The Shadow on the Glass: On Susan Dobson's *Viewfinder* series.

By Amish Morrell

Each image in Susan Dobson's *Viewfinder* series depicts a scene of one of the Great Lakes; images that could just as easily be the Mediterranean Sea or the Atlantic Ocean and thus stand in for one of the most commonly depicted landscapes in art history. One of the images in the series, *Daguerreotype Sixth Plate, circa 1848, 2014* depicts a sunset over the water, with a sharply delineated wharf, a lighthouse on the horizon and shallow water in the foreground. But in looking at this scene, one's eye isn't drawn into the receding space of the landscape, but to the markings from the ground glass of a daguerreotype camera that sit on the surface of the image, organizing and texturing the scene. Scanned and digitally superimposed over the image, scratches, smudges, and a finely etched oval float above the landscape so that one questions when and how this image was made.

Each image in the series shows a different image of water and sky, all taken with the same large-format view camera, but each overlaid with the ground glass of a different camera. And while the titles tell us nothing about where the images were taken, they tell us something about the ground glass in each image, all from cameras that date between 1848 and 1970. Most of these are from the George Eastman House in Rochester New York, and others have been borrowed from private collectors. While there is a geographical relationship between the subject matter and Dobson's method for making these images (Rochester is located on one of the Great Lakes), the seascape functions primarily as a formal constraint. These images could be of any large body of water, at any point in time; a scene so ubiquitous that it could be called a "type," which is the function it serves here, offering recognizable, seemingly timeless signifiers: a setting sun, a swimmer bobbing in the waves, a sailboat or an uninterrupted horizon, what Roland Barthes described as the *studium* of the image; those details that convey information and make it both familiar and legible to the viewer [1].

The presence of the ground glass, however, reorients the viewer temporally, pointing to a time other than when the image was taken, so that the image becomes about something other than the scene it presents. The scratches on each ground glass, the grid, the name printed on the bottom all provide clues to the presence of an earlier photographer and to photographic processes now largely relegated to the museum. These traces wrench the image out of the realm of the pretty, the scenic or the merely interesting, and evoke what Barthes described as the *punctum* of the image, incidental details that have highly subjective and often indescribable poignancy for the viewer. They work to *puncture* or *wound* and wrest the image out of the merely symbolic, affirming one's vulnerable connection to the physical world that it describes [2]. The punctum, however, is not merely a subjective apprehension of the real vis-à-vis the photograph, but can also describe a heightened consciousness of the photograph's temporal character. Images are always made for the future, so we can remember, and yet they are always, as soon as they are made, of the past; they carry what Barthes described as a sense of as "that-has-been"

[3]. Dobson's *Viewfinder* series evokes this future-anteriority of the punctum most poignantly, whereby the traces of the ground glass overlaying each seascape enact a "photographer's punctum," creating a sense of time doubling back on itself, so "that-has-been" becomes "once-again."

This is highly effective because the ground glass inverts the position of the viewer in relation to the seascape. Instead of looking out onto the scene, as one does with perspectival images, the three-dimensional scene is projected back to the viewer (who inhabits the same position as a long-departed photographer peering at the ground glass of a view camera) as a two-dimensional surface. Like Marcel Duchamp's *Etant donnes* (1946-1968), an elaborate tableau he worked on towards the end of his life, where one peers at a reclining nude through peepholes cut into a doorway, the viewer is captured in the act of looking, and caught aware of their projective impulses. Inverting the position of the viewer and the subject of representation, the image is not about not the scene depicted, but the subjective and temporal character of looking. This layering and inversion prevent us, as viewers, from seeing the image as transparent, as what Roland Barthes called "a message without a code,"[4] and makes visible what is described in psychoanalysis as the "screen," where the social, ideological and temporal meanings of the image are projected and inscribed [5]. Looking at the scene as if through the ground glass of 1940 Speed Graphic View Camera, or a 1923 Deardorff, or any of the cameras referenced in this series, the viewer glimpses the scene as an earlier photographer might have composed it, passing through their shadow.

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References:

1. Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida* (New York: Hill & Wang, 1981), p. 27.

2. *Ibid.*

3. *Ibid.,* p. *96.*

4. Roland Barthes, "Rhetoric of the Image," *Image Music Text* (New York: Hill & Wang, 1978), p. 16-17.

5. Margaret Iverson, "What is a Photograph?" *Art History* Vol. 17, No. 3 (September 1994).