Group Exhibition

A HANDFUL OF DUST

Curated by
David Campany

I am a curator of exhibitions, and recently I was invited to put together my “dream show.” That’s a phrase to raise the eyebrow of any Freudian, but I took it seriously. What could such an exhibition be? A dream will defy the logic of time and space: things from an almost forgotten holiday combine with yesterday’s trip to the cinema. Moreover, there is often no obvious connection between what is dreamt and what it might mean. This is not unlike our initial responses to images. We intuit that an image cannot carry a message the way a truck carries coal, and so we are not held by rational thought. Why not begin an exhibition with such a photograph, an image so wide open it could mean almost anything, or nothing. A risky start.

In 1920, the artist Man Ray was visiting his friend, Marcel Duchamp, in his studio on Broadway, in Manhattan. Man Ray was complaining to Duchamp that a rich collector wanted him to photograph her artworks. Duchamp suggested his own latest, unfinished artwork might be something upon which Man Ray could practice. Eventually, Duchamp’s piece would become known as The Bride Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors, Even (1915–23), but on that day in 1920, it was just a horizontal surface, covered in a thick layer of New York dust. Man Ray remembered: “Looking down on the work as I focused the camera, it appeared like some strange landscape from a bird’s-eye view.”

Relocating to Paris, Man Ray brought the photograph with him. Surrealism, with its interest in the unconscious and the uncanny, was blooming. In October 1922, it was published in a little journal with a deliberately misleading caption: View from an aeroplane (much later it would be titled Dust Breeding). Seeing Earth from above is disorienting, but wartime aerial reconnaissance photographs had already become common currency in newspapers and magazines. Devastated cities have an unsettling beauty. Meanwhile, many avant-garde photographers were starting to shoot unexpected subject matter from new angles, attempting to revolutionize perception itself. Also in October 1922, T. S. Eliot published The Waste Land. The great dreamlike poem of the interwar era picks over the rubble of Western civilization like a literary detective, stacking up quotations and allusions as fragments of evidence. “I will show you fear in a handful of dust,” warns Eliot. To many writers and artists of the 1920s, the ideal of a rational, stable order was looking more like a fantasy. What if The Waste Land and Man Ray’s photograph of dust, appearing that very same month, were harbingers of the ensuing century? This would be the theme of my exhibition.

Any photographer will tell you that dust has a double-edged relation to the camera. It must be kept well away from the equipment, but it is deeply photogenic. Floating in the air, dust motes catch the light and settle on surfaces as a soft glow. There is also something universal about dust. We come from it, go to it, and create it daily with all the inevitability of breathing, and dying. So, an image of dust, even one as obscure as Man Ray’s, is likely to have all manner of resonances and associations. Some will be yours only, but many will be shared, from the epic scale of the aerial view and the abstract landscape to the close-up world of forensic imaging.

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On April 28

The Polygon Gallery
101 Carrie Cates Court,
North Vancouver
Tu–Su: 10 am–5 pm; M: closed
Admission by donation

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40 – 41

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Beyond these associations, many artists have explored the idea of dust as material and metaphor, with its allusions to time, mortality, and ruin. For example, in the early 1970s, the Californian John Divola began breaking into disused houses, making mysterious, ritualistic interventions in the corners of rooms, and then photographing them. More recently, Eva Stenram placed under her bed colour negatives of images that NASA sent back from the surface of Mars. She allowed balls of dust to gather on them before making prints. The cosmic and the domestic implications of dust are conflated.

Even when images of dust are thoroughly earthbound, they can be otherworldly. Jeff Mermelstein, a street photographer in the classic mould, was out shooting in New York that September morning when the Twin Towers were struck. His shot of a public sculpture in a powdered avenue near Wall Street is both urgent and entirely dreamlike. He wrote: "I’m not a war photographer, so this wasn’t an easy experience for me. The constantly shattering glass was terrifying and distracting, and my camera kept getting completely covered in ash. But because for years I have been taking documentary pictures of New Yorkers out on the sidewalks, there is a way in which I was prepared."

In 1991, the French artist Sophie Ristelhueber visited the deserts of Kuwait. Allied forces had pushed Saddam Hussein’s invading army back into Iraq, and Ristelhueber wanted to see, for herself, the traces left behind: tanks, personal belongings, and long trenches dug into the sand. She photographed on foot and from the air, always looking down as if surveying the ground before her. The resulting series was titled Fait, meaning both “fact” and “done.” In a short text, Ristelhueber reveals her inspiration: “By shifting from the air to the ground, I sought to destroy any notion of scale as in Man Ray and Marcel Duchamp’s Dust Breeding.”

In 2007, Ristelhueber printed one of these photographs as a single work, titled À cause de l’élevage de poussière (Because of the dust breeding). It is a striking image, and its genesis speaks volumes about the unpredictable effects that images can have upon us. An artist photographs a former war zone and her visual template is a peculiar, semi-abstract view of a half-finished artwork made seventy years earlier, on another continent. No logic can account for that. We don’t file images in our minds the way they are filed in an archive or searched for online. Words will not come close to accounting for the madness of images.

5
Jeff Mermelstein, Statue ('Double Check' by Seward Johnson), New York, 11 September 2001, C-print, Private Collection

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