FUTURE imPERFECT

Robert and Shana ParkeHarrison

BY CAROL McCUSKER

Carol McCusker, Curator of Photography at the Museum of Photographic Arts, considers the latest photographs by Robert and Shana ParkeHarrison, and interviews the artists.

TREE STORIES—1999; FROM *THE ARCHITECT'S BROTHER*

Robert ParkeHarrison arrived on the photography scene over a decade ago. His success was immediate with *The Architect's Brother*. In these images, which unite photography, collage, painting, sculpture, and performance, ParkeHarrison, himself, appears as 'Everyman' struggling alone to repair a devastated planet. With deficient tools, he is nonetheless an industrious, optimistic soul who attends the earth's wounds—evident in the photograph *Tree Stories*—as if "on a schedule devised by Samuel Beckett," wrote Vicki Goldberg in a 2000 *New York Times* review. Here, Everyman sits at a desk in a landscape leveled by clear-cutting. Looking like a film-still from Terry Gilliam's *Brazil*, he diligently works at a typewriter half his size. The vine-like wires from his headphones entangle his feet and connect out to the fallen timber stacked solidly around him: a strange communiqué/transcription is underway between nature and man. The look of the photograph intentionally evokes 19th-century albumen prints. ParkeHarrison even inserts himself into a 19th-century photographed landscape—Timothy O'Sullivan's 1867 view of Steamboat Springs, Nevada—which he re-photographed and assigns Everyman the task of stitching the spring's fissure back together again.

MENDING THE EARTH—1999; FROM *THE ARCHITECT'S BROTHER*

THE EXCHANGE—1999; FROM *THE ARCHITECT'S BROTHER*

UNDERGROWTH—2006; FROM *GRAY DAWN*

Among the many elements that make *The Architect's Brother* riveting is that, as fantasy made from the photographed world, it still adheres to the essentials of photography—analog cameras, film, paper negatives, darkroom chemistry, and nothing of computer technology. Each image was arranged, photographed, re-photographed, pieced, and painted to create a unique object. In this painstaking process, the photographer was not alone. His wife Shana was his collaborator; she is full partner in their latest work. Both Robert and Shana studied photography and photo history at the University of New Mexico; consequently, they know the history of their medium, use it intelligently, and fall in line with the great 19th-century masters of the composite photograph: Gustave Le Gray, Edouard Baldus, O. G. Rejlander, and Henry Peach Robinson.

Relevant to this magazine, the ParkeHarrison's two latest series, *Gray Dawn* and *Counterpoint*, incorporate color; all previous work by the artists consisted of toned, black and white prints. Yet, as the title *Gray Dawn* suggests, the photographs are nearly monochromatic. Color is selectively introduced to accentuate, disrupt, or advance mesmerizing or inexplicable narratives.

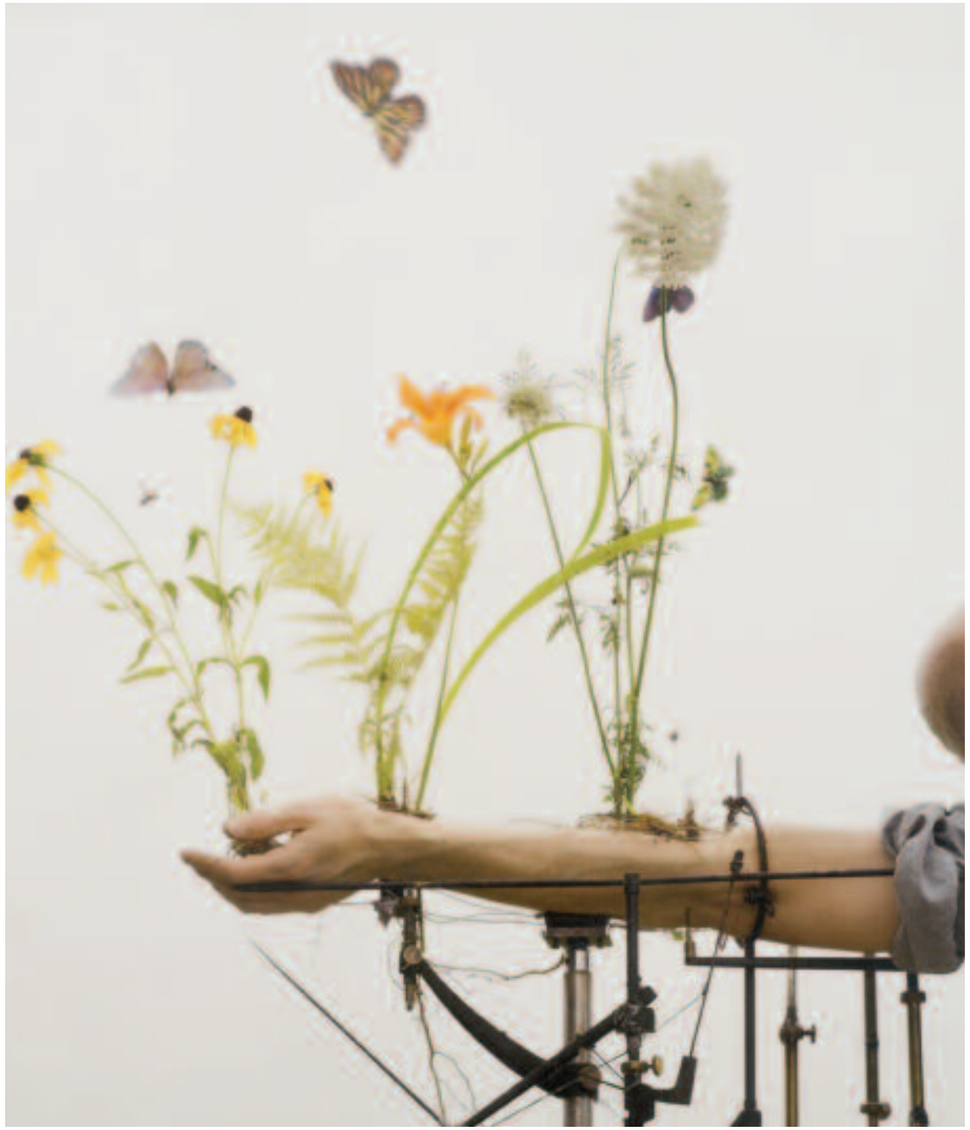
GRAY DAWN—2006; FROM *GRAY DAWN*

Something is afoot in these newer series, both in form and content. The emotional tenor hovers between hopeful change and malevolence. The latter lurks just below the surface, or, when visible, takes place impassively. The planet, a more sentient entity, still appears traumatized as in the earlier work, but it is also recuperating. Earth has awakened, and is unwilling to bear just any intervention. In some instances, it appears to use Everyman for sustenance, instead of the reverse. In *Undergrowth*, the tender green shoots of a vine (usually symbolic of growth and hope) are lightly stained with blood. A single tendril from the vine reaches for Everyman; his own blooded hands sit on his lap. Does the plant reach to thaw his malevolence, or was it the original attacker?

In *The Scribe*, frozen tundra is disrupted by a thin line of blood carefully drawn in the snow from a disembodied arm fitted with a contraption that makes an inkwell of its veins. With *The Wound*, a bandaged tree branch drips blood instead of sap. This image resonates with *The Exchange* (from *The Architect's Brother*) where Everyman literally transfuses his blood into the earth. Now, in some designated future, the tree bleeds it back.

THE SCRIBE—2006; FROM *GRAY DAWN*

THE WOUND—2006; FROM *GRAY DAWN*



SUMMER ARM—2007; FROM *COUNTERPOINT*

The reciprocity continues in *Summer Arm*, as willowy and light-filled ferns, Black-Eyed Susans, and Tiger Lilies grow from a human arm. These cross-species transfusions include butterflies as well, as they float out of a girl's mouth like music, or flutter over and on a shirtless, bent figure. Are they metaphors of pleasure or more akin to pain, since, in *Stolen Summer*, they are ruthlessly nailed to a wall? Everyman, it seems, has changed. He is also no longer alone; a prototype of Eve and child create rituals in the terrain alongside him. Their ceremonial objects hold symbolic importance emphasized through color.

MOURNING CLOAK—2006; FROM *GRAY DAWN*

STOLEN SUMMER—2006; FROM *GRAY DAWN*

FABLE—2008; FROM *COUNTERPOINT*

The ParkeHarrisons use of color is restrained and rarely saturated. New to their process is the use of color and transparency film, scanning, limited Photoshop, and Epson printing. What the color film captures is enhanced or modulated through hand painting with Golden acrylics on the photographic surface in careful layers so that a rich depth is achieved, as in the blue background of *The Alchemist*. The wall's patina is built from the rust, age, and frenetic motion of the worker's Laocoönian struggle (a set the artists built). Yet the blue wall, as created and recorded on film, is worked further and deeper through applied paint.

Like oil on canvas, the surfaces of these photographs have to be seen. Reproductions lack the texture and defused depths achieved by the building up of layers. Along with late 19th-century albumen printers and photogravurists, who used early color by way of the Autochrome (a painterly color process circa 1907), the ParkeHarrisons have named among their influences the Pre-Raphaelites, Vilhelm Hammershoi (a little-known master), Ernst Ludwig Kirchner, and Mark Rothko, all painters. In a photographic age enthralled with color, the ParkeHarrison's painterly approach is refreshing (for this viewer) in its refusal of too much use of Photoshop color, which can be garish, exaggerated, and distracting from an artist's otherwise thoughtful composition.

To further elucidate their working methods and intentions, the interview on the following pages was conducted between the ParkeHarrisons and the author.

OVERFLOW—2008; FROM *COUNTERPOINT*

AFTER THE FEAST—2008; FROM *COUNTERPOINT*

INSTALLATION FOR *COUNTERPOINT*

CM: *Essential to this magazine would be an understanding of your departure from toned, monochromatic imagery to the introduction of color. What lead to this?*

PH: As with many artists, we have a central, overriding compulsion that pervades our work: the triangular relationship of humans, nature, and technology. This central element is present in every piece of art we make, regardless of coloration or medium. On the surface it's easy to classify changes in our work as a switch from black and white to color, but there are more substantive changes than coloration. Around 2003 we began to consider a new chapter in our work. We began to identify changes we wanted to make in our working process, in our aesthetic choices, in the narrative and in the way we approached our work conceptually. In late 2004 we completed our final series of *The Architect's Brother*. For the next two years we focused on experimentation. We needed to redefine our work on a more visceral level. One of the many changes we made involved beginning to use color. Because we 'build' photographs, rather than 'take' photographs, the insertion of color involves conceptual and compositional intent, much in the same way that a painter determines how and when to use color.

CM: *In the* Gray Dawn *series, your color palette is subtle, almost monochromatic, a subtle step away from* The Architect's Brother. *With* Counterpoint, *color is more vivid. How should color by read and understood in the new work?*

PH: Admittedly we were a bit timid in our initial foray into color. We wanted the colors we chose to have meaning. It had to have a reason for entering the image. In *Counterpoint* and currently, this need to control the meaning of color is still part of our thought process, but we are more comfortable using color now. An image such as *After the Feast* conveys our interest in using color to explore new territory in our work. We were inspired by an early Peter Greenway film—*The Cook, the Thief, his Wife & Her Lover* (1989). Throughout this film, color is a dominant and expressive vehicle, from the interior walls to the lighting and costumes. In our feast image we wanted to portray a moment after a gluttonous feast. We chose highly saturated red walls and overly abundant color found in all of the foods piled onto the head of this person. This was a thrilling image to create. It offered the pleasure to work outside of our usual image-making approach and to push a "Baroque" sensibility.

CM: *There's a lovely, painterly aspect in the new work, surfaces that add visual interest or an emotional tension.*

PH: We wanted color to have purpose in our images, either on a visceral or psychological level. During the beginning period of developing this color work, we looked to the history of painting. Specific artists such as Vilhelm Hammershoi and Pre-Raphaelite painters served as influential sources for our philosophical use of color. For these northern European painters, color served as a vehicle to explore psychological and atmospheric moods within the imagery they painted. We also were drawn to this use of

THE ALCHEMIST—2008; FROM *COUNTERPOINT*

INSTALLATION FOR *COUNTERPOINT*

color in our work because our work is rooted so strongly in concepts drawn from nature and the landscape. We deliberately painted walls within imagery to portray a cool and melancholy sense of temperature, as in images such as *Overflow* and *The Alchemist*. Likewise, we heighten colors by dying a pool of water red to convey a visceral sense of blood, as in the image *Red Tide*. Much of the heightened use of color exists in the actual scene rather than as post-production manipulation in Photoshop. We want there to exist a Magical Realism sense rather than an overly digitized fantasy quality to our imagery.

Once we completed the *Gray Dawn* series, we both reacted to the fact that we needed to push color to a point where it became a more dominant expression within our images and not to be afraid to go beyond what is present in a naturalistic scene. A few years ago, while in Berlin, we saw a painting exhibition at the Nationalgalerie of paintings from the early period of Expressionism in Berlin by artists such as Karl Schmidt-Rottluff and Ernst Ludwig Kirchner. We were strongly affected by the hallucinatory use of heightened color in these paintings. A landscape scene of a simple village street took on a powerfully expressive psychological sense in the overly saturated colors of these paintings. Likewise, we have always been infatuated with the atmospheric depth of Rothko's paintings. His delicate use of intense and undulating colors inspires us to continue to paint over our images. Our purpose in doing this is to make the colors three-dimensional. We find this quality—only evident when viewing an actual piece—has the ability to suspend the viewer. It is an enticing, seductive quality.

CM: *Can you discuss your technical process: digital, film, scans, in camera or post-production manipulations, light or ink jet prints?*

PH: As with other aspects of our work, our technical approach also changed dramatically when we transitioned to color. Our old work consisted of our integration of antiquated techniques, like paper negatives along with drawing and painting, to complete the imagery. As black/white papers and chemistries became more difficult to locate, we started to investigate other working methods. The truth be known, we entered the digital world—cameras and Photoshop—kicking and screaming. We mostly feared these technologies would standardize the look of our work and change our creative process. To the contrary, we have learned to use technology only to the degree that we needed it. First we transitioned to color film, transparency film and high quality scans, and very limited Photoshop manipulation. Currently we use a medium format camera with transparency film or a digital camera, depending on the needs of the image. We continue to use Photoshop on a very limited scale. Our work is printed on Epson printers and mounted on dibond. Finally, we control the color quality and depth of color through our painting process.

RED TIDE—2008; FROM *COUNTERPOINT*

ETERNAL SPRING—2008; FROM *COUNTERPOINT*

The ParkeHarrisons have had numerous solo exhibitions nationally and internationally, and are in major museum and private collections worldwide.

Several monographs of their work have been published, including:
Counterpoint, Twin Palms Publishers, 2008
The Architect's Brother, Twin Palms Publishers, 2000

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