

THE ILLUSION OF SEPARATENESS IS THE TITLE AUTHOR JANET DEES CHOSE

for her essay in the monograph *Ocean | Desert*, a premiere of photographer Renate Aller's latest body of work published by the ever-impeccable Radius Books. It's a lovely and informative essay, which, mercifully, doesn't presume to tell the reader what to think, while at the same time affording intellectual access to Aller's pairing of ocean with desert. The two are not readily similar, on a human scale at least, unless we shift to the geological perspective of time and consider the fact that much of our earth has been covered by the sea, and plenty of fossils of some of the earliest seashells are found in the desert. As Aller states, "You can measure the existence of the ocean in the desert."

Ocean | Desert, the exhibition at Chiaroscuro Contemporary Art, was equally as lovely as the book, and saved from being simply repetitious by gallery director John Addison's installation choices. Large-scale prints of the sandscapes have an impact that is quite different from the diptychs that comprise Aller's vision. "The idea was to marry the ocean and the desert because they carry each other's memory," says the artist, who has been photographing the Atlantic Ocean from the top of her house on Long Island for fifteen years. Her house is on stilts, and that gives her a vantage point that seems to make the ocean more manageable. As Aller describes it, "up close, the ocean almost towers over" its human visitors. In the artist's photographs, the Atlantic looks elegant and remote, like someone's wealthy, proper grandmother from another era. No one surfs, swims, or fishes in Aller's ocean; it is comforting and close, left alone to its elegiac dreaming.

Intrigued by the notion that White Sands National Monument in New Mexico and Colorado's Great Sand Dunes National Park are physically aligned, Aller came to this part of the country to photograph the "Desert" part of the exhibition. The large-scale photograph, #079, of the Great Sand Dunes, minus its "Ocean" counterpart, carried a monumental presence that brought to mind Georgia O'Keeffe's *Black Place* paintings with their dramatic extremes of bright and dark. Aller has O'Keeffe's ability to convey the visual allure of abstracted land and sky, yet the photographer does not mimic the painter; nor does Aller's work hint at being anything like an *Homage to Georgia*, which we see all too often here in Santa Fe. Rather, it is the case that the human mind seeks to make similarities and comparisons, comparisons that the land provides and good artists re-present.

The White Sands pictures are conspicuous because of the people who populate them. Photographing on an Easter Sunday, Aller was surprised to discover that families come there to celebrate holidays. The potency of white as a metaphor for the purity and renewal of Easter increases when the viewer realizes that White Sands is the home of the first A-Bomb blasts. Ever silent, the constantly changing hills of gypsum grains do not reveal their secrets; they may be radioactive still, but they are undeniably gorgeous.

The people here seem as interior, as quiet, as the place itself. There is not a posed or pretentious stillness, but a natural, if temporary, co-habitation between children, their parents, and the sands. Innocence abides, not only on the surface of the picture, but within its

deeper narrative. In this sense, I understand Aller's preferences for the Romantic painters, especially Caspar David Friedrich, whose *Nature with a Capital N* is sublime, and humans the ephemeral aberrance, or at best mere witnesses to a greatness they cannot begin to apprehend. When we consider what the men from the Manhattan Project wrought in these ethereal dunes, we sense the impossibility of our own humanity. The individuals in the pictures gain a simple virtuousness in contrast to a history they seem unaware of. They are immigrants in the Land of Plenty at a Price.

Meanwhile, the ocean waits to reclaim the land. In Aller's diptychs, the sandscapes could be the beaches behind the sea, as if the photographer took her ocean pictures, then turned around and shot the scene behind her. But there is a gravitas here that belies such an instinctive first impression, a tension that lends a slight sense of foreboding to these compositions. Despite the frank beauty of her single vistas—#135, *White Sands* is so classic, so pristine, that I can't imagine anyone not wanting to own it—the twin views of water and sand, the latter oddly populated, carry the weight of the show. This is a planet that will forever be strange to us, no matter how closely we observe it. We are of this earth, but have become so alienated from it. The loneliness of our human predicament inhabits these photographs, like children in the sand dunes.

—KATHRYN M DAVIS

Renate Aller, *Ocean | Desert* #61 *White Sands* March 2013, #62 *Atlantic Ocean* May 2013, archival pigment print, 19" x 43", 2014

