

# The Overlook

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“In that Empire, the Art of Cartography attained such Perfection that the map of a single Province occupied the entirety of a City, and the map of the Empire, the entirety of a Province. In time, those Unconscionable Maps no longer satisfied, and the Cartographers Guilds struck a Map of the Empire whose size was that of the Empire, and which coincided point for point with it. The following Generations, who were not so fond of the Study of Cartography as their Forebears had been, saw that that vast Map was Useless, and not without some Pitilessness was it, that they delivered it up to the Inclemencies of Sun and Winters. In the Deserts of the West, still today, there are Tattered Ruins of that Map, inhabited by Animals and Beggars; in all the Land there is no other Relic of the Disciplines of Geography.”

Jorge Luis Borges, *On Exactitude In Science*

“If I am in a car and I look at the scenery through the window, I can at will focus on the scenery or on the windowpane. At one moment I grasp the presence of the glass and the distance of the landscape; at another, on the contrary, the transparency of the glass and the depth of the landscape; but the result of this alternation is constant: the glass is at once present and empty to me, and the landscape unreal and full.”

Roland Barthes, *Myth Today*



*Zenith*, 2024. Inkjet print, 40" x 40".

There is a spot out near Seal Rock where the ocean drops away and reveals the most incredible tide pools I have ever seen. I have spent hours craning over them while visiting the Oregon Coast, marveling at anemones and starfish as barnacle-encrusted sea stacks tower overhead. I return to these spaces again and again, scouting for whales from the nearby overlooks and taking photos atop the rocky lattices where earth and tide meet.

At its core, this continual return is about desire—a desire for stillness and for the sublime, rendered accessible by coastal highway and scenic overlook. It is this same desire I pursue in my images that document these trips, as I zoom in on my phone to take in the minute curve of a wave or a spray of foam. Yet there is always a point where this access is refused: the tide starts to come in, the ground is unstable, the layers of intertidal life are too thick, the photograph begins to pixelate. The best tide pools, I begin to notice, are those I cannot reach.

These questions of desire, representation, and refusal are at the heart of the photographs that make up *The Overlook*. The images begin in the state parks and scenic viewpoints that dot the Oregon Coast, which attempt to frame the land into a definitive and accessible vista. Within these spaces, I photograph the landscape through strategies that seemingly reinforce this framing; some images, made on a large format camera, reproduce scenic overlook infrastructure in exacting detail, while others chase the sublime through the tunnel-like view of a pair of binoculars. Together, these strands of the project embrace the overlook as a conceptual framework where the infrastructural and the photographic converge, in an attempt to bring the sublime into clear view.

It is these same processes that compromise the images from their outset. The large format photographs never reveal the views their subjects are meant to frame, while the binocular images collapse into peripheral abstractions where pixelation, optical aberrations, and fragments of landscape intermingle. The sublime that inspires the images is evasive, manifesting not as a fixed element of the terrain, but as a fleeting resonance of the camera's making. In this moment, the images lose their status as photographs about landscape. Instead, they become photographs about looking.

In tourist photographs of the Oregon Coast, one composition appears with remarkable frequency. It is always centered on a lone figure, their face unseen and their back turned to the camera. Before them unfolds a scene of sublime spectacle—spires of rock, crashing waves, a radiant sunset. The point of view varies, from the arms-length perspective of a vlogging camera to the distant overhead view of a drone. In all of these images, though, the figure is at a remove—most often, taking in the landscape from an elevated scenic viewpoint. The sublime plays out before them, but they stand above the fray.

It is a composition clearly reminiscent of Caspar David Friedrich's *Wanderer Above the Sea Fog* (1818), though one always facilitated by the infrastructure of the scenic overlook. At times, this infrastructure becomes a central element of the composition: a Forest Service path snakes into the distance, a scenic highway rounds a corner, a cobblestone wall frames a panorama. At others, the viewpoint goes unpictured but presents itself elsewhere; location tags on social media are emblazoned with names like Thor's Well, Cook's Chasm, or Cape Disappointment, while the metadata embedded in each image displays the exact coordinates where the photographer stood to take in an awe-inspiring convergence of water and rock.

In all of its manifestations, this infrastructure is ubiquitous in framing experiences of the Oregon Coast. Its backbone is the Oregon Coast Highway, which first brought continuous access to the coast in the 20th century and facilitates its role as a contemporary recreational site. Every few miles of the highway, pull-offs allow visitors to park their car next to the ocean and take in the view. There, they are likely to find tower viewer binoculars, readily-marked trailheads, and Oregon State Parks didactics describing noteworthy features of the landscape. Throughout, the experience is mediated by the optical and the photographic—the decommissioned lighthouse, the superzoom camera, the tower viewer, the souvenir image.

In sum, this infrastructure has framed the coast as a legible landscape—a space where access is unobstructed, points of interest are clear, and a definitive view sits around every corner, ready to be looked at and photographed. In the legible landscape, the sublime is presented as fixed, predictable, and conveniently framed by the infrastructure of the coast, its facets flattened into a consumable experience. It is a wildness of a sort, but a wildness selected for, simplified, and preserved as an aesthetic experience, easily accessed and photo-ready.

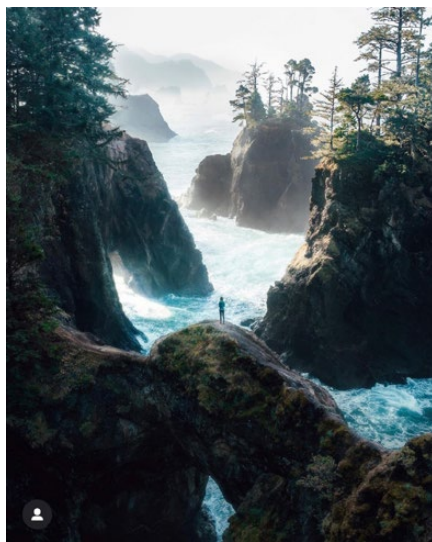
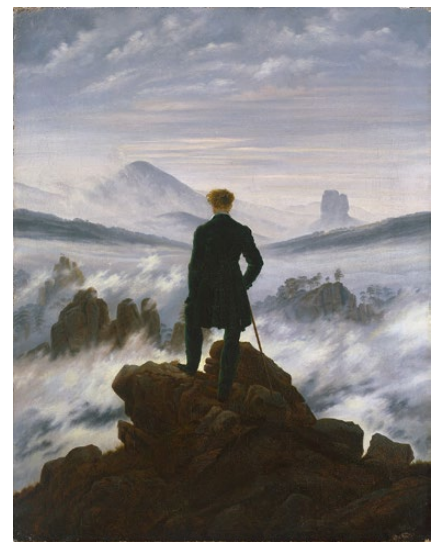


Image by @eyeofshe, sourced from Instagram's Oregon Coast location tag.



Caspar David Friedrich.  
*Wanderer Above the Sea Fog*, 1818.  
Oil on canvas, 37.3" × 29.4".



*Observatory*, 2024. Inkjet print, 40" x 50".

This sense of legibility is not an ahistorical phenomenon. Rather, the contemporary accessibility of the Oregon Coast draws much from the ways that European colonization and Manifest Destiny have shaped the land over the past two centuries. At first, this order served navigability, as American settlers violently displaced Indigenous communities and built economies around resource extraction. In addition to the lighthouses built to aid maritime commerce, Oregon's beaches themselves served as makeshift roads before a paved alternative existed (Tobias). In 1913, the public's use of the coast in this manner led then-governor Oswald West to claim Oregon's beaches as a state highway, enshrining public access below the high tide line (Tobias).

During the 20th century, however, this navigational infrastructure became the foundation upon which the coast's status as a leisure destination was built. Many of the lighthouses that once guided ships were decommissioned and repurposed into tourist sites, and the construction of U.S. Route 101 connected much of the coast into a landscape readily accessible by car. The shoreline's status as public land evolved, too; spurred by a Cannon Beach hotel's attempts to privatize a strip of shoreline, the Oregon legislature permanently enshrined public access to Oregon beaches with 1967's House Bill 1601, commonly known as the "Beach Bill" ("Public...").

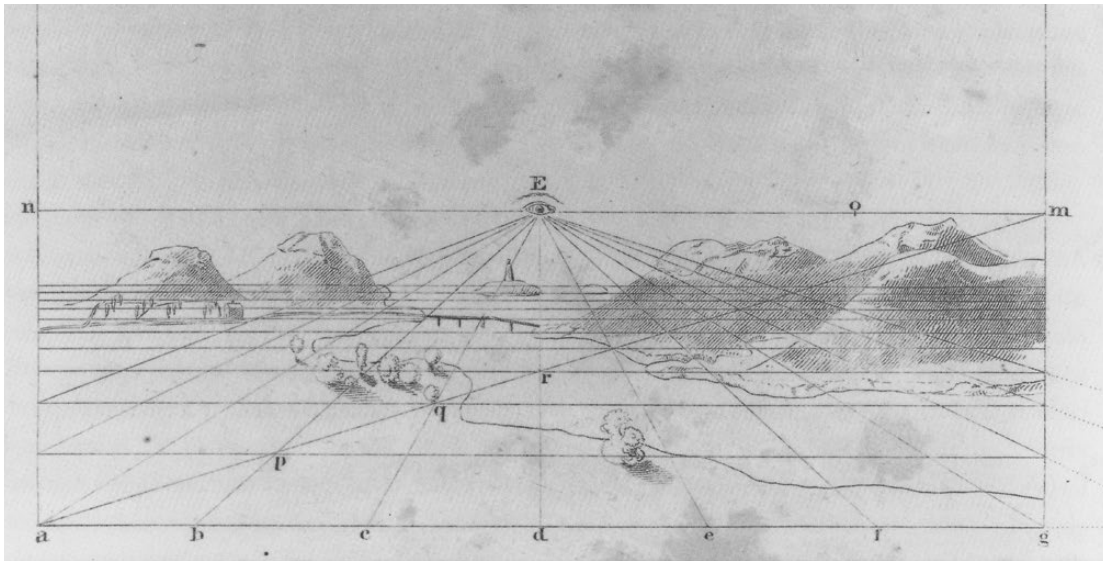
Throughout, proponents of the Beach Bill framed their arguments explicitly in terms of the coast's value as a pristine haven for recreation. At the bill's signing, then-Governor Tom McCall noted that the law would "enable Oregon to meet its burgeoning needs for recreation far into the future" ("KGW Vault..."), and in advocating for similar policies, condemned the spread of "coastal condomania" that threatened "unfettered despoiling of the land" (Gifford 486). In doing so, McCall signaled the transition of the Oregon Coast from a space of resource-based economies into one of aesthetics—a transition from a landscape to be used into a landscape to be looked at.



$8x25\ 44^{\circ}29'32.48''\ N\ 124^{\circ}5'6.74''\ W$  (*Horizon*), 2024.  
Inkjet print on metallic paper, 21" x 28".

This aesthetic reordering has inscribed these histories into the way we see the landscape of the Oregon Coast today. It is a reordering that has much in common with Albert Boime's notion of the "magisterial landscape," a perspective found within American Romantic landscape paintings that contextualizes the land within the westward march of Manifest Destiny.





Seth Eastman. *Method of drawing a perspective view from a topographical plain*, 1837.  
 Reproduced in *The Magisterial Gaze: Manifest Destiny and American Landscape Painting c. 1830-1865*.

Arising out of the historical tension between what European settlers identified as pristine, untouched nature and its supposed ruin at the hands of American progress, Boime argues in *The Magisterial Gaze: Manifest Destiny and American Landscape Painting c. 1830-1865* that the magisterial landscape took root within the paintings of the Hudson River School during the mid-19th century. “Almost invariably,” Boime writes, the setting for the paintings often “occurred on the heights,” and “the compositions were arranged with the spectator in mind, either assuming the elevated viewpoint of the onlooker or including a staffage figure seen from behind that functioned as a surrogate onlooker” (1).

From the spectator’s perspective, the landscape unfurls as both a topographical display and a temporal continuum of American progress. Signs of the land’s former “wildness” (forests, unruly shrubs, tangles of vegetation that interrupt the horizon, and at times, stand-ins for Indigenous communities) make way for signs of European progress, pacification, and development (cleared tracts of land, farms, and train tracks snaking through a visually contiguous expanse). Within this continuum, Boime notes that the spectator’s gaze is often fixed on the horizon beyond the landscape, suggesting that the progression of wildness to civilization marches ever on (9). Boime argues that similar evocations of Manifest Destiny can be found throughout 19th-century American art and literature, presenting the genocidal displacement of Indigenous communities as an inevitable step in America’s westward push.

Notably, this narrative is not built through isolated vignettes or fragmented compositions, but rests on a seamless stitching of the landscape into one visual and narrative singularity. From their elevated position, the spectator of the magisterial landscape sees the past, present, and future of the land, brought together under a seamless horizon of American progress and free of “the finicky details that contradict and despoil the whole” (18). Under the sweeping expanse of this magisterial gaze, Boime argues, “the panoramic prospect becomes a metonymic image...of the desire for dominance”: the pursuit of an ever-greater singularity, a viewpoint from which all can be seen, synthesized, and possessed.

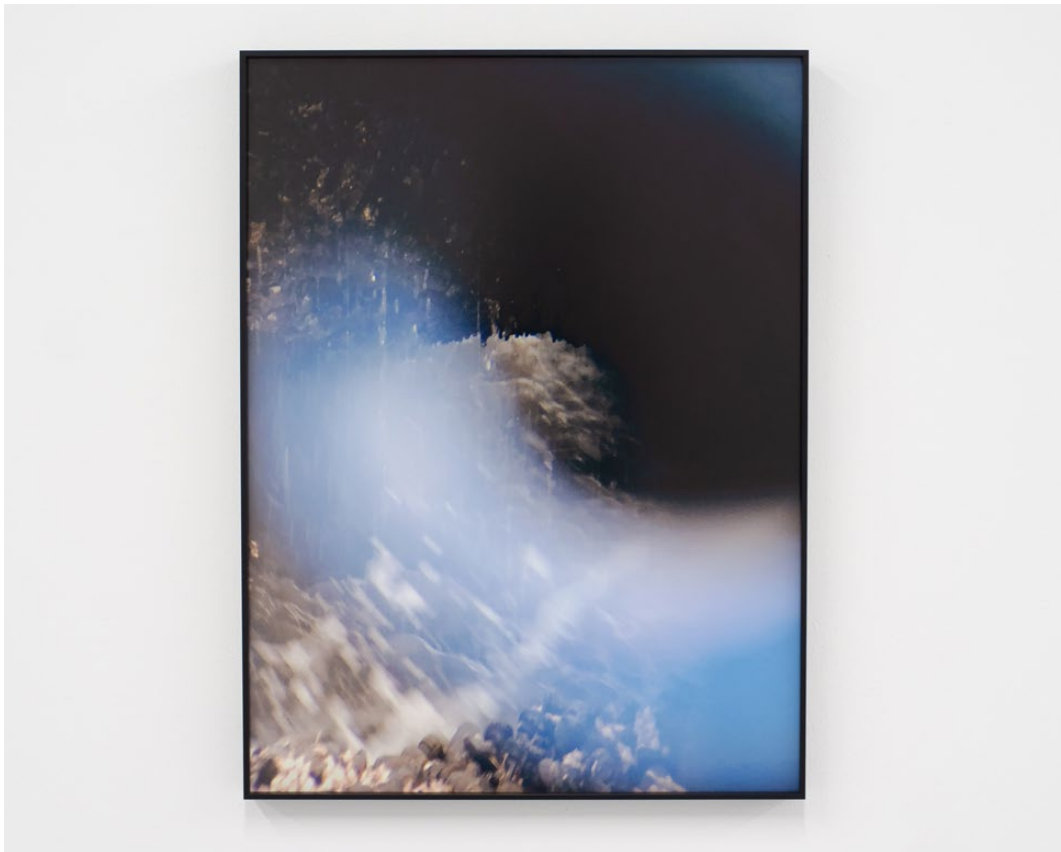
Throughout my visits to the coast, I often found myself leaning on photography to provide a similar sort of visual clarity. I carried a medium format film camera that reproduced the landscape with exacting detail, as I sought compositions that evoked the feelings of the sublime I was experiencing. At some point, I began to treat my phone images in a similar manner, zooming in to pore over the minute details of each scene. I also began photographing the coast through a pair of binoculars, which promised to bring distant objects into clear view and advertised full compatibility with a phone camera.

Making these photographs was fundamentally aesthetic in nature, but they also had an ethical concern; I hoped that my images would help me resolve my questions of what it meant to exist in this space, with its densely layered histories of dispossession, commercial development, and environmental conservation. These questions were especially relevant as a photographer, as I added to a body of imagery that had historically been used to romanticize, colonize, and develop the coast into the legible landscape it is today. I hoped that my own photographs would help me reconcile some of these questions, to better understand my role in this contested space. Yet these answers never materialized, and a sense of disorientation persisted: the binoculars would lose focus, and the images would collapse into fields of pixels.



*Pinch-Zoom Seascape*, 2024. Inkjet print, 8" x 10".

While reckoning with this disorientation, I encountered the work of Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing. In *The Mushroom at the End of the World*, Tsing examines the matsutake mushroom and its trajectory as a global commodity that begins in logged Oregon forests and ends in luxury markets in Japan, where it is sold as one of the most expensive agricultural goods on the planet. Notably, matsutake only grow in areas that have been deforested or ecologically disturbed, making their capitalist transformation into a luxury consumer good particularly striking.



8x25 44°16'42.09" N 124°6'48.5" W (*Precipice*), 2024.  
Inkjet print on metallic paper, 21" x 28".

In analyzing this trajectory, Tsing advocates against the easy binaries associated with the matsutake (the untouched old-growth versus the forest shattered by logging, the pure versus the commodified). Instead, Tsing argues for understanding this network of relations through a model of “contaminated diversity.” Within this model, Tsing writes, “we are contaminated by our encounters; they change who we are as we make way for others. As contamination changes world-making projects, mutual worlds—and new directions—may emerge. Everyone carries a history of contamination; purity is not an option” (33). While understanding can be found within this tangle of encounters, easy moral judgments are elusive. Rather than independent, self-contained entities, we are constantly shaping (and being shaped by) the worlds in which we are enmeshed. The peripheral is just as important as the center, the essential is nowhere to be found, and no one emerges unscathed.



8x25 44°7'32.29" N 124°7'32.69" W (*Interrelation*), 2024.  
Inkjet print on metallic paper, 40" x 53".

Echoes of Tsing's approach can be found in works like Timothy Morton's *Subscendence*, which examines questions of the definitive and the essential in an age of ecological crisis. Beginning from the premise that the whole is never greater than the sum of its parts, Morton argues for framing existence as a "subscendent whole," where every entity is made up of parts whose number and complexity vastly dwarf what contains them. In this model of subscendence, Morton argues, boundaries between entities are highly "fuzzy and ragged," and "there is no one true and proper scale," as the innumerable facets that make something up lead everything to take on infinitely complex, fractal relations. Crucially, Morton echoes Tsing in identifying the obliteration of perspective that ensues from this fractal nature, writing that "cynical distance cannot be achieved, because there is no place from which to grasp the totality without losing something." The definitive no longer looks so definitive, the overlook collapses, and we are thrown into the waves.

Amidst this destabilization, I found the binocular photographs taking on new meaning. From the start, the images could never be considered faithful to their subject matter. Buffeted in the coastal wind, I often found myself with images whose framing was left to chance. The limited image circle and lens coatings of the binoculars caused vignetting and flare, while the phone's rudimentary light meter and noise reduction algorithms would blow out details or veil the image in dense layers of pixelation. To compensate, I would often drag the exposure down into complete darkness, bathing much of the image in shadows that transformed the subjects into landscapes imagined by the camera: a barnacle-encrusted rock would become a meteor, the edge of the binoculars a horizon.



$8x25\ 44^{\circ}19'22.83''N\ 124^{\circ}6'22.52''W$  (*Collapse*), 2024.  
Inkjet print on metallic paper, 21" x 28".

These fallible images rarely captured the sublime nature of their original subject matter; in many, the landscape was hardly even visible. Yet I found that these imperfections became resonant in their own right. The binoculars' lens coatings would bathe the scene in an otherworldly blue or reflect the surrounding landscape, dissolving the boundaries between subject and photographer in a way that felt reminiscent of Tsing's contaminated diversity and Morton's subsistence. The pixelation that beset the images became equally engaging, as what appeared to be solid outlines between elements in the frame dissolved into hazy, interrelated fields of color.

It was not only the images themselves that were breaking down, but the promise of clarity that they offered. Yet, amidst this breakdown, the images gained a new kind of resonance, even as their reference to the topography fell away. The sublime interaction with the coast that inspired the photographs went unseen, replaced by alternative landscapes of the camera's making. It felt all the more crucial that these moments were not fixed, unlike the proscribed view of the scenic overlook. Though fragments of landscape occasionally appeared in the images, the compositions were impossible to replicate without the mediating influence of the camera. Indeed, given the chance involved in the images' creation, they may not be reproducible at all.

Within these reconfigured landscapes, an element of refusal soon became inescapable. It was not simply that the sublime was outstripping the camera's capability to record it; rather, obscuring the landscape through the camera's presence became a deliberate artistic choice. I found myself pursuing these degraded images, chasing the optical aberrations of the binoculars and eschewing photographs that offered any hint of the original landscape. Doing so was not just an aesthetic choice, but ultimately came to form the central ethical component of *The Overlook*.



8x25 44°16'40.42" N 124°6'46.27" W (*Monolith*), 2024.  
Inkjet print on metallic paper, 21" x 28".

In examining the nature of this refusal, I returned to ideas laid out in Édouard Glissant's *Poetics of Relation*, where Glissant writes on how conceptions of difference can be reoriented towards freedom. In examining this retooling, Glissant notes that efforts of understanding cross-cultural difference have long been predicated on transparency and assimilation. In Glissant's words, "in order to understand and thus accept you, I have to measure your solidity with the ideal scale providing me with grounds to make comparisons, and, perhaps, judgments. I have to reduce" (189-190). This moment, Glissant notes, is akin to a simplification of a complex individual into a selective image: "to recreate...afresh" in a logic of difference that is legible and easily contextualized within a majoritarian system (190).

It is this moment of reduction that Glissant argues against. Instead of insisting upon mutual transparency and comprehensibility, Glissant argues for the "need to bring an end to the very notion of a scale," to accept difference that is not predicated on neat comprehensibility (190). Doing so, Glissant writes, is contingent upon recognizing that human beings are fundamentally "fractal in nature" (193), with facets of identity opaque even to ourselves. By recognizing this unknowability, he argues, we are able to make space for such illegibility in others—to free our relations from the burden of absolute transparency, just as we free ourselves from full understanding. In doing so, we are able to forsake essentialism and embrace difference for what it is—a divergence that need not be rendered transparent to be afforded legitimacy.

Similar questions of representation and refusal occur in Roland Barthes' "The Third Meaning," where Barthes outlines how "obtuse meaning" subverts attempts to build understanding within an artwork. Distinguishing from the literal or symbolic meaning an artwork is capable of conveying, Barthes outlines obtuse meaning as the idiosyncratic formal qualities of an image that are resonant for the viewer, even as they refuse to coalesce into a broader narrative. Barthes argues that this resonance, which sticks with the viewer even as it maintains a "freedom of position with respect to narrative" (57), has a disrupting effect on synthesizing any broader message of a work: it resists categorization by language, causing it to "subvert the entire practice of meaning" that the artwork is otherwise engaged in (56).



8x25 44°16'39.98" N 124°6'46.25" W (*Threshold*), 2024.  
Inkjet print on metallic paper, 21" x 28".

To outline this sensation, Barthes focuses on manifestations of obtuse meaning in Sergei Eisenstein's *Ivan the Terrible*—a pained expression in a close-up, or makeup applied unevenly to the faces of the actors (43-47). To Barthes, these moments add nothing to the plot or symbolism of the film, yet they contain an energy that is both undeniable and tricky to pin down, as if "something in these two faces transcends psychology, anecdote, function, and, in short, meaning" (43). In their assertion of their own presence, these moments interrupt and overwhelm the informational context of which they are a part, creating an idiosyncratic relationship with the viewer that is highly personal and impossible to sum up.





$8x25\ 44^{\circ}16'40.37''\ N\ 124^{\circ}6'46.22''\ W$  (*Veil*), 2024.  
Inkjet print on metallic paper, 21" x 28".

These notions of opacity, unknowability, and refusal came to form the heart of *The Overlook*. In a space where photography has already acted as a vehicle of legibility and simplification, of what use is remaking a map? Is the sublime truly sublime if it can be contained within an image? Can breaking down the photograph's representational capabilities evoke a personal relationship with a place without rendering it fixed, passive, and universal? And what happens when the camera's gaze turns inward, subverting representation and allowing its subject to go unseen?

It is my hope that my images approach these questions by acting as illegible landscapes—spaces where the sublime is felt but not represented, where photographs draw their resonance from their own fallibility, and where images of a place actively resist its essentialization. Through these photographs, I work towards a relationship to landscape not predicated upon the singular and the magisterial, but grounded in the fleeting, the multifaceted, the illegible, and the irreducible. In doing so, I position the images in *The Overlook* as models upon which new photographic relations with place can be formed—as glimpses that subscend the definitive view.

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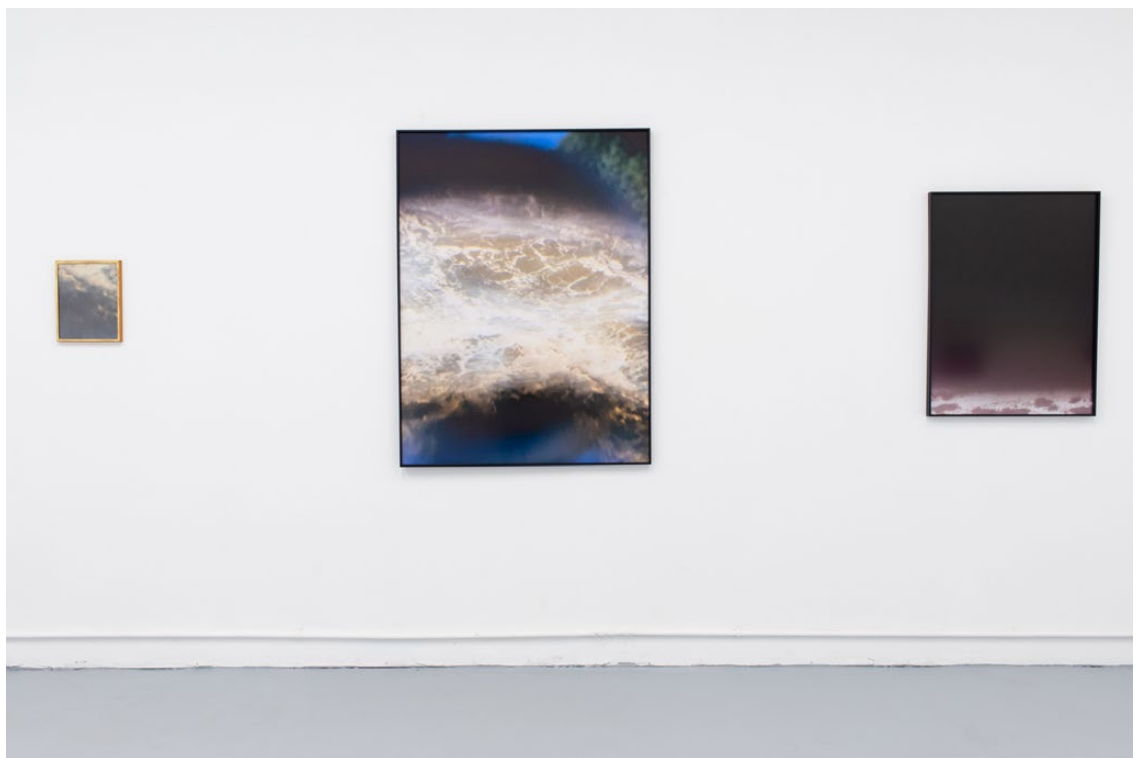
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# Installation Images

Ditch Projects, Springfield, OR. May 17-26, 2024.







# Watchers

16 pages, 11 images. 5.5" x 7.5".

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