

“The Sylvan Screen: Richard Barlow and Regan Golden”  
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*“Whose woods these are I think I know.”<sup>1</sup>*

*Robert Frost*

*“As a texture, the naturalness of light cannot be divorced from its historical and embodied circumstances. It is neither visible nor invisible, neither metaphoric nor metaphysical. It is both the language and material of visual practices, or the invisible interweaving of differences which form the fabric of the visible.”<sup>2</sup>*

*Cathryn Vasseleu*

The two clauses in the opening stanza of Robert Frost’s well-known poem “Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening” place the reader in a vivid scene wherein a minor drama of land ownership and knowledge plays: “whose woods these are” and “I think I know.” Ironically, the play (by which I mean a game as much as a theatrical performance) is set in motion by an arrest, a stopping, a quiet pause in a dimming white landscape, where the poem’s narrator takes visual possession of a wood that is owned by someone else. Much beloved for its gentle contemplation of nature, the poem has been imbued by its readers with all manner of religious, spiritual, sexual, thanatological, and philosophical meanings.

This is because every landscape is always already a scene, which we decorate with both symbolism and signage; a scene in which we recite freighted words such as wild, wilderness, nature, native, and nation; a scene in which we act out legal scripts of possession, investment, development, conservancy, and cultivation. It is into this white scenography, (like the name “white mythology” that Derrida uses in place of “metaphysics”<sup>3</sup>) full of both longing and menace, that one is directed by the work of Rich Barlow and Regan Golden, works of art in which conceptual, photographic, and mass media techniques labor alongside painting and drawing practices.

Golden’s family owns a small wood on a mountain in rural Massachusetts, a bucolic landscape that might have been described naturalistically by fellow New Englander Robert Frost. Golden has repeatedly photographed her grandmother’s woods, wandering about in the dense thickets of mature trees and the fecund underbrush of saplings and ferns. Like Frost’s narrator, who proposes that the absent owner “will not see me stopping here to watch his woods fill up with snow,” she takes voyeuristic possession of this small wilderness. But these are not simple photographs—neither nature photography nor tourist snapshots; neither family photos nor surveyor’s record. They exhibit no memorable landmark, no depth of focus, no horizon line, no dynamic angles created by flowing streams. They are not beautiful. They are full of oppressive verticals, confusing spatialities, dense greenery impossible to penetrate or bring into focus. Therefore, while they offer a kind of possession, they also mock and frustrate it.

What is more, Golden has “drawn” on the photographs with a knife, cutting outlines around the trees and plants, creating a raised surface that invites the tentative stroke of a finger as though it were investigating the contours of a scar. The cuts, though they are introduced carefully and subtly, penetrate the glossy

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<sup>1</sup> Robert Frost, *Collected Poems, Prose, and Plays*, ed. Richard Poirier and mark Richardson (New York: the Library of America, 1995), 207.

<sup>2</sup> Cathryn Vasseleu, *Textures of Light: Vision and Touch in Irigaray, Levinas and Merleau-Ponty* (New York: Routledge, 1998), 12.

<sup>3</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Margins of Philosophy*, trans. Alan Bass (Brighton, Sussex: The Harvester Press, 1982).

surface of the digital prints; shatter the photographs' smooth illusion of homogeneity, its natural absorption of light.

The gesture of the cut makes me think of a line from Georges Didi-Huberman where he says, with regard to the art historian's reading of images: "We needn't be afraid of not knowing. We must, in this history, have the courage to confront both parties, both 'pictures' ... [b]oth the veil that makes thought possible and the rend that makes thought impossible."<sup>4</sup> A philosopher of history, Didi-Huberman employs this metaphor to suggest that knowledge is created through the translucent threads of a veil, which filter out the too-much of the world, which allow us to see the bright light of metaphysics by partially blinding us. Moreover, he urges his readers to question history's "tone of certainty" and to recognize the generative possibilities of unknowing. Golden's careful rending of the photograph's fabric turns it into two pictures at once; one, a picture of knowing, recording, and representing the truth of the world; the other, a picture of unknowing, of letting go of the certitude that vision pretends to secure.

Golden's work is thus a complex engagement with the paradox of images, and especially the landscape *as* image. Where the landscape photograph typically seeks order, miniaturization, objectivity, and neutrality, hers introduce disorder, enormity, subjectivity, and abjection. They produce an uncomfortable awareness in the viewer that picturing the world is complicit with cutting up and destroying the world, that knowledge has the force of violence. The validity of that claim is borne out on the very terrain where Golden has so often stopped. The same technologies of knowing—light, vision, photographs, and images generally—with which her work is concerned are routinely used by surveyors, developers, tax assessors, and various participants in the courts to claim rights of ownership to this land. Today it is bounded on one side by a new subdivision and on the other by a gravel pit, each of which gauges the earth as a blade through a photograph.

Ensnared in similar questions, Rich Barlow's work contemplates the scene of ownership and knowledge from a different vantage. Rather than making photographs of a landscape, he collects 12" record album covers, which employ various land and seascapes that Roland Barthes would have called mythological. Mythologies are, for Barthes, the "decorative display of *what-goes-without-saying*, the ideological abuse" which is hidden in the naturalness of images.<sup>5</sup> Barlow reproduces these familiar, sometimes generic pictures, such as the cover from the Cure's 1980 album "The Forest," with silver leaf on layers of vellum. The resulting works are at once intentionally clichéd landscapes, freighted, as I said before, with all manner of leaden allusions, and complex conceptual images that, like Golden's photographs, undermine the viewer's easy possession of the places they depict.

Because they are rendered in silver leaf, the images constantly shift in relation to the viewer's position before them. From one angle, the silver shines brightly with an alien glow against the translucent snowy white vellum. From another angle, the image looks black, as though it were drawn with soft graphite. Into these scenes of light and knowing, Barlow inserts the rend, what philosopher Cathryn Vasseleu calls "unrepresentable material obstacles," which include such things as "the tain of a mirror, the bodies which cast shadows, the water's reflective surface, the cloth divider, or the walls of a cave."<sup>6</sup> These scenes of shifting light, and the play which they engender and which is contingent on where the viewer stops (as on a snowy evening), demonstrate Vasseleu's claim that light is both the language and material of Barlow's visual practice.

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<sup>4</sup> Georges Didi Huberman, *Confronting Images: Questioning the Ends of a Certain History of Art* (University Park: the Pennsylvania State University Press, 2005), xxvi.

<sup>5</sup> Roland Barthes, *Mythologies* (New York: The Noonday Press; Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1971), 11.

<sup>6</sup> Vasseleu, 8.

Although these pieces incorporate the tools and methods of the draughtsman, whatever visual depth is achieved comes about through the layering of silhouettes on translucent sheets and the ghostly shadows produced thereby, rather than through careful modeling and shading. Indeed, although they make reference to drawings, these works are concerned primarily with the mechanisms of photography: the photo shoot, the silver salts on which traditional photographic images are exposed, the mass produced album cover.

As such, they proffer the recognition that accompanies consumption. The viewer may indeed nostalgically recognize the image from the album—whether it's The Cure, Styx, or Henry Mancini—connect with the brand, but recognition does not yield greater insights about the work, does not penetrate the inscrutable images drained of their mythological content. It is we who are possessed and consumed by these works, our own reflections and shadows captured in their silver tain. In them, we are momentarily stopped and enthralled by the dusk of thought that descends oppressively upon them.