

A Small Pocket of Dances

Photography by Brett Matthews

Brett Matthews' subjects are nature's abstract patterns and reflected light. The label "landscape photography" acquires a new specificity when applied to his work, a fine, large sample of which is currently on show on the second floor of the UO Law School through Dec. 31.

Matthews' landscapes within landscapes, often abstract, evolve into autonomous worlds and ultimately into self-standing works of art. The viewer is free to look at the image referentially or as an end in itself. The very possibility of alternating between these two views adds further richness to the work.

Matthews does not crop his pictures, and since he uses a 2x2-inch format camera, all are square. An unerring compositional sense marks his work. Composition alone keeps interesting his most conventional shot in the show, *Last Run*, with its dark, silhouetted boat and figures gliding over golden reflections under a black sky. But composition also provides the crucial backbone to his more unusual images.

Matthews' photographs range from figurative to abstract, with *Last Run* at the figurative end. Images of tree and rock-configurations occupy a middle ground. In *Late Autumn*, aspens' white trunks and naked branches form a vertical pattern against a tangerine background. Pattern dominates the image, conferring an abstract quality and dynamic, aesthetic interest. Composition takes precedence over representation. Similarly in *Rime Ice Trees*, a few brown trunks and white curlicues of frosty twigs set against a deep blue background acquire an independent aesthetic dimension.

Three orb images, displayed as a triptych, also straddle the boundary between figurative and abstract. Texture dominates these abstracted geologic representations, yet figurative interpretations also are possible. The black orb of *Summer Sphere*,

speckled with gray and encrusted with barnacles, may evoke the interrogating eye of an ancient creature, a fossilized egg, a mineral birth.

Geometry organizes Matthews' somewhat abstract compositions of rocks and water interacting. *Yachats Surf* remains figurative but is structured as a series of triangles. Both *McKenzie Water* and *Fall Creek Fall* are concerned with land reflected in water distorted by ripples in the current. A slow shutter-speed in *Blue Water Fog* makes the water appear as a cloudy mass, out of which crest dark rocks that could be Alpine mountain ranges. The diagonals converge toward the horizon, emphasizing depth and perspective and contributing to the explosion of scale.

Matthews' *Crashing Waves*, with its unusual viewpoint, flattening of space and reversal of perspective shows the influence of abstract expressionist Mark Rothko's division of his canvas into luminous rectangles of colors. The vertical drop of a surf-sculpted cliff down to the waves below appears to rise under a greenish sky with trailing clouds. *Spring Snow Melt* is similarly divided into two horizontal fields of different texture and width, while *Copper Sea* is divided into three shimmering rectangles of foam, water and sky interrupted by the black accent of jutting rocks.

The Rothko-like structure is brilliantly used in Matthews' purely abstract *White Granite / Black Sand*, a particular favorite of mine. A layer of white granite mottled with blacks rolls down over black sand dotted with color. Rothko's influence becomes an explicit reference in *Rothko Light*, which is divided into two shimmering color fields, with deep ocean-blue at the bottom and at the top warm sunset tints reflected on the water surface. Each field receives and contains pigments from the other. Broken lines from wavelets provide horizontal texture.

"I love the way Rothko's bands of colors



Yachats Surf, photograph by Brett Matthews.

were undoing the background-foreground distinction as a visual metaphor for non-duality," Matthews said. Some of Matthews' pieces do just that.

"Looking at nature's own abstract expressionism is almost like trying to validate what the abstract expressionists were painting," Matthews said. "Their stuff was not really abstract; they'd just blurred the details of it." These artists valued spontaneity and improvisation, but Matthews' photographs require watchful observation and an understanding of the natural world.

Many of the most painterly of Matthews' abstract pieces capture patterns found in nature, such as *Seaweed Waves* and *Sand Diamonds*, which could be interpreted as a stylized forest of firs. *Painted Hills* is an earth-tone study in which the diagonals of hillsides intersect with the scallops of contour lines. In *Driftwood Lines*, the wood's curving grooves, bark scars and worm-holes create a topographic map in purplish-grey and green.

Blue Twigonometry abolishes depth: The seamless black lace of twigs and their reflections is etched flat over the blue mirror of the water. The lovely *Blue Water Alders* captures in nature the very effects that others obtain by manipulating Polaroid images. In *Dune Grass & Clouds*, the calligraphy of sparse grass curls over a reflected pink and blue sky.

Finally, a large number of abstract pieces capture the patterns of light on the ocean or on puddles left by the receding tide over the wrinkled sand. "I've always been fascinated by light," Matthews said. "Photography is all about light. The word itself means 'writing with light.'" In these pictures, the photographer allows us to see what our eyes can't really perceive. "Most of the stuff on the ocean your eye can't even see because it's going so fast," Matthews said. "It's a very small pocket of dances that I focus on," he explained.

I highly recommend Matthews' exhibition, so catch it soon. **EW**

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