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You Are My Ghost

A Thesis submitted in partial satisfaction
of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts

in

Visual Art

by

Matthew Nelson Shain

June 2012

Thesis Committee:

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The Thesis of Matthew Nelson Shain is approved:

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Part 1

I try to think of my approach to photography in cosmological terms, rather than as a linear trajectory. It is partly a loose philosophical practice and partly an interrogation of the conventions of photography. The works are created individually, tangentially and organically, then presented in such a way as to create a poetic and overarching narrative. Rarely do I move from one project to the next because I am much more invested in individual images. But for all the power I try to imbue single images with, I also know that nothing can be viewed in a vacuum. Because of this, I am equally interested in how photographs relate to one another. To investigate this idea, I often combine individual images into unfixed sets. They are unfixed because at another point in time, or possibly at the same time, some of those images could very well appear in a different set, thus changing how each is read. The goal is to create cross-talk or friction between photographs through their formal and conceptual connections. These approaches, the investment in the creation of individual images and the experimentation with grouping in presentation, ultimately come out of my belief that the meaning of an artwork is found somewhere in the space between intention and reception. While the balance may never be perfect, neither should be made permanently primary because together, these two factors have an enormous amount of poetic potential.

Photography exists in a unique relationship to the “real-world”, a relationship no other artistic medium can quite match. (Perhaps writing, for its ability to suspend narrative in order to describe, might have some equivalence.) Photography is a medium of intrinsic paradox, from the traditional negative-to-positive/input-to-output relationship to its atemporal relationship to an inherently dynamic, temporal world. When I can find a way to make pictures that operate in the space between these complementary characteristics of

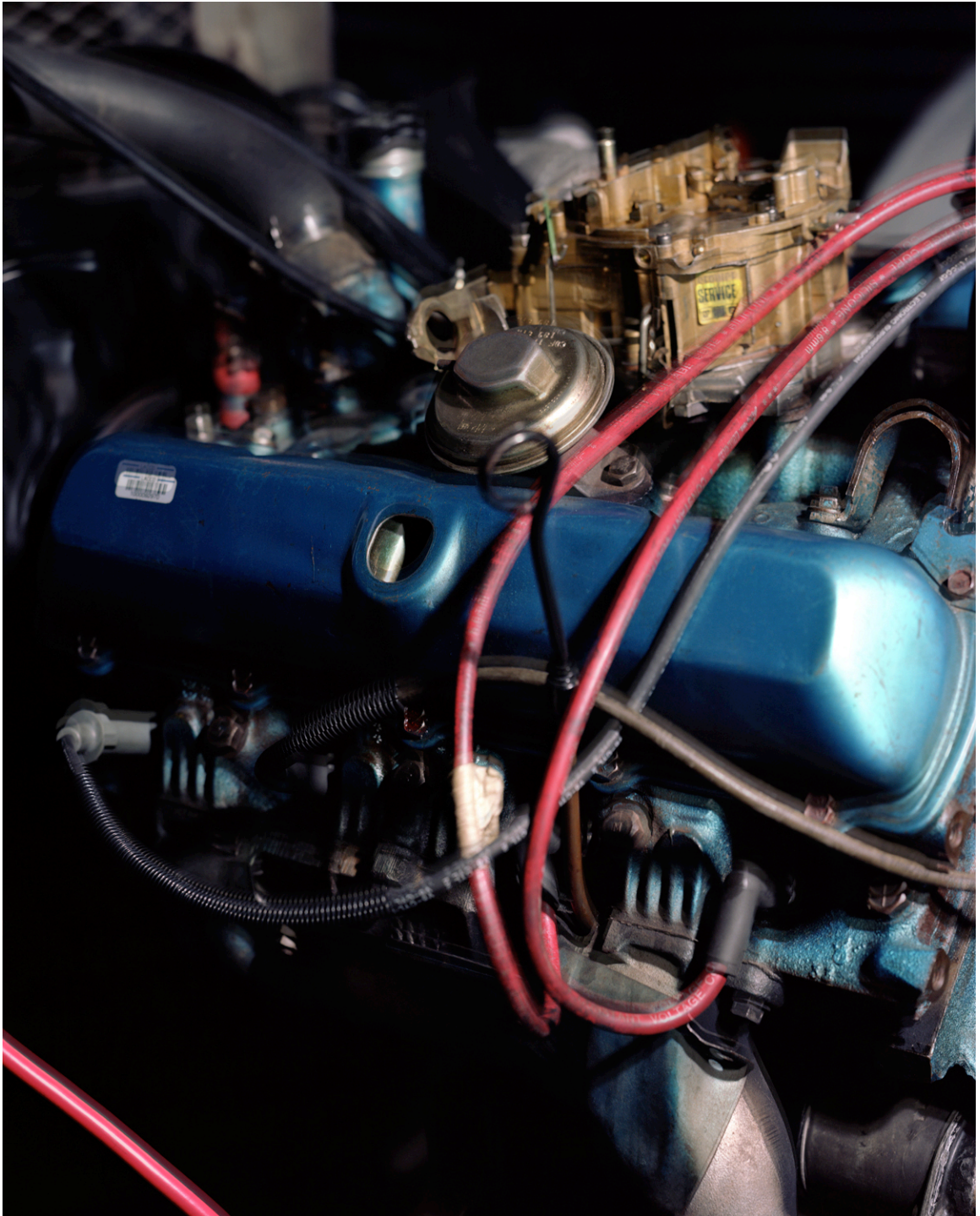
photography, then I find traction with my work. But it is not a matter of always treading some fine line of ambiguity. We all maintain a position in the evolving relationship of images and experience. I make and present my work with the hope that it might provide a pictorial space of contemplation and imagination. I want the viewer to spend just enough time to get lost in the depiction, so that he might then reflect on his relationship to the world and how he imagines it.

Imagination is often the first step in my process. I imagine the kind of picture I want to see. The preconceived image and the final result are rarely, if ever, the same, but this idea for a picture is almost always the beginning. In 2008, I began thinking about how full of potential energy images are, yet how static an actual print is. This was the beginning of my thought process in regards to the inherent paradoxes I see in photography. What I mean by potential energy and static is simply that a print, be it in a book or on the wall is a fixed, solid object occupying space in the world. But on that three-dimensional piece of paper is a two-dimensional image and it is the image that has potential energy. It can become so many different things depending on the context in which it's viewed. And by context, I don't just mean *where*, but also *when*, *why*, *how* and by *whom*. Granted, this is not a new revelation, but it was an important one in how I approached creating and presenting my photography.

Eventually, I came to understand photographs as things that work very hard just to stay still, so I started imagining images in these terms. I imagined a man treading water in a large swimming pool, his legs kicking in rhythm to his swinging arms. I thought about helicopters hovering, engines idling, hummingbirds, equilibrium, spinning tops, meditation.



Hover, 2010
UltraChrome Archival Photograph



Idling No. 3, 2010
UltraChrome Archival Photograph



Exploded Target No. 1, 2012
UltraChrome Archival Photograph



The Bee in the Tree, 2010
UltraChrome Archival Photograph

Part 2



Blind Spot (Kristin), 2010
UltraChrome Archival Photograph



Spiral Bound, 2011
UltraChrome Archival Photograph



Watchtower, 2010
UltraChrom Archival Photograph



Site, 2010
UltraChrome Archival Photograph



Magazine Street Pole No. 4, 2012
UltraChrome Archival Photograph



White Window, 2011
UltraChrome Archival Photograph

Excerpts & Inserts

Excerpts from *How to Read a Poem* by Terry Eagleton¹:

“Close reading is not the issue. The question is not how tenaciously you cling to the poem, but what you are in search of when you do so.”

Content analysis



Untitled (Luck/Chance), 2010
UltraChrome Archival Photograph

¹ Eagleton, Terry, *How to Read a Poem*

“...the language of the poem is *constitutive* of its ideas. “

“In a world of fleeting perceptions and instantly consumable events, nothing stays still long enough to lay down those deep memory traces on which genuine experience depends.”

“Poetry is language in which the signified or meaning is *the whole process of signification itself*. It is thus always at some level language which is about itself.”

Form reflects content

“Poetry has an authority about it which seems to spring from natural experience, and which we are therefore inclined to trust.”



The Red Queen, 2009
UltraChrome Archival Photograph

Excerpts from “The Poetics of Space” by Gaston Bachelard²:

“Forces are manifested in poem that do not pass through the circuits of knowledge.”

Latency in connections



Halfway to Infinity (experiment with a hummingbird to test its body/wing movement in relation to its vision/depth of field), 2010
UltraChrome Archival Photograph

² Bachelard, Gaston, *The Poetics of Space*

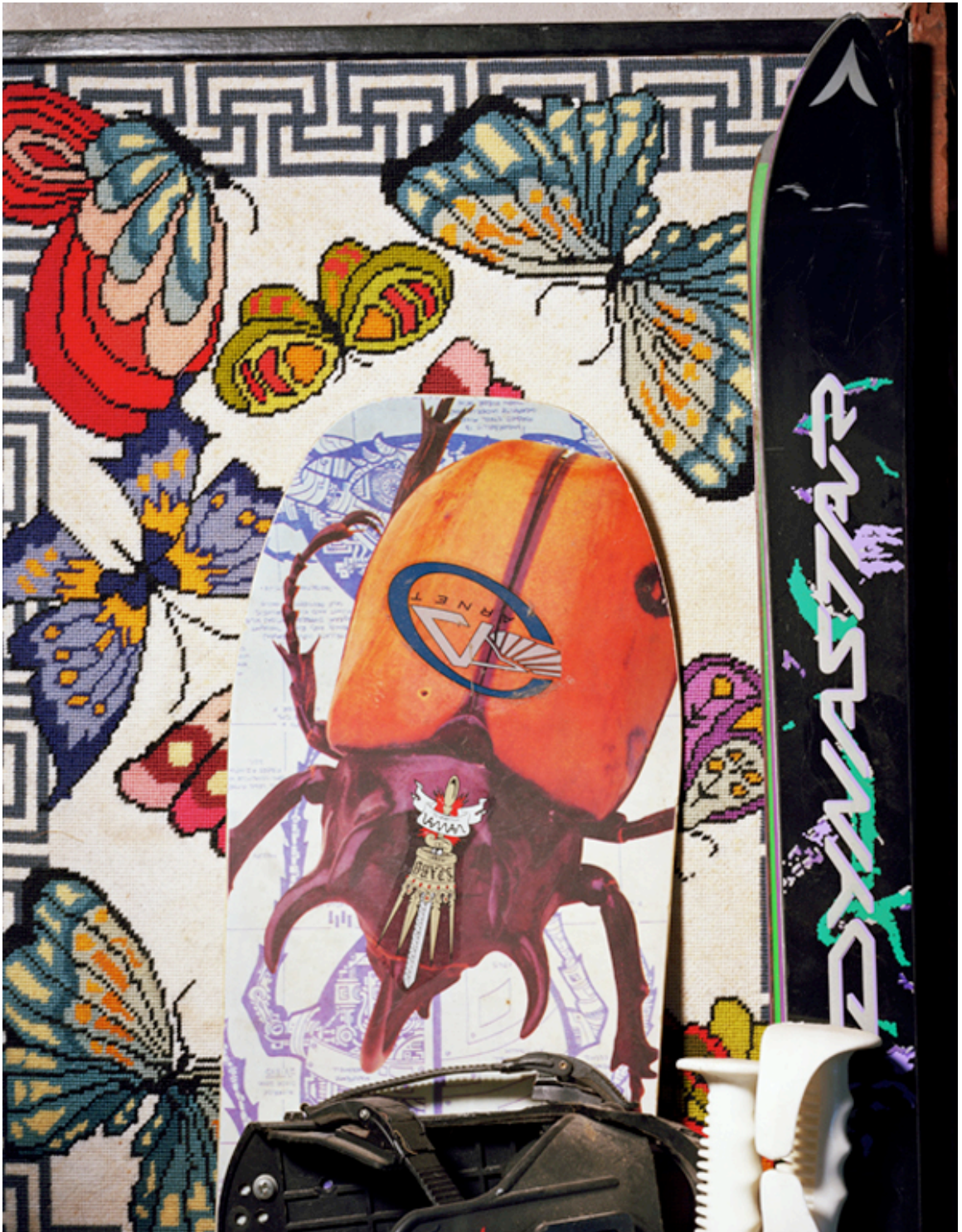
Resonance & reverberation – how the poetic image is received and understood

“The joy of reading appears to be the reflection of the joy of writing as though the reader were the writer’s ghost.”

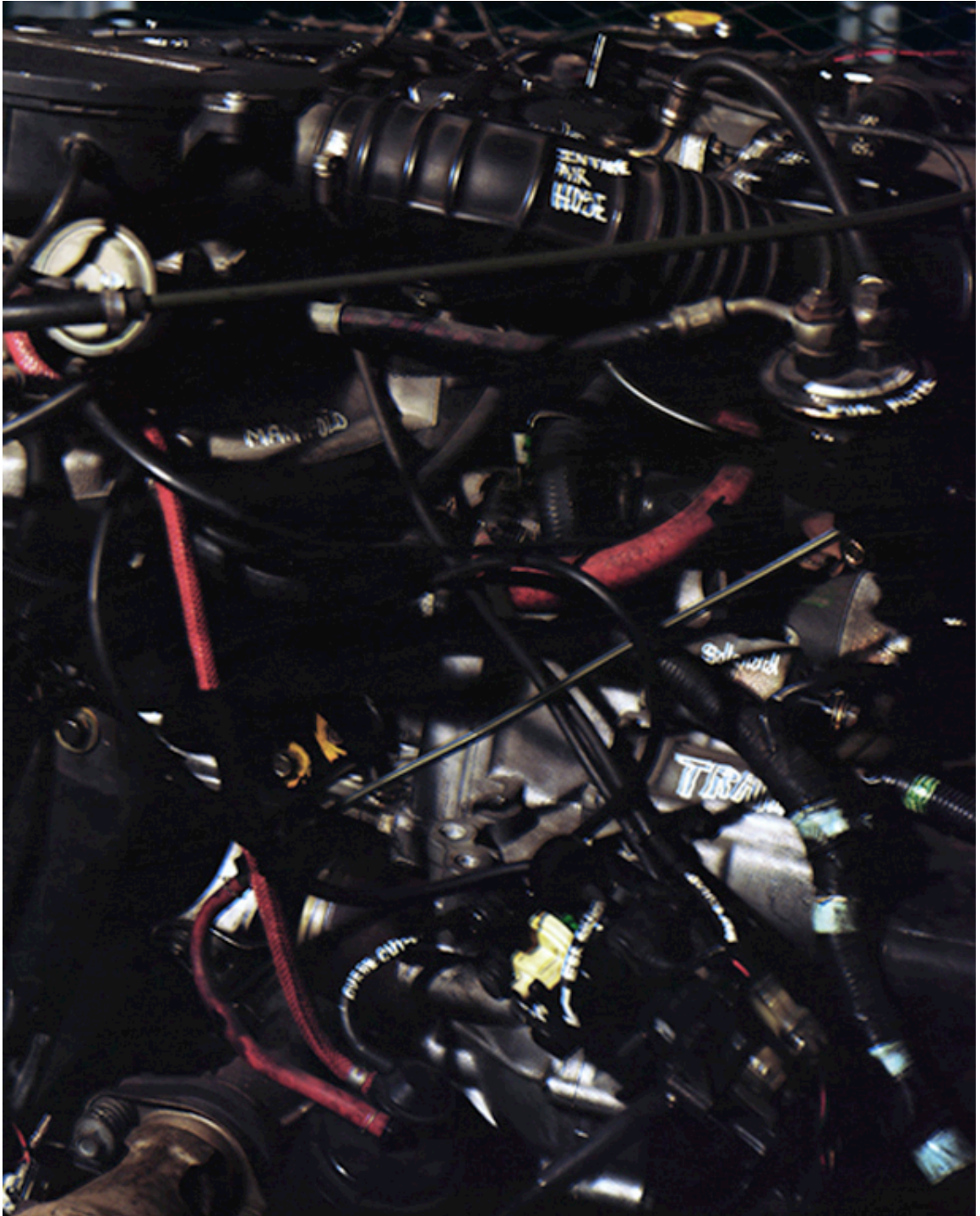
You are my ghost.

“The poem is an index for the phenomenology of expression and comprehension.”

“The poetic image in an emergence from language, is always a little above language of signification. By living poems we read, we have, then, the salutary experience of emerging... poetry puts language in a state of emergence, in which life becomes manifest through its vivacity.”



Basement II (Bugs), 2011
UltraChrome Archival Photograph



Idling No. 3, 2010
UltraChrome Archival Photograph

“Generally, the word image, in the works of psychologists, is surrounded with confusion: we see images, we reproduce images, we retain images in our memory. The image is everything except a direct product of our imagination.”

Images ≠ Memory

“Space that has been seized upon by the imagination cannot remain indifferent space subject to the measures and estimates of the surveyor, It has been lived in, not in its positivity, but with all the partiality of the imagination.”

“Space calls for action, and before action the imagination is at work.”

Daydreams



The Bat Cave at Daybreak (Interior), 2009
UltraChrome Archival Photograph

“The values that belong to daydreaming mark humanity in its depths.”

“At times, we think we know ourselves in time, when all we know is a sequence of fixations in the space of the living being’s stability...”

Oneiric (oh-neigh-ric):

Of or relating to dreams

“The great function of poetry is to give us back the situations of our dreams.”



The Bat Cave at Daybreak(exterior), 2009
UltraChrome Archival Photograph

Part 3



Lazy Eye (Kirk and the Duchess of Cleveland), 2011
UltraChrome Archival Photograph



Jax, 2011
UltraChrome Archival Photograph



Borders, 2010
UltraChrome Archival Photograph



Eastern Sierras/Alabama Hills, 2010
UltraChrome Archival Photograph

Part 4

A dog finds a bird and flushes it out of the brush. A moment later the bird lies prone on the ground and is just as quickly scooped up into the dog's mouth, carried off and presented eagerly, with pride, and even almost salaciously.

Is that satiated look in the dog's eye a sign of her wildness or an indication of her domestication, an eagerness to please her master? At what point in the hunt, if any, is there a connection to the wild, or is it all an enactment of culture?

Pointing and presentation are reciprocal actions. What we try to show the world boomerangs back to us with revelations about our nature, about the constructs of world and how we read what we see. But if the narrative of the wild were truly embraced as a cultural construct then the adventurer, the tamer of lesser species, the master of his domain, would go from hero to idiot in the blink of an eye. So, for all that is seeable, we have blind spots. They keep our actions justifiable and our stories believable so that we may eagerly point to and present what we find as some original creation, a result of our direct contact with the natural, wild world.



GunDog (with Blind Spots), 2011
UltraChrome Archival Photograph



Big Bear, 2012
UltraChrome Archival Photograph

Part 5

For the last year, I have been photographing the western landscape through both a set a concerns about the mythologies of the West and an experimental approach to my photographic practice. Using a telephoto lens, I went to shotgun shooting ranges and attempted to photograph the clay targets as they were shot to pieces. I say 'attempted' because it was always an exercise in simultaneity and collaboration with the shotgun shooter. Because the event I was trying to depict was so instantaneous and dynamic the timing of my shot had to be precisely synced with that of the shooter's shot. Through this process, I not only ended up with abstract still-lives from the frozen scattering of the clay, but with abstracted landscapes as well. The shooting ranges were all located in the foothills and rugged outskirts of Los Angeles and the San Francisco Bay Area, places where those western mythologies are both most supported and most threatened, and they became the soft backdrops to the crystalline explosions. In a reversal of this approach, I also made a large time-lapse, composite panorama of the landscape at one of these ranges. While exposing the frames, I made an audio recording of the ambient sounds of the shooting range environment. Installed together, the temporal sound and the atemporal of the photograph create a poetic space where the histories and mythologies of the landscape can be contemplated in direct correlation to their actual usage.

A new tool I've begun using for making my photographs is the GigaPan. Developed in part by NASA robotics engineers, it takes a mounted camera and mathematically maps out each frame within a larger, predefined composition to give the shooter the most optimal overlap in images for the composite. The results provide for unmatched clarity of focus,

impossible depth of field and incredible file size for mural printing. And while I embrace these characteristics of the tool, I am also interested in where it fails and how it changes that intrinsic characteristic of photography, indexicality. As the camera methodically records, the lighting shifts and subjects may move, so that in the final composite image there are often uncanny representations in the landscapes; shadows where light should be and vice-versa and ghosting of objects in otherwise perfectly still settings. But the final image is photographic and, therefore, purports a certain naturalism no matter how mechanical its origins. That paradoxical quality of photography is a central part of my practice and I find it particularly suited to my investigations into the mythology and representation of the western landscape.



Exploded Target No. 1, 2012
UltraChrome Archival Photograph
From the project, *Shooting Range*



Exploded Target No. 2, 2012
UltraChrome Archival Photograph
From the project, *Shooting Range*



Exploded Target No. 1, 2012
UltraChrome Archival Photograph
From the project, *Shooting Range*



Exploded Target No. 4, 2012
UltraChrome Archival Photograph
From the project, *Shooting Range*



Exploded Target No. 5, 2012
UltraChrome Archival Photograph
From the project, *Shooting Range*



Range (00:02:24 exposure), 2012
UltraChrome Archival Photograph, looped 00:02:24 field recording played backed through speakers



Shooting Range, 2012 (installation shot)



Shooting Range, 2012 (details)

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Thank You Thank You Thank You (yellow), 2009
UltraChrome Archival Photograph