



what is normally kept hidden but offers little wider contextual explanation or relief.

Simon Denison

Seeing in Nature

Field Studies: Walking through Landscapes and Archives, Chrystel Lebas

At once methodical and poetic, Chrystel Lebas's new book brings together several photographic series, comprising panoramic landscapes, close-ups of vegetation, and darkroom photograms of plants, all stemming from her encounter with a rich and understudied collection of early twentieth-century botanical photographs: the Sir Edward James Salisbury archive. Buried for almost a century in unlabelled boxes in the vaults of the Natural History Museum in London, Salisbury's photographs are important documents for understanding the transformations of the British environment in the past century, but also reveal the emergence of a new way of seeing landscapes in the light of an ecological understanding of natural processes, of which Salisbury was one of the pioneers.

At first glance, Lebas follows the customary

protocol of re-photographic projects, travelling to the same locations captured in the early ecologist's negatives, shooting the same scenes from an identical viewpoint, and documenting the way in which the landscape has changed between his time and ours. But the fact that she calls this process 're-visiting', suggesting familiarity and emotional attachments, provides a clue that this endeavour is not as systematic or rigid as it may seem.

For one, her photographs almost invariably capture nature at twilight, when things are still barely visible, but at the very limit of our visual perception. This approach, which she has perfected in her previous projects, is not just a device for conjuring Romantic mystery. It gives the viewer an intuition of the infinite depth of living processes unfolding before our eyes, but greatly beyond our perceptual or intellectual grasp. Creating expansive panoramic views or extremely detailed close-ups under a fading light which seems to go against the claim of clarity and distinctness that these formal choices imply, Lebas indirectly converges with one of the concerns of early ecology: using visual devices to expose natural phenomena which defy vision. Through her thoughtful exploration of the limits of seeing in nature, wilfully ignoring the rules of documentary vision, Lebas illuminates one of the key intuitions of ecological perception:

the beauty of the landscapes we see originates in invisible living processes, and environments are worth preserving for reasons beyond apparent beauty.

In the accompanying text, Lebas explicitly questions what it means to capture a view, recalling how, when trying to re-create a Salisbury photograph depicting water lilies in a specific site, at first she could only find a similar scene with the same flowers, but in a different location; but once she had arrived, many months later, at the original location, there were no flowers there at all. The process of chasing the visible equivalences of long-gone, transient states of living landscapes leads her to abandon the idea of precisely identifying the same scenes, instead focusing on learning to see as Salisbury did, embodying his ecological gaze in a transformed world.

Artistic projects combining art and science sometimes run the risk of shallow mimicry, where the artist only uses scientific tropes for aesthetic effect. Chrystel Lebas avoids this trap, and instead, through her lyrical photographs, luminously unveils an essential part of the Salisbury archive which exceeds its purely scientific content: the possibility of seeing nature anew.

Nora Labo

Left: **Edward James Salisbury.**
From box 1237-1249-Aviemore,
Loch an Eilein with Nuphar pumila. Plate n°1239

Right: **Re-visiting Loch an Eilein with Nuphar pumila & Pinus**
Plate n°1239, Aviemore, Rothiemurchus, August 2014
57°8.749' N 3°49.010' W Courtesy of Chrystel Lebas