtual in the photographic image: in his *Poly* series the artist creates from styrofoam a series of seemingly impossible objects – such as might be produced through extrusion and twisting in 3D modeling software – and picturing them suspended as though outside of the rules of gravity and real world lighting. In *Frames* Clark goes a step further, composing shots of a series of planar structures in parallel to the objects' inbuilt surrounds. The result

is a kind of perspectival flattening that echoes the primary mode of vision in a 3D environment. In a virtual environment anything is possible; in the two series *Poly* and *Frames* Clark crudely attempts to manifest this world of possibilities in physical reality. The illusion soon gives way – these polygons are far from the infinite smoothness of the virtual image, they are rough hewn from materials that have clues to their former uses and method of construction.

Through the interplay of the analogue and the virtual, of authenticity and artifice, Clark takes as his subject the photography apparatus – the idea that the 'camera program' predetermines the possible images a photographer can make – yet the contents of his photographs are highly significant. The titles that Clark employs clearly describe the things that he points his camera at: 'Sunset Sequence', 'Seagrass', 'Frames'. There is the idea of a universal photographic subject – the word 'sunset' has many connotations ranging from the sublime to the kitsch, but there is no room for confusion in what is meant by the term; a sunset is a sunset. Just as the camera is for Flusser a machine for making symbols, the contents of Clark's photographs can be understood as a series of symbolic stand-ins.

In the *Seagrass* series the photographic contents can be understood through the idea of vision – and its supposed analogue in photography – mediating between bodily experience and interior life. The layer of curved organic fragments at first glance appears to be arranged by chance, but keeping in mind the idea of the camera as a symbol-making machine, the curves seem to stand in relationship to

one another as hieroglyphs or letters of an unknown language. The shapes also have a visual relationship to formations which are found in the human eye: small floating fragments which ordinarily go unnoticed, but become apparent against a uniform backdrop (such as a blue sky), and perhaps come into optical focus only during a moment of mental abstraction. There is then, in the images, a sense of introspection: the seagrass can be seen as a stand-in for a layer of language or of interior imagery which comes into mental focus through transcendent thought. In turn the seductive gradient of the sky brings to mind imagery of exotic holiday destinations – supposedly the only place where mental abstraction is really possible – and their connotations of escape. But an understanding of this photographic image of the Adriatic must be tempered by the idea of the democratization of photography: the consumer is incited to travel by photographic images that give the promise of a bodily experience – on arrival they seek to capture their bodily experience through rephotographing the advertising image. The motifs of sky and seagrass can be understood then as symbolic stand-in for vision as a mediator between bodily experience and interior life.

It is no co-incidence that both Sunset Sequence and the Seagrass series include romanticised imagery of the sky. In Sunset Sequence there are layers of gradients from blue into light purple, from mauve into a brooding orange, from dark blue into deep purple. A similar colour palette exists in Seagrass: muted gradients of blue and yellow, with the dark, rich line of the Adriatic Sea along the bottom of the frame. It is the same gradient which has reoccurred in Clark's recent works as the backdrop

to palm trees in a A Tree. A Sunset and in Bisected Field. The seductive gradients Clark employs directly reference not only advertising imagery of exotic locations, but the colour gradient as a visual 'meme' – an isolated trend which spreads with explosive speed before disappearing just as quickly – identifiable amongst contemporary artists at the moment. The Seagrass series is a formal reflection on a certain tendency in contemporary art which can be characterized by a fascination with surface – high gloss finishes, flat planes and aggressively vibrant colour palette – and the use of spatial or digital collage to combine disparate artifacts of visual culture.

Clark's critiques of different modes of image production are characterized by a wholehearted occupation of their conditions. In Sunset Sequence the artist attempts to capture a temporal and spatial relationship to the setting sun; in Frames and Poly he tries to create physical analogues of virtual forms and ways of seeing. The Seagrass series occupies a mode of production in contemporary art making today which is engaged with the erasure of symbolic relations in images, an attempt to produce an anti-analogue of a sign-signifier experience of reality. In each attempt the idea or mode of production that Clark occupies is shaken, as its artifice is revealed each approach to image making is momentarily laid bare. As it turns out, the analogue is impossible.

Images © Joe Clark,
Courtesy Workplace Gallery & XPO Gallery



Joe Clark, Seagrass #3, 2013, Giclee, 34 x 42.5 cm