



## Sam Contis

KLAUS VON NICHTSSAGEND GALLERY

Landscape photography has long been a genre ideal for heroic posturing, romantic projection, and melancholic ritual. Historically, the depiction of earth has been a territorial assertion, one of acquisition in both a material and metaphysical sense. The photograph was a tool of conquest, an implement of manifest destiny and, indeed, colonialist greed.

This lineage came to mind while visiting Sam Contis's "Overpass," her solo exhibition at Klaus von Nichtssagend Gallery. Contis is a young American photographer whose earlier projects assessed the gendered mythologies of the American West or excavated the work of Dorothea Lange. For this outing, however, she turned her inquiry to England and its tidy relationship to the landscape and, more specifically, property. The artist has located a dynamic in the British tradition of the stile, an inventive structure of the pastoral boundary, both creative and practical, that allows human passage while preventing that of, say, bovines. Its origins as a charmingly British gesture of compromise and equanimity has since been codified as a legal obligation for right of way on the behalf of all, ensuring some public access to private real estate. (One is also reminded of *A Line Made by Walking*, 1967, English artist Richard Long's documentation of a country stroll as sculpture, which highlights the importance of the photograph as a record of an ephemeral activity.)

In the gallery was a series of twenty-one photos chosen from the artist's 2022 book of these images, also titled *Overpass*. Of immediate appeal in the selection on view was the variety of contraptions that punctuate the land and choreograph passage. Some were elaborate, ceremonial, an assertion of the landowner's prestige. Others were improvisational or of little invention—a mere step and handhold through thickets. One saw a number of trellises, secretive structures camouflaged by bramble and bloom as much by the gray tonal range of the pictures. Some of the stiles—from which we have the word *turnstile*—were narrow vertical gaps in a stone wall, evocatively named "squeeze stiles." A handful of these passageways were arranged at an orderly middle distance, while others were engulfing, claustrophobic and irrational, indistinguishable from the pastoral clutter. Occasionally, the change in light or tone dramatized the threshold from here to there. Throughout this exhibition one could locate the textures and ethos of Andrew Wyeth via his depictions of hardscrabble field and stone.

Contis's photographs are arid, reticent, and self-effacing. Even the light feels gray, washed, wan—afflicted by gloom and damp. The

subtleties of the pictures were repeated by the arrangement on the gallery wall. Despite the linearity of the installation, spatial cadences and dialogical groupings meandered quite like a ramble across the fields, compass in hand. The temperament was suitable for a historical transition from pictorial grandiosity to subtle grace.

The artist is of a generation of young photographers—such as Matthew Genitempo, Raymond Meeks, and Kristine Potter—whose work proposes a continuity with photographic history, itself an "overpass" above the excess of studio-based and media-informed output of a previous generation. With an awareness of photography's sundry fallacies and ambiguities, Contis frequently sidesteps the snare of nostalgia and pastiche. Her art—black-and-white, rural and local—evokes emotional intimacy without the rhetoric of the self-absorbed.

"This is the gift of the landscape photograph, that the heart finds a place to stand," said photographer Emmet Gowin. At the very least, "Overpass" straddled the romantic *and* the ideological, maintaining the nature picture as a solitary pursuit of solace and, at the same time, inferring the inevitable politicization of the landscape as a site of territorial conflict and ecological disaster. It was a notable sleight of hand.

—Stephen Frailey



Sam Contis, *Untitled*, 2020–22, gelatin silver print, 10¼ × 11¼". From the series "Overpass," 2020–22.