

aperture

David Benjamin Sherry By Kevin Moore

Exploring what remains of the American landscape—while using an antiquated photographic process that relies on light and chemicals to produce a print—is David Benjamin Sherry's fool's errand. Of course, landscape is not disappearing, nor is photography, but both of these "endangered territories" are undergoing acute alteration caused by manic human industry and technological advancement. One might imagine such pictures to be dark, dour, bleak, accusatory. But no, they are happy, sunny, druggy, romantic. Sherry's photographs capture faintly eroticized, dewy, and transcendent beauty in a climate of extinction. They are the painted face of Candy Darling, Warhol's muse, on her deathbed, exaltedly lovely at her greatest moment of tragedy.

The allusion is not random, for Sherry's colors—ochre, magenta, cerulean—are quietly flamboyant. Not Jeff Koons-flamboyant, offering every flavor in a single lick, but monochromatically flamboyant, as if paying innocent homage to Ansel Adams and Fred Archer's Zone System in hues of violet instead of gray. The effect is one of nonchalant inversion, of blowing "straight photography" a kittenishly affectionate kiss. The essential traditionalism of Sherry's photographs—their evident reverence for American landscape photography, emulating iconic works (even in their eroticization) by Ansel Adams, Edward Weston, Frederick Sommer, and Minor White—is perhaps more unexpected than the pictures' large scale and intense color. Sherry, who describes his perspective as that of an "outsider," does not mind being part of this club.

Straight photography: The curious term was already in use during the 1880s, as Carleton Watkins and others trekked the West and sent home photographs of a sublime landscape Easterners could scarcely imagine; the unmanipulated prints—sometimes mammoth in scale, sometimes formatted to lifelike stereo—served as simple proof. By the 1910s, when modernism hit its mark and photographers such as Paul Strand began propagandizing for photographic objectivity, straight photography came to signify an optical imperative, or "truth," that was a modernist truth of rational science, heroic industry, and social progress. Performing this new reality of twentieth-century modernism, American photographers embraced sharp focus and monumental form, conjuring symbols of potent self-assurance, which might strike us today as hopelessly, fabulously, macho, confident, optimistic, naïve.

Naturally, straight photography was never conceived in opposition to "gay photography" (if F. Holland Day and Minor White had thoughts on this, they kept it to themselves). But today the dyad is obvious and easy game. Queer is a serviceable counter to monolithic, dominant histories of heroic modernism—Duchamp versus Picasso, Warhol versus Pollock. But if flamboyant color and a sense of tragedy seem to denote a "camp" sensibility, defined by Susan Sontag fifty years ago as a "love of artifice and exaggeration," history has by now overwhelmed such quaint classifications. Rather than thinking of Sherry's photographs as a queering or personalizing of a Western landscape tradition, with environmental overtones, it might be more insightful to point out that photography—straight or otherwise—always has made the world queer, abstracting and two-dimensionalizing everything it records. In that sense, Sherry's work does not queer American modernist photography so much as it brings to the surface what was already latent: a queer and common feeling of alienation from the "natural" as well as the modern world. Today, as so-called aberrant sexualities become more normative, and technologies elaborate denser skeins of mediation between humans and their natural environments, the outsider's perspective becomes the norm.

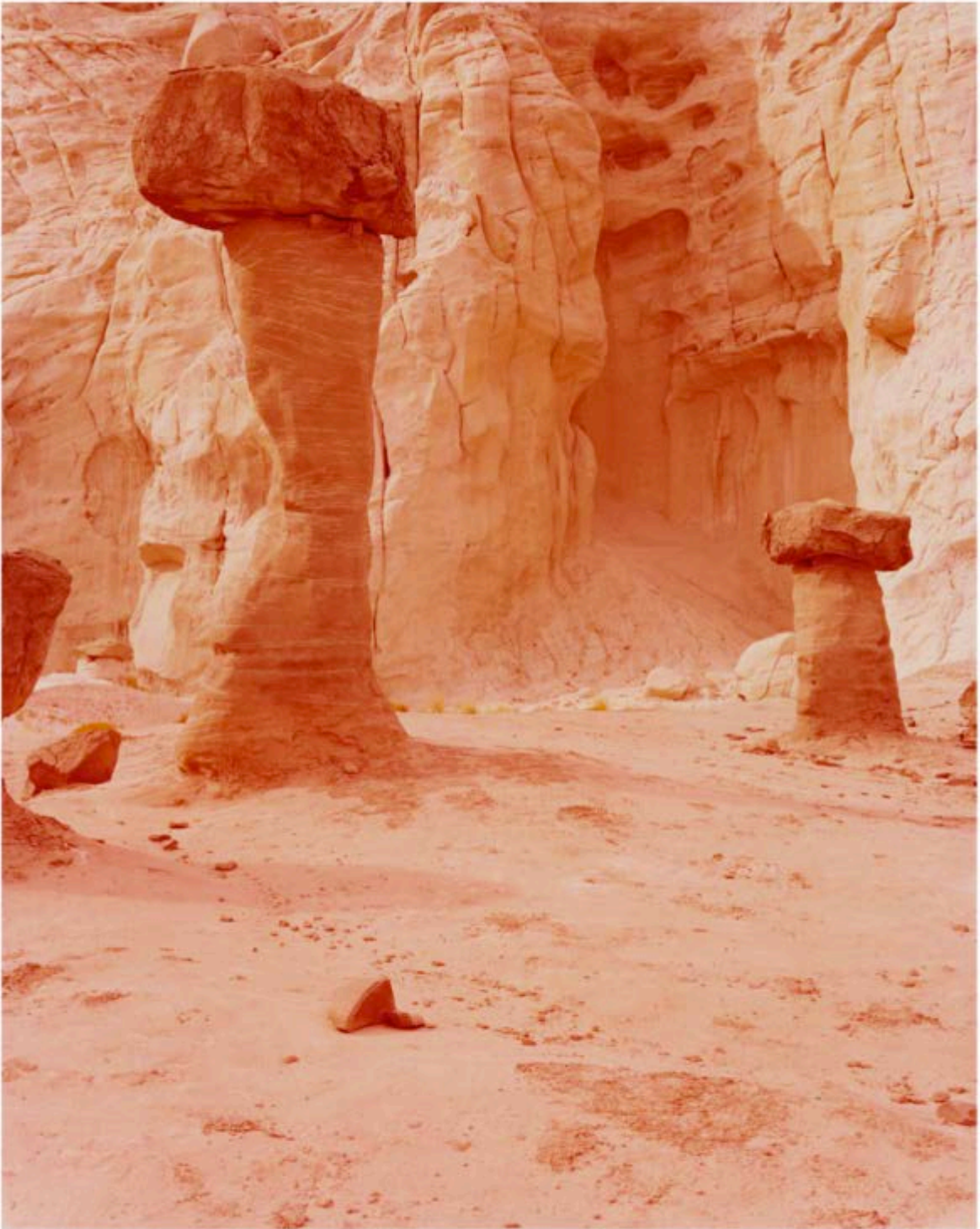
David Benjamin Sherry

Kevin Moore

Kevin Moore is an independent curator and writer based in New York. He is the author of *Real to Reel: Photographs from the Train Collection* (de Young Museum, San Francisco, 2012) and *Starburst: Color Photography in America 1970–1980* (Cincinnati Art Museum, 2010).

Opposite:
Time Past and Time Future,
Utah, 2014

Aperture Magazine, Queer Issue, Spring 2015



Aperture Magazine, Queer Issue, Spring 2015



Aperture Magazine, Queer Issue, Spring 2015

Left:
Geothermal Antisocial
Network Earth Explosion,
Utah, 2014

Below:
Adaptive Capacity
(Self-Portrait), Los Angeles,
California, 2014



Aperture Magazine, Queer Issue, Spring 2015

Below:
*Crude Love in the
Anthropocene, Los Angeles,
California, 2014*

Right:
*Wilderness of Mirrors,
Idaho, 2014*





Aperture Magazine, Queer Issue, Spring 2015

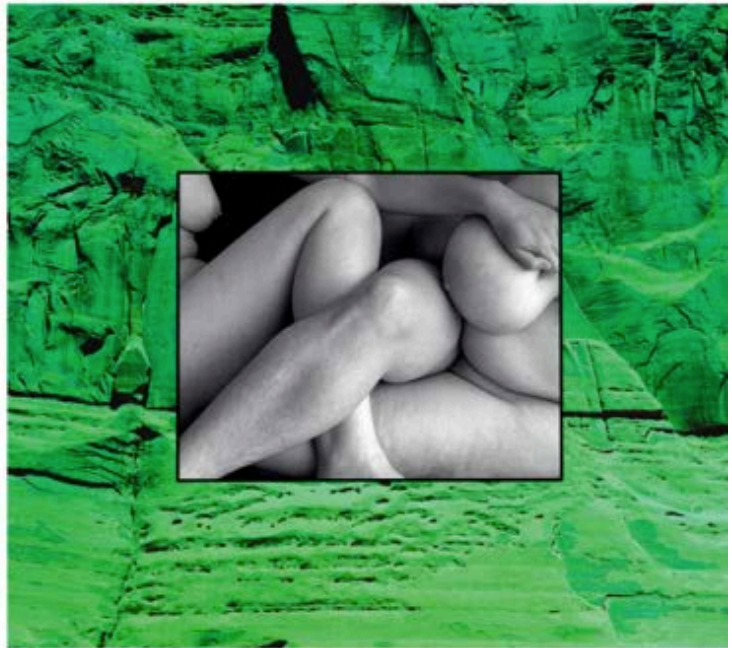


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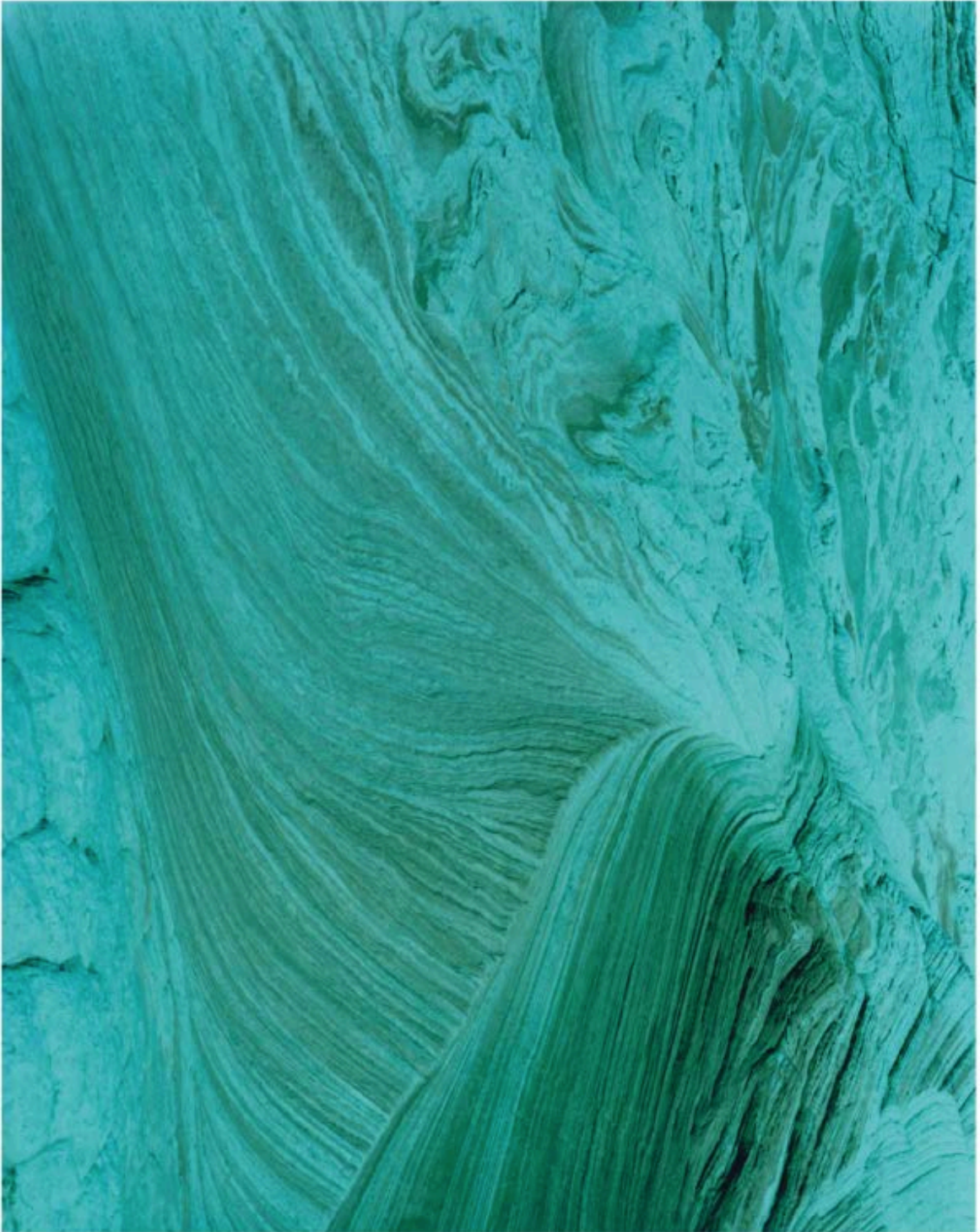


Left:
Spirit Infinity, Death Valley,
California, 2014

Below:
The Center of the Vortex,
(Rochel and Steiner)
Los Angeles, California,
2014



Aperture Magazine, Queer Issue, Spring 2015



Aperture Magazine, Queer Issue, Spring 2015

Left:
*Waves of Ocean
Acidification,
Capitol Reef, Utah
(For Minor White), 2014*

Below:
*Deep Blue Sea Rising,
Oregon, 2014*
Courtesy the artist and
Salon 94, New York

