Constructing Fate:

Paul Hart's Farmed Landscapes

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> "To do things 'railroad fashion' is now the byword; and it is worth the while to be warned so often and so sincerely by any power to get off its track. There is no stopping to read the riot act, no firing over the heads of the mob, in this case. We have constructed a fate, an *Atropos*, that never turns aside. . . . We are all educated thus to be sons of Tell. The air is full of invisible bolts. Every path but your own is the path of fate. Keep on your own track, then."[1] —Henry David Thoreau, *Walden* (1854)

Thoreau's iconic passage on fate and progress comes from a chapter of *Walden* called "Sounds," even though so much of what Thoreau hears evokes conspicuous landscapes "shot toward particular points of the compass," full of "invisible bolts" coursing through visible telegraph wires. Tracks and wires crisscross New England farms, gleaming like a "comet," as Thoreau describes these new linear sciences, "for the beholder knows not if with that velocity and with that direction it will ever revisit this system, since its orbit does not look like a returning curve." Or imagine these tracks and wires as threads of life, as Thoreau does, capriciously snipped by Atropos, one of the three goddesses of fate whose name literally means "without turn."

Paul Hart's *Farmed* takes seriously the notion that, in the landscapes we've constructed, there is no "returning curve," only points of arrival in some inestimable distance. In his previous collection, *Truncated* (2008), Hart explored the densities of forests where "the wind is calmed and noise filtered, temperature altered, and light bounced and subdued." Nature, in those photographs, builds "cathedrals" where some modicum of life finds "shelter and protection" from its own elemental chaos.[2] But *Farmed* attends to vulnerable landscapes—unsheltered, unprotected:

> When I finished TRUNCATED I wanted initially to move away from the almost claustrophobic confines of the forest, and look at a more wide-open landscape. I was especially drawn to the small groups of trees left remaining

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1 Henry D. Thoreau, "Sounds," in *Walden, Civil Disobedience, and Other Writings*, ed. William
2 Paul Hart, *Truncated* (Stockport, Greater Manchester: Dewi Lewis Publishing, 2008), 71.

> when all that surrounds has been cleared by modern agricultural practice. I thought of these as tiny dissipated 'islands' of trees, surrounded by a sea of 'used' land. However, the landscape in-between these trees soon proved to be far more interesting, and it is this "farmed" land that I've concentrated more on. I think of it as a "linear" landscape. By this I mean that it is not very curvaceous - instead it is comprised of so many straight lines, and the horizon is always flat. Power lines, communication lines, lines of transportation, lines of delineation . . . it was this modernity that drew me into this subject—[3]

Even though many images like *Whaplode Cross Keys*, *Gedney Drove End*, and *Middle Marsh Road* scan the ruin of postindustrial farmland, little of the desolation felt in images like Dorothea Lange's *Tractored Out, Childress County, Texas*, 1938 (Figure 1) touches the viewer in *Farmed*. That's because Hart's photographs resist narratives of pure catastrophe in places clearly impacted by centuries of mismanagement. "The richly fertile soil," Hart explains, "is the fundamental reason for this area's intensive arable use . . . I want the viewer to feel the 'weight of the mud', so to speak."[4] Form and sense work together for Hart like a sonnet. Indeed, the "linear" constraints we see have more in common with the self-imposed metrics of poetry.

Figure 1: Dorothea Lange, "Tractored Out, Childress County, Texas (1938)

Britt Salvesen, curator and head of the Wallis Annenberg Photography Department and the Prints and Drawings Department at the LACMA, calls this imposition of form "romantic modernism"—a phrase she uses to distinguish between experimental modernists who made "photography about photography" and photographers who, as Thomas Mann put it, looked for the "soulful" in the "technological." Salvesen writes, "If the experimental modernist photograph was a manifesto, the romantic modernist photograph was a poem: utilizing the endlessly replenished resources at hand in the world, inventing within established structural forms,

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[3] Hart, email message to author, April 1, 2014.
[4] Hart, email message to author, October 8, 2015.

isolating moments of direct personal contact with the world" and "reverence for nature."[5] Photographers of this vein aimed to bridge the arts and sciences, and though romantic modernism as an historical category belongs to the early and mid-twentieth century, its objectives are still very much the concern of photographers like Hart who see in the extension of power lines over endlessly diminished fields a need to bridge the artful—the "soulful"—with technological artifice—our constructed fates.

Lange's *Tractored Out* and Hart's *Farmed* seem particularly resonant on that score. Linked by the past tense of words directly related to cultivation, "tractored" and "farmed" convey a sense of finality, albeit an ambiguous finality. On the one hand, a job has been completed: the land cleared, the soil ploughed, the crops seeded. On the other hand, nothing has been achieved: no growth, no fruition, no harvest. The curving furrows in Lange's photograph spin the house in a vortex of trenches. Its roof is fated to join the sterile dirt ridges in the churning landscape. In Hart's *North Ing* and *Metheringham Heath*, the houses look equally empty and distraught. But the rows of unruly stubble seem less opposed to the house's edges—a burgeoning vastness kept at bay by an outthrust of alien geometry. There's vitality in this poetic tension—or at least the possibility of renewed vitality.

Among the many types of linear landscapes exhibited in *Farmed*, we find at least five recurring themes: waterways, pathways, architectural skylines, tree lines, and flat horizons. It is nature faceted, like a diamond—the perfect symbol for industrialization and the dream of more wealth, more control. Just before the turn of the twentieth century, the novelist J.K. Huysmans wrote *À* rebours, often translated as "Against Nature," in which the iconoclastic Des Esseintes fashions his turtle into a walking jewel and ornaments his home with bouquets of artificial gems. For Des Esseintes, nature *untouched* demanded improvement, innovation, novelty. Therefore: the futurists, the vorticists, the Taylorists, the fascists. *Farmed* is, in some ways, the consequence of *À rebours*. The elemental gods of water, earth, and sky appear thinned and regimented—an unthinkable idea until the camera exposes a flattened grid where once lived Apollo 17's blue marble.

[5] Britt Salvesen, *See the Light: Photography, Perception, Cognition: The Marjorie and Leonard Vernon Collection* (New York: Prestel, 2013), 160.

In Hart's photograph, *Holbeach St. Matthew*, a canal abuts the road as the power lines alternate from roadside to farmside. All lines reach diagonally outward, emphasizing time with ditches and history with wires. The viewer is pulled into the "weight of the mud" in the process. Visual artists, explains Todd Hido, use diagonals to "draw the viewer into the frame. The diagonal line creates depth, and depth often works well in describing an environment. The diagonal lines extend your photograph into infinity somehow."[6] And maybe something awaits the viewer there at the convergence of these infinities, maybe not. The vanishing points vanish, as they are wont to do. But the lines themselves acknowledge the human impact that, as the poet John Clare once put it, "levelled every bush and tree and levelled every hill / And hung the moles for traitors—though the brook is running still."[7] That brook, straightened and deepened for drainage, irrigation, and as the industrial age matured, commerce, signifies more than picturesque diversions. We are, as Thoreau remarked on the railroads, "related to society by this link."[8]

Figure 2: West View Farm

But in *Farmed*, those links are beset by limitation. Oftentimes, we encounter abrupt severance in the tree line, as in Washdyke Road, Poplars Farm, or *Dale Hole*. Other times, only isolated stands remain. And still other photographs show trees entirely replaced by telephone and electrical poles (*Bicker Road*), wind turbines (*Fontaine le Dun II*), or neat rows of warehouses (*Park Lane*). When Thoreau, sitting at his window and looking out at the woods, considered the ongoing corruption of his view, he rejected any further compromise: "Instead of no path to the front-yard gate in the Great Snow—no gate—not front-yard—and no path

[6] Todd Hido, *Todd Hido on Landscapes, Interiors, and the Nude* (New York: Aperture, 2014), 20.
[7] John Clare, "Remembrances," in *Poems by John Clare*, ed. Arthur Symons (London: Henry Frowde, 1908), 127; lines 68-69.
[8] Thoreau, "Sounds," 81.

to the civilized world."[9] But *Farmed* yields to the sympathies of the human eye. The most striking example, I think, is the photograph *West View Farm* (Figure 2)—an image of what looks to be a condemned chapel with a sign that reads, "Dangerous Building: Keep Out." Scaffolding encloses the chapel's frame and forms a grid that, instead of flattening the visual field, creates a gestalt of the sacred and the profane, the aesthetics in the wastes. *Farmed* appeals to our wherewithal to reconstruct. It ignores the "keep out" signs and invites us to trespass.

"I grew up in a rural agricultural part of the UK," says Hart, "and spent so much of my time when young outdoors in an area still quite untouched by the modern world."[10] This kind of history—personal history attached to tangible landscapes—is what keeps landscape photography vital and fresh. The landscapes in *Farmed* are by no means "untouched by the modern world." But they are, perhaps more so than untouched wilderness, landscapes that need to be seen. What makes wasteland *wasteland*—be it overused farmland or the sprawling unused roofspace of outlet malls—is, in many ways, the neglect of the eye. *Out of sight, out of mind*, as the saying goes. But not out of existence. Many of our most talented landscape photographers today engage with this very problem: Alex S. MacLean, for instance, or Edith Roux, Edward Burtynsky, and Yao Lu.

Hart's photographs raise important questions about possession, ownership, mobility, stewardship, history, memory, perspective—the list goes on. But none of these would matter much if the photographs were not, in their attention to the poetry of place, earnest and moving. They keep on "their own track," as Thoreau put it, and replace Atropos with artistry, constructed fates with fated reclamations.

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[9] Thoreau, "Sounds," 90.
[10] Hart, October 8, 2015.