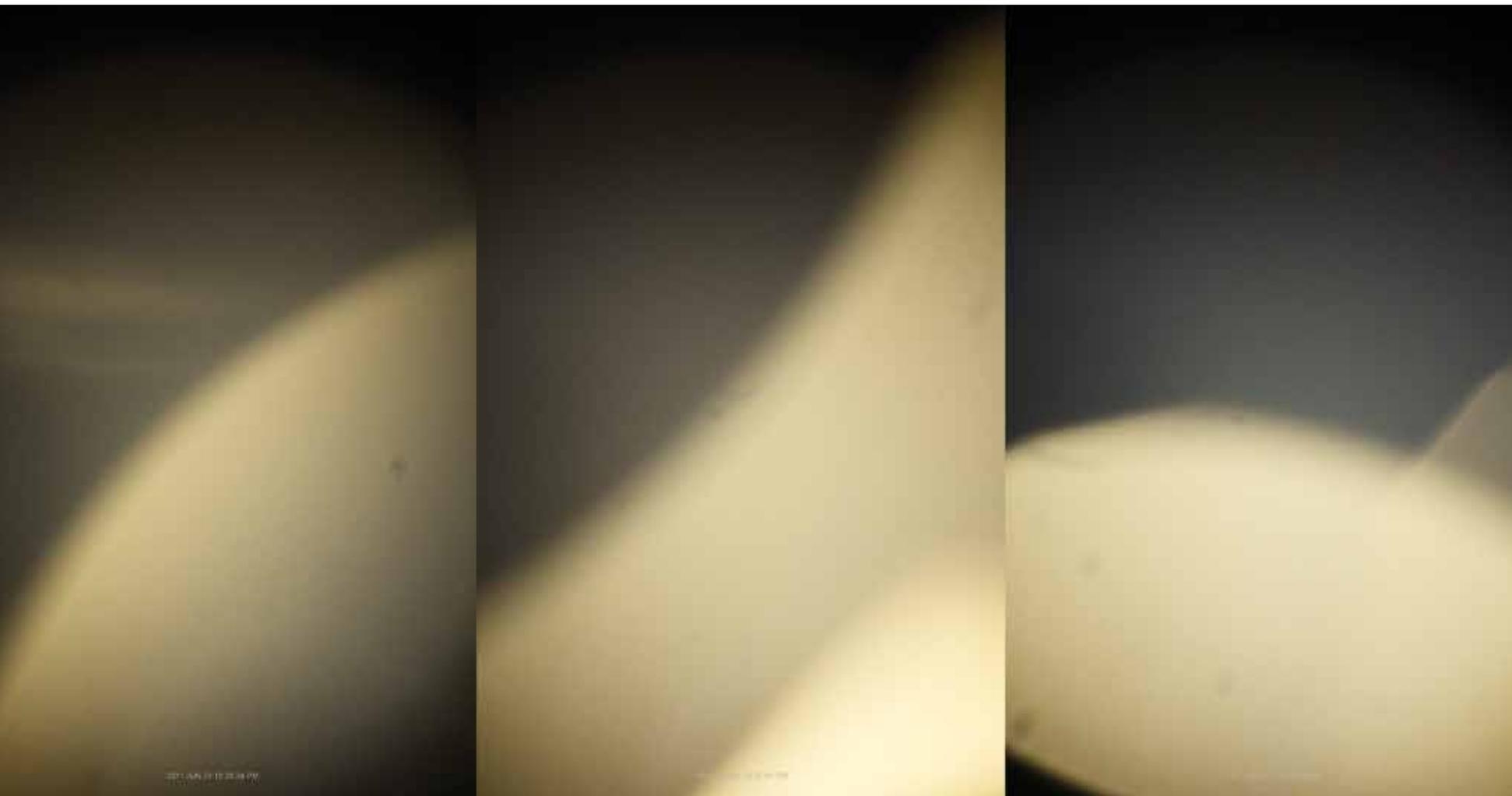


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# F R O M   A B O V E



By collecting many of her painstakingly produced photographs and video stills in a book, **Sharon Harper** has intensified their meaning.

**Paul Beasley** peered intently at Sharon's multi-layered images of land, sky and stars – and felt the Earth move. He hoped that Harper's answers to his resulting questions would direct him back towards the safety of terra firma...

# A N D   B E L O W

“The cathedral leaves its locale”, observed Walter Benjamin in ‘The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction’, “to meet the beholder halfway”. The critic was referring to the impact that mechanically reproducible photography was having on works of art – on the where and how of their consumption.

Making sense of what we perceive always implies a meeting. Light from an object hits the photosensitive cells that cover the retina and are converted into electrical signals that are sent along the optic nerve, which are then relayed to relevant parts of the brain, which then communicate with each other through a network of neurons in a language of spikes and ions in order to agree upon what all of this sensory data, this ‘stuff’ from out there, adds up to.

Beyond this scientific explanation, though, there is another way in which vision is a halfway house – especially when it comes to engaging with images. Some artwork, happily, hooks you instantly and pulls you smartly in the direction of its intentions; but other artwork requires a greater initial effort, perhaps to join the contextual dots or knock up a materialist vantage point; and yet other works of art neither pull us in through their aesthetic surface nor have much in the way of depth underneath. Deep down, they’re really shallow.

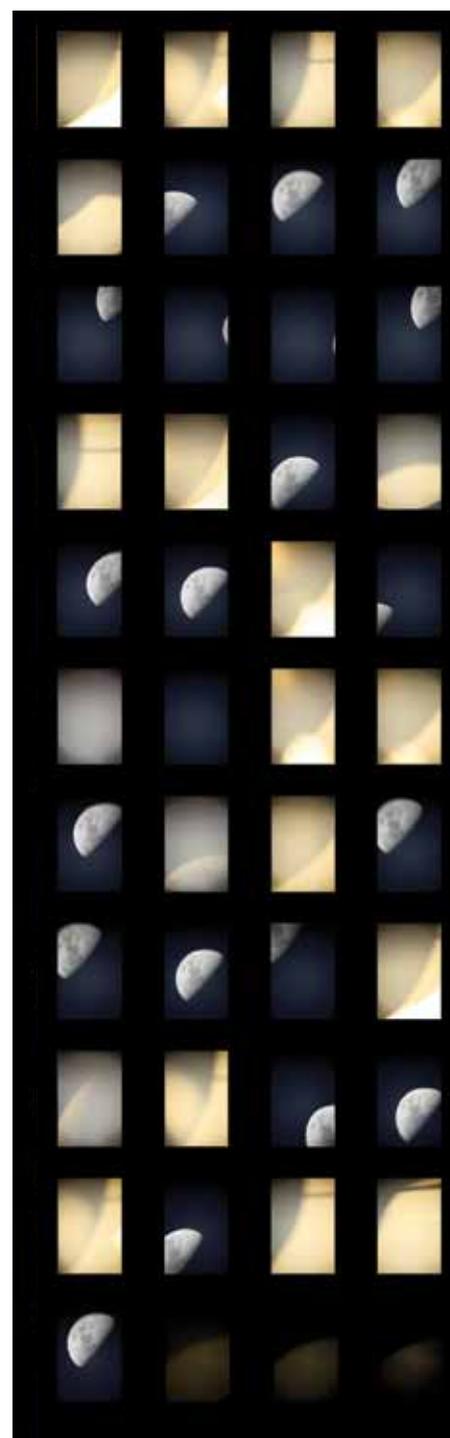
All of this supposes a journey, wherein an individual deepens his or her understanding of an image, unlocking its meanings, and emerges enriched, freighted with insight. There’s an in and out, a heave-ho to it, like an empty coal wagon disappearing into the blackened bowels of the Earth and reappearing, some time later, laden with something of ‘value’.

All of this, moreover, implies a series of fixed points: the subject and the object, the surface and the meaning – like regimented movements on a map encoded with clear cultural waymarks.

Well, ladies and gentlemen, be prepared to wave goodbye to all of that when you enter the world of “conceptual and aesthetic photographer” Sharon Harper, Associate Professor of Visual and Environmental Studies at Harvard. In Harper’s work it’s as if everything, the whole system of meaning, our entire sense of reality, is placed – to borrow a term from deconstructionist-in-chief Jacques Derrida – ‘under erasure’. The fabric of space and time, and with it one’s apparent location within its usually reassuring gridlines, seems to become uncoupled. Or, to put it another way, one’s optic nerve has become unplugged from one’s parietal lobe – the bit of the brain that situates us in a particular place. The effect is profoundly disconcerting. Harper’s work, then, is intensely

Facing page:  
Sun/Moon (Trying to See through a Telescope), 2010  
2010 May 27 10:48:35 AM –  
2010 May 27 11:08:34 AM  
2010 June 19 8:16:30 PM – 2010  
June 19 8:23:40 PM  
No. 1, No. 2, No. 3  
Ultrachrome print on Epson  
Enhanced Matt paper  
17 x 57 inches each

Pages 60-61:  
Sun/Moon (Trying to See through a Telescope), 2011  
Solstice No. 2  
2011 Jun 21 12:06:19 PM  
Ultrachrome print on Epson  
Enhanced Matt paper  
17 x 40 inches



disruptive of our sense-making mechanisms. Her multiple layers of sky and stars, and her chopping up of the apparent chronology of movement between ‘here’ and ‘there’, seem to catch our sense of reality dithering, beset by a chronically indecisive mood that it just can’t seem to shift.

So what’s it all about? Harper proffers the following explanation: “By accessing visual ideas that we cannot access or express without it, I see photography as a bridge between human consciousness and the natural world”. That may be, but she also pulls the rug of conventions from underneath our feet, like a street magician specialising in metaphysics.

*From Above and Below* showcases six of the series Harper has put together over the course of her career. Painstaking, borne out of a patiently applied methodology, and with outcomes about as certain Erwin Schrödinger’s infamous cat-in-the-box-with-the-radioactive-isotope thought experiment, Harper’s work arranges to meet you halfway... then leaves you stranded. ‘Moon Studies and Star Scratches’, for example, features multiple exposures that record the movements of the earth combined with the movements of the camera over the course of an evening, a month or several months. Another series, ‘Landshift’ (which is made up of grainy video stills), seems to show the Earth’s surface re-presented as a lunar or Martian landscape, perhaps recorded by a passing satellite launched 40 years ago.

So what unifies these scratchy, blurry expressions of her art? “I want to show that photography is far more malleable and plastic than our cultural expectations of it”, she says. “What is assumed about photography is often much more constrained than the medium itself. When I go somewhere to photograph I’m interested in devising an approach that upsets my expectations and understanding of photography.”

The title of the book is pleasingly apt: nouns, those signs of things in space and time, are absent. Prepositions, having been denied the presence of their ‘thingy’ companions, can only offer an approximate location, a sketchy somewhere or other, but not a here nor a there. This is entirely appropriate for work that deploys the camera as an in-between or, in Sharon’s words, “a fulcrum or a conduit that can translate invisible phenomena and ideas, and make them material”. In her acts of translation, Harper seems waylaid somewhere between the earth and stars, precise location unknown, her camera working like a prosthetic extension, a dumb eye with its own internal logic affording a different, estranged way of seeing. But there again, as she declares: “If you don’t get lost, you’re not going to discover much.”

Beam me ‘up’, Sharon, wherever you are...

**Was there a specific point time when your approach to photography first began to shift from its documentary origins and, if so, what prompted this?**

I began to make images that were different from what I could see when I was in graduate school, which was in 1995 at the School of Visual Art in New York City. I found that if I made work that emphasised the difference between camera vision and our eyes, I couldn't predict what the photographs would look like. I had been working in photography for 10 years at that point. I got fascinated with the expressive potential of photography, and its ability to generate imagery that functioned differently from what we could see.

**Do you rigorously use one camera, one film stock, and one processing and printing technique for each series?**

I chose a different camera for each project, depending on what it is I want to explore with the project. Cameras access ideas differently depending on their technical characteristics. The materials that record an image also affect the image, so that's a choice that I change up as well. I tend to like transparency film if I'm shooting film because it isn't forgiving—it's constrained by strict technical limits with exposure. I like running fowl of those limits and seeing what happens.

**What informs these choices – is it conceptual, aesthetic, or a combination of both?**

The choices are conceptual. Choices about the aesthetics of an image are made to support ideas, so I consider those conceptual choices in a way too. I chose 4x5 and 8x10 transparency film to make images for the series 'Moon Studies and Star Scratches' because I wanted to be able to photograph many times on one piece of film. If I had chosen negative film, I would have had to immediately make a lot of aesthetic choices about the colour of the image to start processing the image in Photoshop. The images are affected by overexposure and strange lighting conditions so by starting with a positive image, a transparency, I eliminated all kinds of guess work about where the colour would be from a photographic materials standpoint. I take the liberty to adjust those colours if I feel I need to, but I want to know how light registered on the photographic material.

**What ideas did you set out to explore with 'Moon Studies and Star Scratches', and how did your method of working facilitate this exploration?**

I was interested in the photographic record being information that implied a relationship – interplay back and forth – between the natural world and the camera. For this reason I was willing to relinquish control over the composition of the photographic image



**Above: Moon Studies and Star Scratches, No. 11**  
**June 2005, Clearmont, Wyoming**  
**30, 45 min. exposures:**  
**1, 4, 6, 1, 3, 4 hour exposures**  
**Luminage Print**  
**40 x 50 inches; 4x5 Fuji NPH**

that resulted. My decisions about the length of an exposure and how many nights I would photograph before I developed a particular sheet of film were determined by the results I was looking for, and by the external conditions that impacted the images, such as the weather. With each image in the series I was looking to address different visual ideas. In order to do that I would vary the conditions under which I was shooting, such as the weather, the exposures I used, the film I used, the method for exposing, etc.

**If happenstance is an important facet of your work, how difficult is it to produce images that manage the interplay of chance and method effectively?**

I had a lot of experience to draw on to increase my chances for 'success' with an image when I started working on the 'Moon Studies and Star Scratches' series. As with any work, as I continued working on the series, I grew to know how to increasingly stack the deck in my favour. When I moved on to the 'One Month, Weather Permitting' series I had been working with the process of shooting multiple exposures of the night sky for five years, and I decided to set different perimeters for the project. Instead of shooting several sheets of film at a time and editing the results later, for the 'One Month, Weather Permitting' series I shot every night for a month. I made multiple exposures on a sheet of film for several nights running, and I changed the film every few nights. I used colour film and black and white film, and I made decisions about which film to shoot according to the external conditions I was responding to (the sky, the weather, the mountains, etc). I didn't edit the film in this case. The images I made are all part of the series. They incorporate 'failures' such as light leaks and whatever else showed up in the film as a part of the process.

**Is the risk involved in rigorously pursuing a conceptual approach to photography that the resulting images might lack aesthetic appeal? If so, how do you rationalise this risk?**

I love work that is purely conceptual and doesn't give a hoot about aesthetics. I think it's an interesting way to work. Sometimes I wish that I could work that way. I wish I could make work with low production values too. I don't see my work this way. I see my work tending to fall into the category of 'conceptual and aesthetic'. It's how I see the world, and how I understand and process it. I think my work is completely situated in the art world. It sometimes comments on scientific, evidentiary uses of photography, but the work itself doesn't function in the realm of science. It is totally metaphoric.

**Is analogue superior to digital technology as a metaphor for the human senses?**



**Facing page:**  
**One Month, Weather**  
**Permitting, 2009**  
**The Night Sky Over Banff,**  
**Alberta**  
**September 12 – October 10,**  
**2007**  
**5 October 6 October**  
**Ultrachrome print on Harman**  
**paper**  
**30 x 40 inches**  
**4x5 Fuji NPH**  
**5 October 2007**  
**2 hours**  
**(No moon)**  
**6 October 2007**  
**8 hours 5 minutes**  
**(Overcast)**

I don't place a value judgement on technology. High, low, digital, analogue: these are all tools in the toolbox with different imbedded metaphors that are useful in different circumstances.

**Did *From Above and Below* enable you to develop your ideas further and/or show them in a more 'distilled' way?**

It helped to show the ideas in a more distilled way. I knew going into the book project that I had been working on the same ideas from different angles from 12 years consistently, but it became much more apparent to others from the way that all the work builds upon itself visually instead of chronologically that that is the case. I found that when I shopped the book around to publishers and curators, that they were very intrigued by ideas in the work that hadn't been as readily apparent to them when I presented the bodies of work separately to them previously. There had always been people who were interested in that aspect of my work, and who had followed my work, but I noticed that people found those ideas to be much more accessible when they saw them presented in the book.

**How did you come up with the title of the book?**

I was trying to come up with a way to bring 12 years of my work together into a book so I could pitch it to a publisher and I literally sat up in bed one morning at Yaddo (an artist residency in upstate New York) with the phrase in my head 'From Above and Below', and I instantly thought this was a viable framework for bringing my work together. I could focus on the work that used the sky as a site for perceptions and images that can't be seen without the camera. Not all of my work over the past 12 years fits this framework, but a significant amount of it does, and it encapsulates the ideas that have been the most present and important throughout my work.

**I find some of the work disorientating, especially some of the 'Moon Studies and Star Scratches' series where, in some images, a layer of planets seems to almost float free of the page. Because I struggle to interpret the object and fix its location in space and time, my sense of subjectivity is destabilised. I have an urge to make sense of what I'm looking at but I find this taxing because the work is so 'detached' and seems to contain only 'traces' of presence. Is this the 'right' response to your work?**

I'm interested in all of the notions you raise here, and in having them present in my work. We are always struggling to 'make sense' of photography even when it looks like a seamless window to reality that is presented in a photograph. We rely on our perceptions and cultural assumptions to make sense of all photographs, and all art for that matter. I'm trying, with my work, to heighten and draw attention to that process of 'making sense', which involves our

perceptions. This is very destabilising to the viewer, and that is part of the point. There is no way for the photographs to be understood as 'evidentiary' and have pat meaning, because it's really hard to figure out what's going on in them.

**How challenging is it for you to produce a series such as 'Moon Studies and Star Scratches'?**

That series was made from 2003–8. I felt stifled by the expectations for the medium at the time, and I felt excited by generating images that pushed my own patience almost beyond what I could handle. Some of the images, for instance, took four months of exposures to make before I even developed the image and saw what I had. It felt important to me at the time to push these boundaries of what I could predict, and what I could know about the images I was making. I was fascinated by the way that the technical aspects of the medium could generate metaphors within the imagery. For instance, all of the unknowns within the composition in terms of exposure and organisation for me were a stand in for all of the things that impact us and are beyond our control. We are constantly in conversation with things beyond our control, and I wanted to make photographs that were about that. It's a call and response that we are in relationship to at all times.

**If Cartier-Bresson explored the 'decisive moment', when significance and form come together, could your work be considered an exploration of the 'indecisive moment', when the 'centripetal forces' of understanding are disrupted and the 'real' meaning of an image is shown to be irresolvable?**

John Berger wrote a forward to Nick Waplington's *Living Room* and talks about the 'indecisive moment' being important to Nick's work. I think it's an apt description of the power of Waplington's work. I think of my work as concerned with endurance, experience and perceptions, which all involve extending a single moment in time.

From Above and Below  
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[www.radiusbooks.org](http://www.radiusbooks.org)

To find out more about Sharon's  
work, visit:  
[www.sharonharper.org](http://www.sharonharper.org)

**Facing page:**  
**One Month, Weather Permitting, 2009**  
**The Night Sky Over Banff, Alberta**  
**September 12 – October 10, 2007**  
**27 September 29 September**  
**Ultrachrome print on Harman paper**  
**30 x 40 inches**  
**4x5 Tri-x**  
**27 September 2007**  
**16 seconds**  
**20 seconds**  
**30 seconds**  
**1 minute**  
**2 minutes**  
**(Moon behind clouds)**  
**29 September 2007**  
**Eureka, Montana**  
**40 minutes**  
**20 minutes**  
**(No moon)**

