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An art review on Florian Maier-Aichen’s *Untitled (Dewatered), 2009*

Since the beginning in the 1800s, photography has progressed from a hermetical technology to one of the most democratic leisure activities today. It has become so advanced that German photographer Florian Maier-Aichen thinks that modernity has disconnected photography with its preliminary characters.¹ To him, a photograph should be imprecise and leave rooms of imagination, and so, a tension between representation and abstraction is often seen in his works. Rebecca Morse (2007) made a comment on Maier-Aichen’s works, of which are “rich with reference and allusion”. Among them, I have chosen *Untitled (Dewatered), 2009* to talk about.

*Untitled (Dewatered), 2009* is a landscape photograph of the American Falls. The picture cuts in two parts. The representation side reflects factual qualities: the sky in crystal blue fades into white upon the horizon of the ground, and the sea in dark green contrasts with white spoorrift, something identical to other landscape photographs of the Falls. The abstraction side falls into the middle area, the American Falls, which was hand drawn by Maier-Aichen.

The Falls was composed by different layers and colors of dots, in a miscellaneous way that the photographer described it as a ‘scribble’. To some extent, his drawing resembles pointillism, which the German photographer has also claimed to have used in another artwork of his, *Untitled (St. Francis Dam), 2009.*² If look closer, there are a few skull-shaped objects in grey at the bottom right of the Falls, which pause the audience to look at it again.

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¹ The reasons Maier-Aichen adds human elements into his photograph are two-fold: he thinks that photography is too easy to assess and becomes too democratic; and modernity has made it too scientific that it lacks human essence.

Whether publicly or intimately known, places have meanings and value in a photograph (Robertson and McDaniel, 2010). Like most of Maier-Aichen’s other works, there is a reference to this picture. In 1969, the American Falls were dewatered for inspections on the river bed. As a result, different sizes of debris and rocks were seen accumulated on the foot of the Falls. It was also reported that the police had found a dead body caught in the debris during the project. It then all makes sense to see a bunch of unsorted colors scattered around the Falls that represent the debris and the rocks. The dead body also explains the implementation of the few skulls in the dry Falls.

Recapturing a view of an old photographic source is often an artistic goal when Maier-Aichen shoots a photograph, just like how he began Untitled (Stralsund), 2009. The idea of re-creating the scenery of the dewatered American Falls might have come from a few pictures of the place (taken in 1969) which could be found online. The once-in-a-while historical moment founded the abstract qualities of the Untitled (Dewatered).

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5 See 2.

The way Maier-Aichen draws, enhances, and constructs his photographs somehow disconnects the final image with the reality. Suzanne Anker and Dorothy Nelkin, in *The Molecular Gaze*, compared such a distortion (digital manipulation) to scientific research, stating “Like artists, they manipulate, alter, and edit these images to contain complexity and emphasize characteristics that effectively illustrate their interpretation of the data.” Nonetheless, there are some opposing arguments towards this view. Morse (2007) says the German photographer’s works reveal a more poetic than scientific truth. A poetic truth, suggested by Werner Herzog (1999), can only be reached through the artist’s stylization and the viewer’s imagination.

Using digital manipulations on photographs is not exclusive to Maier-Aichen. Painters like Gerhard Richter and Vija Celmins also examine how people deceive a place whose appearance is altered by technology. In *Moon Surface (Luna 9) No. 1*, Celmins prudently created marks and layers to separate photograph and painting. However, as a viewer, you can hardly distinguish between the two media and it just creates an illusion between what is real and what is not. Richter is in line with this style of representation, he quotes “I blur things to make everything equally important and equally unimportant.” (Richter G., 2009)

Despite their similar photography-based painting method, Maier-Aichen and the two painters do not share a common belief in perfection. Maier-Aichen likes to use the computer to bring imperfections, or to turn an end product into an unfinished state again, so the viewer will have the room of imagination. For Richter and Celmins, the subject matter is not about the existing place in the real world, but the representing style in the artwork. Richter further explained his intrinsic purpose of mixing photography and painting by saying “I blur things so that they do not look artistic or craftsman-like but technological, smooth and perfect.” (Richter G., 2009)

While there may be a blurred line between Maier-Aichen and Richter’s view on art, some realists would definitely disagree with Maier-Aichen’s work for any reasons. Affected by Greek philosophers Plato, whose views on beauty lies on the real in its perfect form, Realism was defined as a view of rejection to artificial and idealized pictures. In that sense, a photograph without any enhancements should be more agreed to be a better artwork than a painting of the American Falls.

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But the ‘realness’ of a photograph was challenged by conventionalism, which argues that photography is a human construct and no more real than paintings.\(^\text{13}\)

But what is the point of determining an artwork by its realness? As suggested by Geoffrey Batchen (1997), a historian of photography, photographers have always been trying not to replicate nature, but to visually improve it. This point is further supported by Berys Gault, a current cognitivist. He states that we celebrate works that give us knowledge and new perspectives to perceive the world; and we criticize works that simply gratify people’s illusions.\(^\text{14}\) These statements profoundly differentiate Maier-Aichen’s work, *Untitled (Dewatered)*, from general photographs of the American Falls.

In my opinion, Maier-Aichen has achieved both points by combining, yet also creating a tension between representation and abstraction in *Untitled (Dewatered)*. It made me stop, look closely, and think again, about the relationship between the optical message sent by my eyes, and the perception received by my brain. And most importantly, I did learn about the 1969 historical incident of the American Falls, and thus was able to reasonably connect with Maier-Aichen through the photograph. Therefore I would say *Untitled (Dewatered)* has a cognitive impact on me.

\(^\text{14}\) Ibid., pp.58
Bibliography


