

DIANA LYN ROBERTS

Ansen Seale: Capturing Possible Realities

The history of modern art, and photography in particular, is fraught with theoretical treatises and arguments. Art photographers spent the first half of the Twentieth Century establishing aesthetic and intellectual legitimacy and the second half carving a niche in the market place and institutions. Much of art theory seems to have a sort of half-life, a point at which it becomes so abstracted from the visual image that it loses a good chunk of its relevance and starts to decay chaotically into random parcels of meaning. Relativism rules the day in our vaguely defined “postmodern” context, and the plethora of arguments both for and against digital technology seems to blur the boundaries even more. After all is said and done, published and debated, the pure visual impact of a photographic image carries its artistic value. San Antonio photographer Ansen Seale explores those spaces in between theory, technology, and image, maintaining an edge of pure formalism in his most recent body of work.

For the past several years, Seale has worked with a camera of his own invention, creating images that challenge the viewer’s sense of visual orientation even as they appeal to our sense of abstraction. The classic photographic paradox occurs; we know that at some level the camera is capturing something tangible, real and recognizable but we also know that our perception of it is manipulated at many different levels. Seale exploits this relationship, giving us a recognizable subject to latch onto, then subverting that recognition by juxtaposing it with things we can’t readily accommodate. The figure/ground relationship is somehow flattened; shapes and shadows are distorted in irrational ways, and objects are simultaneously compressed and extended.

Like any other form of abstraction, these images remove the subject from their normal context and form to communicate something more symbolic, expressive, or intangible than a documentary image. Seale isn’t reinventing subjective photography; he’s just developed a specific means of exploring it. Part of the equation, as always, is a manipulation of the viewer’s perception. The other part is his digital slit-scan camera.

According to Seale, “For the most part, photographers have applied their craft to the imitation of the real world. The camera has been used to capture a frozen slice of time, arresting a single instant from its place along the flow of the time line. Rather than suspending a single moment, my photography examines the passage of time. The horizontal axis of the image is rendered as a time exposure. A single sliver of space is imaged over an extended period of time, with moving objects inserting themselves into the data stream at different speeds and directions. Counter to classic photography, still objects are blurred and moving bodies are rendered clearly. Instead of mirroring reality as we know it, this camera records a hidden reality. The apparent distortions all happen

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in-camera as the image is being recorded. There is no Photoshop manipulation.”

In *All Things Must Pass*, a stream of people in various degrees of distortion fills the elongated, horizontal picture plane. In the upper third, the figures appear evenly spaced at different heights, but seemingly single-file. In the lower half the figures are more scattered. The visual surface is unified by horizontal bands but, contrary to typical digital stripes, these are somewhat organic, smooth, even painterly. Running the length of the vertical center is what appears to be a loaded-brush smear of thick, white impasto with a bit of black here and there originating (or ending) with a stooped figure on the far right. Upon closer inspection, the black spots can be identified as eyes and a moustache at various points along the stripe. Since the camera records moving objects clearly and stationary objects as blurred (the reverse of what we typically expect), the gentleman standing still becomes an abstracted formal element except when he turns his head to watch the people passing in front of him.

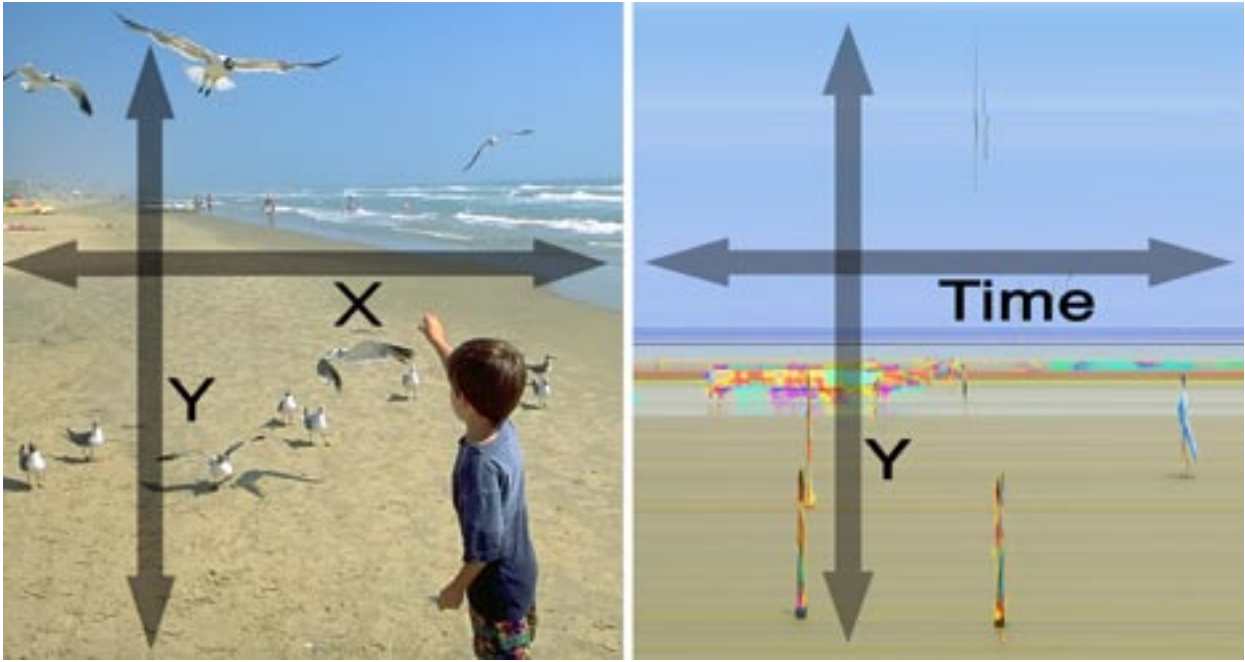
The typical photograph has 4 implied dimensions. The vertical (Y) and horizontal (X), depth (Z) implied by perspective, and the passage of time, which is implied by movement. Seale’s images are not manipulated in any typical sense. His camera just records time a little differently. Originally designed as a panoramic camera to create virtual tours on the Internet, Seale discovered that by altering some of the features he could “exchange the horizontal spatial dimension (X) with the implied dimension of time. This is done by imaging only Y, the vertical line of pixels of the same subject over and over again, up to a hundred times per second. The internal processor of the camera arranges these pixel lines side by side, in effect building up the second dimension of the picture plane (X).”

For all the technical discussion, Seale is mostly



All Things Must Pass

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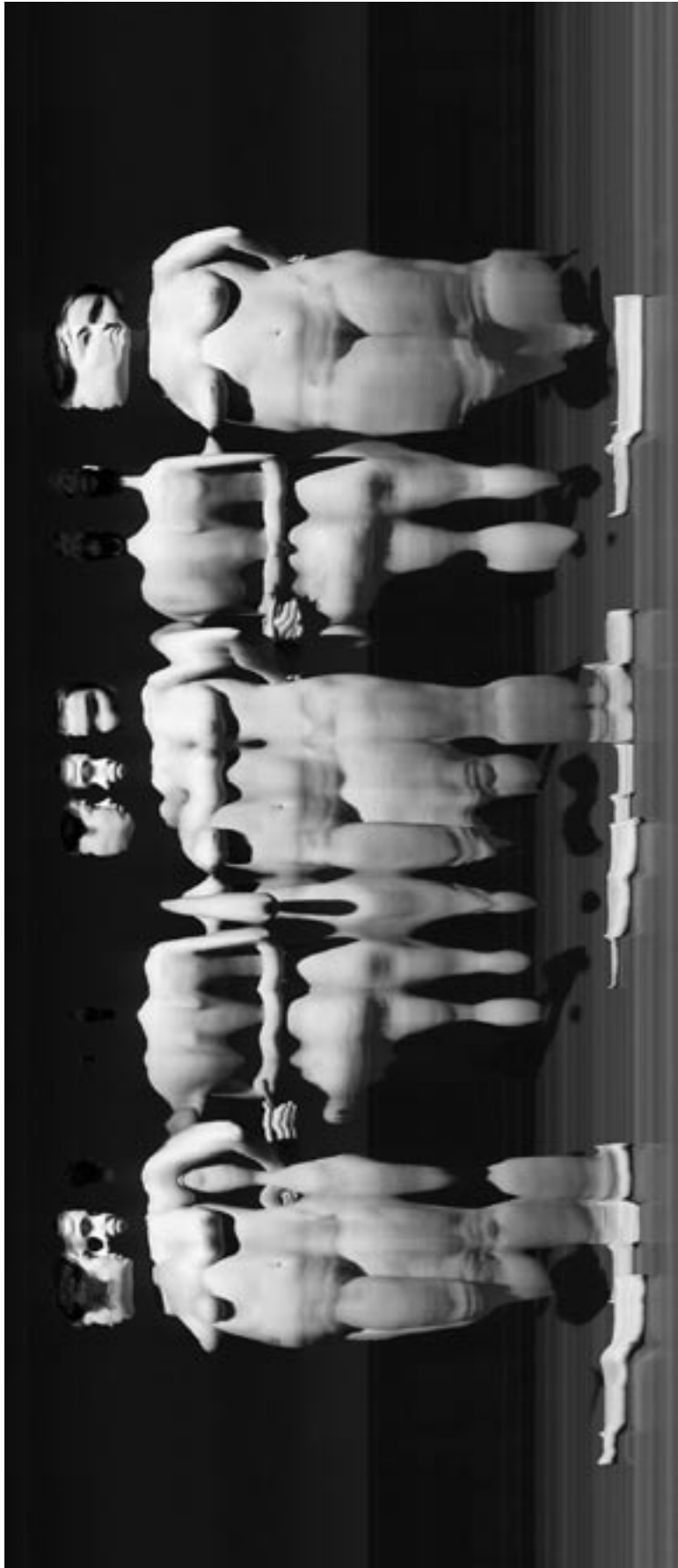


interested in capturing a compelling image. He likens his slit-scan technique to a finish line camera at a racetrack. “The camera is continuously ‘on’ and trained only at the finish line. The first horse to stick its nose through the plane of the finish line is captured. What I’m interested in is what happens to the rest of the horse.” A kinship exists here to Edweard Muybridge’s famous 19th century series *Animal Locomotion*, except that instead of stopping the action and differentiating each image in series, Seale’s camera puts them together in a seamless stream of continuous motion. Since time is “flattened”, we don’t see the motion in dimensional space. Movement is typically understood as a change in gesture through time. Changing the time element alters the perception of movement. It’s a sort of still animation; since time is imaged in flow instead of taken in sequence, the movements appear all at once.

This is perhaps most apparent in the series of nude figure studies. These works are a bit like Cubist paintings, in which the human form is viewed from different perspectives in the same picture plane. Our brain can accommodate the painting,



Cat Dream

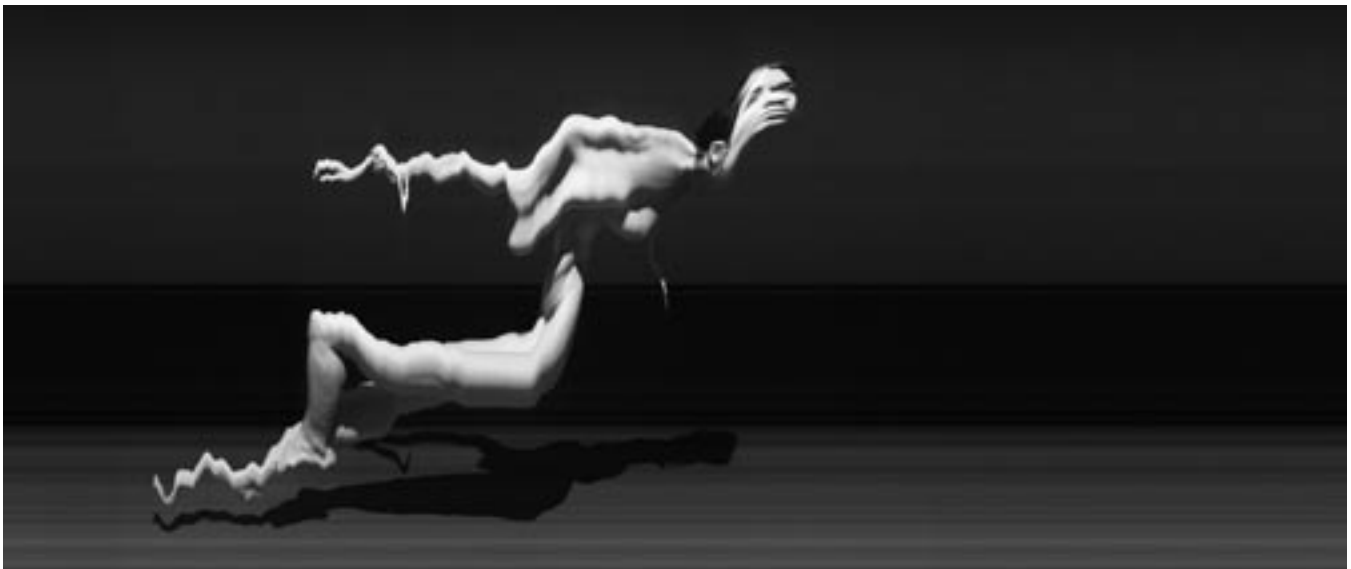


Heisenberg Figure

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but somehow when it's a photograph, our perception is challenged. Seale comments, "Half your brain says 'this is real' but the other half of your brain is saying 'something is very wrong here.' Somehow the figure works bring home the idea of Heisenberg's Uncertainty principle: that we can know only one thing about a particle, either its location or momentum, but not both."

In *Strive*, a female form floats mysteriously in the left half of the picture. The figure is distorted, distended, and attenuated in disturbing ways. Something about the implied motion here arouses a sixth sense somewhere in the viewer's psyche and puts one on guard. It's not unlike seeing something out of the corner of one's eye, when the type of motion signals something fearful—the difference between a leaf blowing past and the slithering of a snake, or the scampering of a rat. The female form in *Strive* isn't an ephemeral angelic presence, but a ghostly distortion of human spirit. The isolated studio background provides another level of alienation, much like the characters milling aimlessly about in *The Wanderers*. It's an irrational space with no bearings, no sense of orientation. Like many things in life, it isn't necessarily frightening, just disorienting.



Strive

In any event, these images are rife with metaphorical and symbolic possibilities. Interestingly, the nude figure study was not a theme explored in Seale's earlier, more traditional still photography. Elements of surreal, disassociated imagery such as the untitled group of trees, bending and swooping in the artificial light at their center, suggest a mad dance of gesturing forms. But the self-conscious treatment of the human form in *Heisenberg Figure* or in *Frieze* makes the viewer's orientation to movement a central theme. The gesture is implied, but we don't know which direction it's going or when and where to focus our inner compass, either physically or emotionally. How do we respond to this figure? Is it sympathetic or sinister? *Frieze* is particularly complex as it brings in the notion of stone figures we associate with architectural features. The blurring of the figure is especially pronounced with the

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disassociated arm swooping at the center of the image, the static figure stretched across an indeterminate time span, the face at the far left spreading in both directions at once.



Frieze



Night Dance



Uncertainty

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Despite the disturbing nature of our engagement with the subject, the physical surface of the photograph is compelling in purely visual terms. In all of Seale's work, composition is paramount: color and texture studies of doorways and boats in water, a sea star curling around a child's hand, the still life of a dead and decaying bird. Seale says that he has been "always impressed with the abstract expressionists and their existential belief that the paint was all that exists; paintings are just paint and canvas, nothing more. To separate oneself from the subject matter is really liberating as an artist. It lets me explore form, color, line, scale, texture and composition without getting bogged down by the emotionality of the subject. Of course, when viewers come to the picture, they are intuitively absorbed by the subject. That's the power of photography together with the human mind, to create the illusion of reality. So my job is to try to separate the viewers' adhesion to reality and bring them back to the surface of the print; to see the photograph as a work of art in and of itself."



Five

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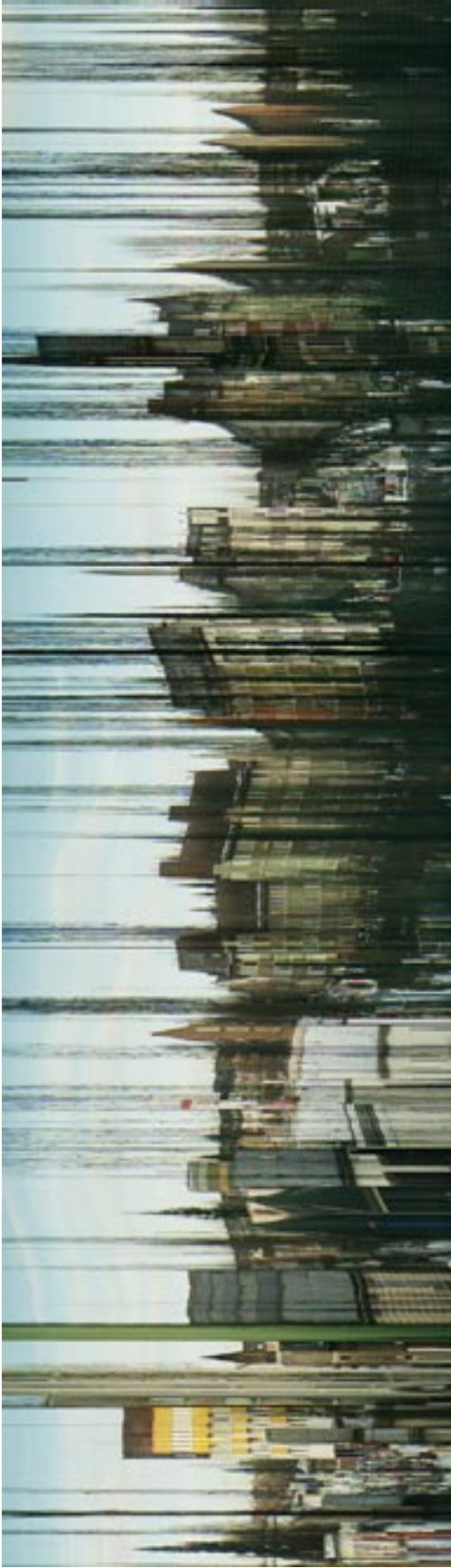


Still Life

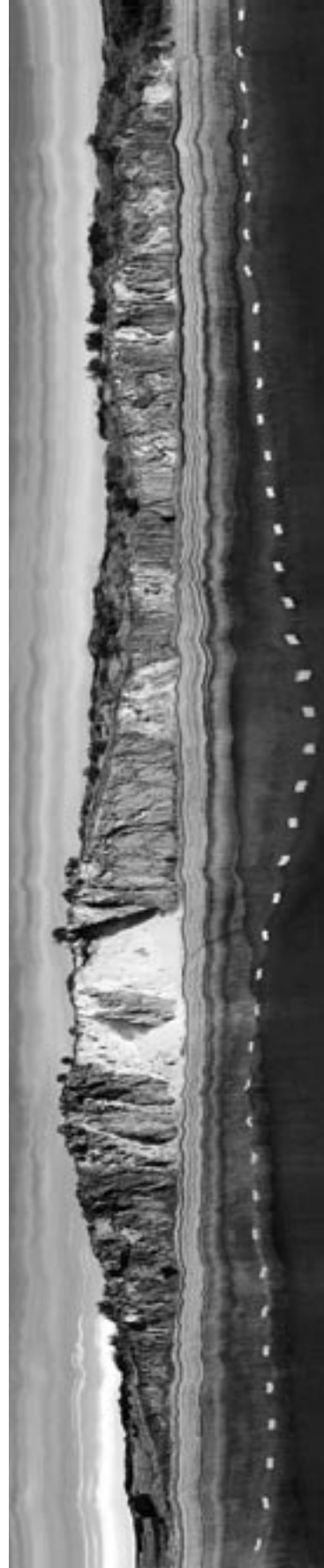
While the images themselves are engaging, one cannot help but react to the fundamental perceptual shifts that they create. All of the viewer's normal means of orienting oneself become compromised, and our basic sense of place within the time/space continuum is called into question. Seale explains, "These distortions could really be described as a more accurate way of seeing the passage of time although it is unfamiliar to our traditional concept of the depiction of time and space in art. In other words, this camera is recording a reality that exists, but one we cannot see without it."

This aspect is particularly true in the landscapes, where our sense of orientation is usually strongest. In a series of road cuts, photographed in motion so that the stationary objects appear in focus (keeping in mind the reverse blur effect), the actual formation grows vertically out of an implied horizontal stratification. Upon closer inspection (and once our bearings are appropriately inverted), we see that the "sedimentary layers" are in fact stripes in the road, wavering with the motion of the camera. The images read like a geology diagram showing both the cross-section and elevation of any given feature. Likewise, cityscapes become compressed and vertically exaggerated, the curve of a beach can render waves invisible.

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Europe By Train



Road Cut Rhythm

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What Seale has accomplished, aside from visually compelling images, is the wholesale re-ordering of our sense of space and time. It's not that we can't intellectually understand the abstraction of time, but that in our daily existence we don't question it much. We certainly don't tend to think of time in visual terms. Moreover, while Seale can simply "swap the dimensions of X and Time" in his camera, our eyes and inner ear can only accommodate so much swapping of the horizontal and vertical, especially when it's all bound up with what's moving past us, toward us, or at an oblique angle. In short, one can apply only so much theorizing and intellectualizing to any given photograph. As soon as we have a perceptual and visual fix on it, we look away and have to readjust our perceptions all over again.



Relativity (detail)

Seale says, "I draw a link between the ephemeral nature of these fleeting images and the elusive nature of the quantum mechanical universe. Some scientists argue that the orbits of electrons do not exist in nature unless and until we observe them. So then, to observe is to create. Figures appear and disappear in my work like quantum particles and uncertainty rules the day." And just like the world around us, when the theory gets too complex or starts to fall apart entirely, the best thing to do is absorb the sheer, abstract beauty of it all.