

MIKE GRILL

JAMIE TOLAGSON / Immovable Objects

On first glance, Mike Grill's photographs seem to show us nothing we don't already know. While this might seem a common enough facet of contemporary art, and certainly of contemporary photography, Grill's relation to this trend is largely deceptive. Pictures that lack the subjects we normally associate with aesthetic experience may be de rigueur among today's artists, but pictures that avoid pointing to that lack—as a subject in itself—are more rare. Grill belongs in this latter, more elusive camp. His subjects—staid, average, unremarkable—do not so much congratulate us on our ability to aestheticize those things we might normally condemn as “banal,” as make us doubt our use of the term in the first place, to describe anything. Artist Robert Irwin said, “Seeing is forgetting the name of the thing one sees,” and John Cage suggested that “If something is boring after two minutes, try it for four,”¹ two statements that could serve equally well as introductions to Grill's work.

Sponge Composition, a diminutive work from 2005, demonstrates this way of seeing. On first glance we seem to comprehend the limits of the picture's content. A light blue cellulose sponge sits atop a dust-strewn section of similarly colored concrete. What looks like daylight hits the sponge from the left, and a



Mike Grill, *Sponge Composition*, 2005. Inkjet print, 36 x 46 cm.
Courtesy the artist and Jeffrey Boone Gallery, Vancouver

scattering of small objects (a chunk of curled plastic, some flecks of dried paint, a small piece of knotted twine) lie scattered nearby. The primary aesthetic effect of the whole seems to reside in the very close tonal and chromatic relationships between the sponge and the concrete, the one seeming to morph slowly into the other. But prolonged attention to the image yields more. What initially seemed to be an unmodulated ground is actually awash in stains and spillages, their flattened patterns surrounding and encasing the sponge as if in the suspended liquid of a microscope slide. The curled bodies of several deceased pill bugs, or “roly-polys,” lie camouflaged among these patterns, their minute forms barely large enough to cast a shadow. In the lower left of the frame, an ambiguous rectangular shape (that might be the edge of a concrete support) confounds our initial impression of the picture as a flat field of action, its presence echoed by a similarly perplexing wedge-like object (that could be a bicycle part) in the frame’s upper right.

Most interesting of all, the sponge is flanked by two extremely transitory and ephemeral traces of itself. To the left, an “imprint” of its former resting place on the concrete (the sponge has recently been moved, possibly by the photographer himself) and to the right, its own sharply delineated shadow. The imprint is, in essence, a fragile form of photogram (a photographic image made without the use of a lens) and will exist only briefly before being re-absorbed into the surrounding texture of its environment. The shadow will remain visible for an even shorter period of time, gradually elongating over the course of the day until the sunlight that makes its existence possible disappears from view and it too fades back into its ground.

While these last two elements of Grill’s work may be elegant proof of his self-reflexivity as an artist working within photography, they have the potential to foreclose our experience of the pictures themselves—the temptation being to label Grill as yet another artist making “photography about photography,” and to then hunt diligently through the rest of his oeuvre for telling visual correspondences between his subject matter and the photographic process. (To stop looking at the work, in other words, and to start requisitioning it.) Grill thwarts this process by taking shrewd advantage of the disruptive possibilities

¹“In Zen they say: If something is boring after two minutes, try it for four. If still boring, try it for eight, sixteen, thirty-two, and so on. Eventually one discovers that it’s not boring but very interesting.” Richard Kostelanetz, *John Cage (ex)plain(ed)*, (Farmington Hills, MI: Schirmer Books, 1996), 21.

offered up by his camera's inability to see "in the round," corralling his three-dimensional subjects into perplexingly ambiguous two-dimensional relationships that are then fixed by the camera in a state of perpetual fragmentation. As Grill states, these fixed relationships

... stick, like a thorn in the eye, frustrating the wish to see or to rest the eye on the harmonious artwork. They are a constant distraction from the logical space of the picture. This dynamism, however, is what allows the picture to achieve a kind of life or form of its own, something that articulates the dead space of the picture and makes it come alive or go beyond the ability of the viewer to fix permanently upon it. This is not the metaphysical beyond. This is the very physical thing that can't be gotten beyond. This is the point when the imagination appears to lose its freedom. When the imagination is confronted by something that goes beyond it, imagination then jumps over its own limit by representing to itself the inaccessibility of the idea, and by making this very inaccessibility something that is present and sensible in nature. It is what I would call a picture's visual language, or for lack of a better term, its spirit.

In Grill's newest photographs, a suite of thirteen black and white images taken on Vancouver's North Shore, the manicured greenery of the city's suburban neighbourhoods (hedges, lawns, ornamentals,) the omnipresent "natural" growth of its coastal mountains (Douglas fir, Western Red cedars), and the numerous roadways connecting the two are juxtaposed to subtle effect. In an uncharacteristic move, Grill has grouped ten of these images together into a single work, simply entitled *North Shore*. The middle-to-far distance of these pictures is claimed by the dense coniferous forests of the North Shore mountains, while the foreground plays stage to a variety of private and civic landscaping efforts. A modest stand of bamboo emerges from beneath a group of low-hanging power cables to make its way cautiously out onto a residential street. The brutally topped limbs of an ailing fruit tree explode with defiant shoots of new growth. An immense, manicured cyprus hedge runs like a retaining wall through two adjacent properties, blocking neighbour from neighbour. To all appearances, these juxtapositions are not employed as stepping stones to allegory, symbolism or social critique, but simply *pictured*, as things in themselves.²

For viewers accustomed to an unrelenting “rhetoric of purposefulness”³ in their contemporary art, the large amount of space allotted here for individual interpretation may be cause for consternation. But as in all of Grill’s work, our initial impression will expand significantly upon prolonged viewing (what Ed Ruscha called the *Huh? Wow!* art experience, as opposed to the more ubiquitous *Wow! Huh?*)⁴ leading us away from that which we thought we knew by way of the very objects we thought most knowable.⁵

In *Hedgerow*, the largest of the new works, the scattered subjects of *North Shore* are compressed into a singular image of dense formal complexity. Six young cedars, each about five feet high, are huddled together on the periphery of a cleared lot. To their left is the bulldozed root system of an older tree, and to their right a single pine, partially concealed by mounds of piled up earth. Further back, beyond the lot’s perimeter, are several two-story buildings typical of a light industrial zone, and in the far distance, the snow capped peaks of the Pacific Range.

The presence of the young cedars is perplexing. How long have they been here? The weeds at their base suggest that they are not new arrivals, yet the trees are still young. If they are remnants of a former development, why have they been so carefully avoided by the demolition process? If they are the beginning of a new development, why are there no further signs of activity on the lot—no cement mixers, no construction tape? What, exactly, are they doing here? The question nags, as does Grill’s spatial positioning of the trees themselves.

Immediately in front of the cedars is a small boulder whose shape and tonality (the bright midday sun makes it appear pure white) is clearly echoed by two similarly-sized slabs of white wall on the buildings in the middle distance, the three points

²“That the subject is called banal, because it is judged on the idea that it is ordinary, is a problem for people who think that the higher can only be experienced through the extraordinary or the meaningful, and, as well, for those apologists who because of their fetish for meaning claim that the ordinary is really extraordinary as a way to find meaning in the everyday. The extraordinary is all around us. It’s just that, in the end, it’s not very extraordinary. Most of the time a thing, really is just a thing. As Beckett said, ‘no symbols where none intended.’” Mike Grill in correspondence with the author, 2009.

³“‘High Art’ photography, good or bad, generally invokes a rhetoric of purposefulness, of use, as ruthless (and self-justifying) as advertising’s or journalism’s. Each image its own exit strategy, moving you along.” Peter Culley, “Evan Lee’s Elective Affinities,” *Evan Lee Captures* (Vancouver: Presentation House Gallery, 2006), 17.

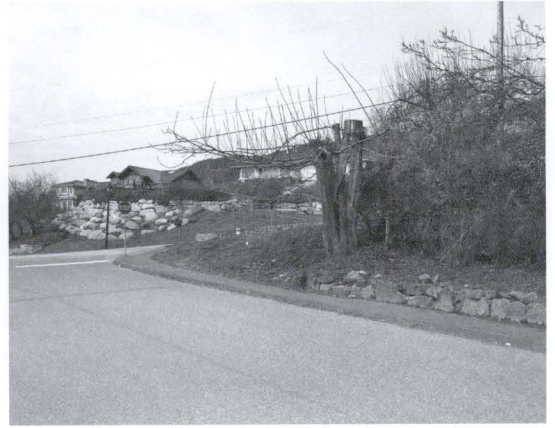
⁴Dave Hickey, *Air Guitar* (Los Angeles, CA: Art Issues Press, 1997), 62.

⁵Contrast this with the experiential *retraction* that occurs in the viewing of much current large-format colour photography. An initial jolt of scale, colour and tactility, followed by rapidly diminishing returns and the depressing realization that the picture’s instantaneous spectacularity may have constituted the full extent of the photographer’s ambition.

forming a triangular perimeter which contains the cedars, pine, and uprooted tree. Grill flattens the considerable distances contained within this perimeter by placing near and far into problematic relationships with one another that many photographers would simply read as “wrong.”⁶ In Grill’s two-dimensional reading of the scene, the tops of the two cedars on the right merge helplessly with the birch trees at the rear of the lot, while the distant pine, because of its precarious contact with the cedars at far right, projects forward in space, becoming, in essence, “one of the group.” The tip of the tallest plant intrudes messily into the monochrome-like purity of the cloudless sky, and its point-of-entry becomes a distractive element to the eye, which returns to it again and again in hope of resolution—the repeated failure of which compels a more prolonged engagement with the work itself.

In his willful disruption of such elements, Grill recognizes, and subverts, the limits of his chosen medium. He knows that the three-dimensional world he aims his camera at will not survive the journey into two dimensions, that it will become something much smaller, more compromised and contingent. This irretrievable loss cuts across the entire spectrum of photographic reproduction, and is just as true of the grainy twilight exposures of Robert Frank as it is the macroscopic enlargements of Thomas Ruff. Within this apparent weakness lies one of the medium’s most irreducible, and least understood strengths. In his newest work, Grill demonstrates a profound understanding of the possibilities inherent in this paradox.

⁶ John Baldessari famously lampooned this conservative tendency in his photo-canvas *Wrong*, in which the artist is seen proudly breaking the established rules of “good” picture making by posing directly in front of palm tree, which appears to grow directly out of his head.



Mike Grill, *North Shore*, 2008. Inkjet prints, 27.9 x 35.6 cm, Courtesy the artist and Jeffrey Boone Gallery, Vancouver

