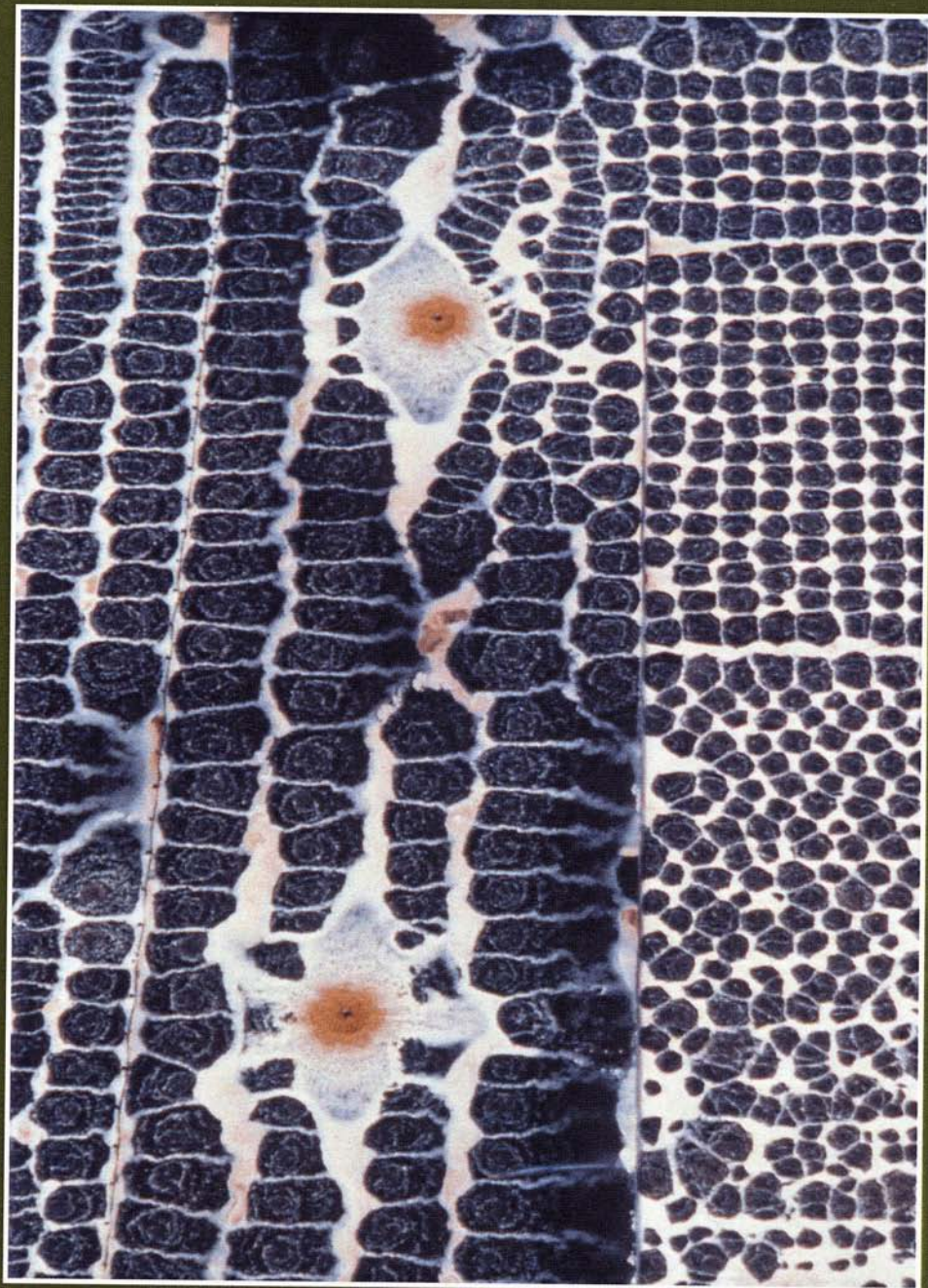




Mark Abrahamson *Watershed Investigations*

Hallwalls November 10 to December 22, 2001

Watershed Investigations

There is a deceptive simplicity to the work of Mark Abrahamson. The aerial photographs from his ongoing *Watershed Investigations* project remain unerringly simple and concise, yet fluctuate within an extremely complex field of meanings. As straightforward as they are (they are literally color aerial photographs of American river watersheds) they are full of rich ambiguities. Not merely ambiguities in subject matter, but pictorial ambiguities, the visual slipping from representation into abstraction, from document into their own striking rendition of eye candy.

The impulse to document the impact of development and man-made forces upon American waterways and the land surrounding was, and remains, a practical concern for Abrahamson, an ardent recreational fisherman and conservationist. However, despite the urgent reality of the issues at hand, there is never the least hint of proselytizing in his work. Abrahamson merely selects an optimum perspective and lets the land speak for itself. Apart from the occasionally oblique shooting angle, there is likewise nothing complicated about his photographic maneuvering. In the age of Photoshop, it is worth noting that Abrahamson does not augment his imagery with computer manipulation. They are shot and processed. They are, as with the landscape that is their subject, right here before you.

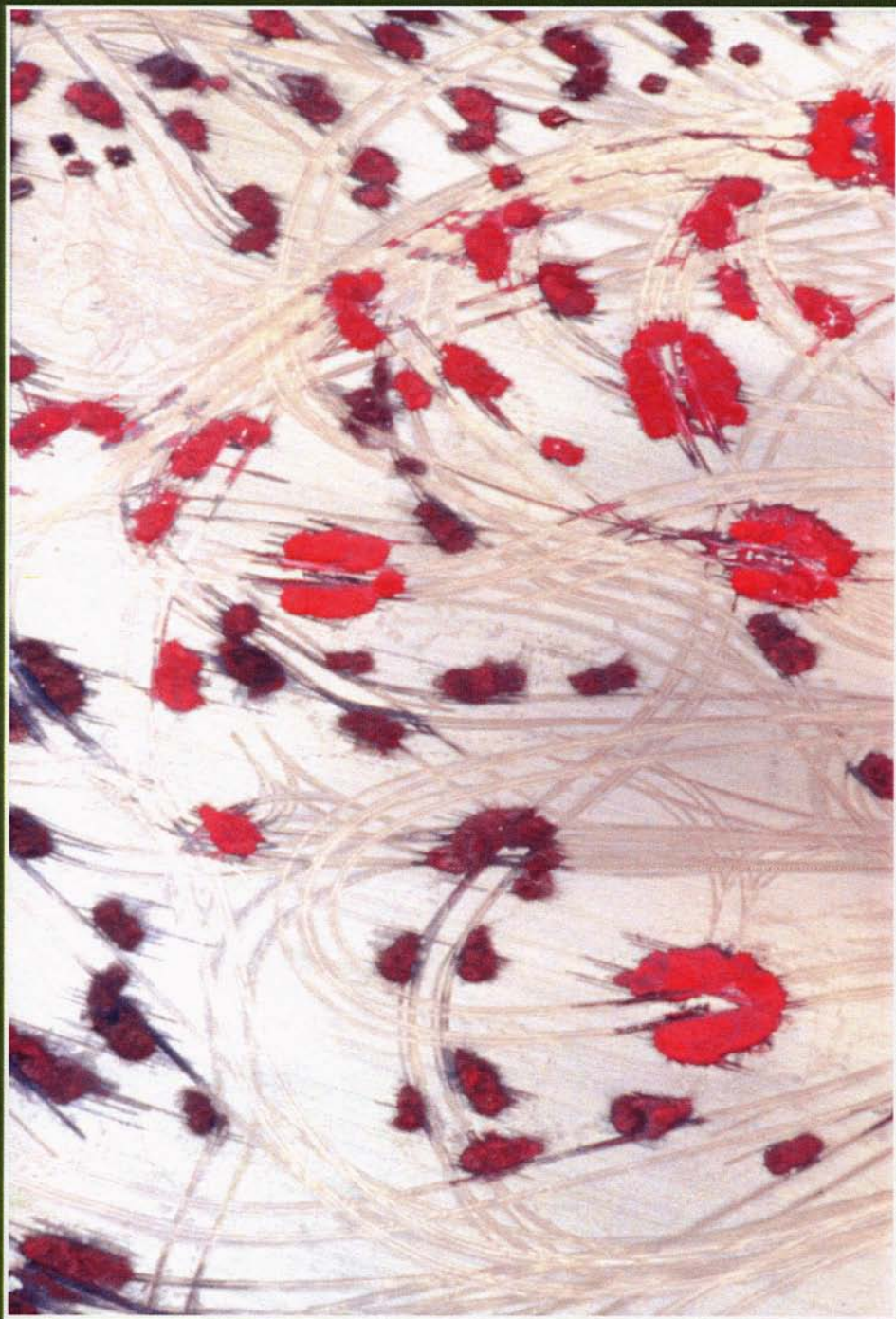
At times, this knowledge does little to clarify our visual experience. While there are images where the subject matter is apparent (an overhead view of SUV's lined up on a roadway), there are many more in which ambiguity becomes the dominant fact. There are images in which the photographic actuality of the work blurs into an uncertainty. Images like *Strawberry Field #5* and *Pulp Ponds* look much more like abstract paintings than documentary images.

There is a staggering bluntness at hand and a staggering beauty. And the question of beauty in Abrahamson's photographs is deep and complex. Certain distinctions are blurred and it is not always obvious whether the visual thrill in an image is the result of positive or negative factors. It is something like realizing that an intensely gorgeous hue of pink at sunset is actually atmospheric pollution. Is it the egregious impact of industry or the forces of nature that are creating the visual effects before us? Within this is a metaphor about our relationship to the land and our need to invest a deeper understanding in the issues if we ever hope to resolve them.

And while the literal, ecological issues are never far away, it is intriguing to think only of beauty. A beauty that verges on jaw-dropping. Think only of the lush, otherworld that Mark Abrahamson somehow concocts without artistic trickery or subterfuge. He is utilizing the simplest artistic gesture—framing a point of view—to portray landscapes so visually startling they at times suggest alien topography.

That they are not alien at all is the final rub, the lasting impact of the deceptively simple.

John Massier
Visual Arts Curator



Strawberry Field #5, 1993, cibachrome

Artist's Statement

As an environmentalist, citizen activist and artists for the past twenty years in Washington State I've been involved in landuse and watershed restoration processes. As an ardent recreational fisherman, I've observed the decimation of legendary runs of King salmon, Coho, steelhead and cutthroat trout in Puget Sound. Sloppy logging practices have increased sedimentation and exacerbated flooding. Pollution from industry, herbicide and pesticide misuse, fertilizers, household hazardous wastes, dairy and equestrian farms, and failing septic tank systems have fouled the waters of the Sound. Development has increased runoff and destroyed wetlands as we've raced to pave over the countryside.

Since 1990, I've photographed American river watersheds, focusing on water and the impact of landuse upon it, from locations as diverse as Washington State, the "meadows" in Las Vegas, the Low country of Savannah, Georgia and urban watersheds in Seattle, Chicago, Philadelphia and New York. Photographing at a low altitude in helicopters and airplanes, one witnesses a landscape continuously redefined by development and the forces of nature. The deceptive beauty of the land is made more ambiguous through a choice of oblique shooting angles—upon close inspection, the world below reveals itself as troubled and complex.

Water quality in some urban watersheds has improved in the past twenty-five years. On the Hudson River, you can now swim or catch twenty pound striped bass (albeit laced with PCBs). In Seattle's Duwamish River, recreational fishermen catch salmon and steelhead. Chicago River wetlands have been restored, native plant and aquatic life are returning and water quality has been upgraded. Improvements are due to a combination of factors: Federal environmental laws enacted in the early 1970s; changes in industry and agriculture; greater public environmental awareness; and to the leadership of conservation and citizen groups that promote a sense of identity between local citizenry and their rivers.

However, there remains along way to go to clean up our marine waters and rivers. Washington State, often portrayed as a national leader for environmental concerns, in fact ranks first in the country for the dumping of carcinogenic chemicals into its waters. A recent New York Times poll indicated that 80% of Americans polled favoured "spending whatever it takes to protect our environment." The right to a safe, healthy environment has become a core American value.

— Mark Abrahamson

MARK ABRAHAMSON graduated with a BA from Whitman College (Walla Walla, WA) in 1966 and received his DDS from the University of Washington, Seattle in 1970. Since that time, he has maintained a dental practice in Seattle. Since 1990, has been exhibiting his photography in various group and solo exhibitions across the United States, including Art in General (New York), San Fransisco Art Institute, Frye Art Museum (Seattle), 55 Mercer Street (New York) and ARC Gallery (Chicago). His work is housed in the corporate collections of Microsoft and Deutsche Bank and several museum collections, including The Museum of Contemporary Photography (Chicago), Knoxville Museum of Art, Tacoma Art Museum, Portland Art Museum, Northwest Special Collection—Seattle Arts Commission, Boise Art Museum, and the Brooklyn Museum of Art.



Lichen Planus, 1994, cibachrome



Cheesesteak, 1997, cibachrome

HALLWALLS

CONTEMPORARY ARTS CENTER
2495 Main Street #425, Buffalo, NY 14214
tel 716.835.7362 fax 716.835.7364
www.hallwalls.org

Cover image: *Pulps Ponds*, 1993, cibachrome

Hallwalls' visual arts program is supported by generous grants from the New York State Council on the Arts and The Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts.

Watershed Investigations is co-sponsored by Great Lakes United.

