

Drone's-Eye

VIEW

Q+A with Mark Tribe

"PLEIN AIR," THE TITLE OF MARK TRIBE'S SOLO EXHIBITION OPENING JULY 19 at Washington, D.C.'s Corcoran Gallery of Art, evokes the unspoiled landscape tradition of painting's past. But Tribe has created photographs of a depopulated earth by running raw data through an advanced cartography program, prompting questions about visibility, representation, and political violence. He spoke with Chelsea Knight, a fellow New York-based artist and collaborator, about this show and his larger body of work. The final iteration of Knight and Tribe's ongoing project *Posse Comitatus*, a video and performance work that combines movements of militia groups with contemporary choreography, will be on view at DiverseWorks in Houston November 2014 through January 2015.

CHELSEA KNIGHT: Tell me about "Plein Air," your upcoming exhibition at the Corcoran.

MARK TRIBE: I'll be showing new work—a series of aerial photographs of virtual landscapes. Like the series "Rare Earth" and my recent cloud studies, they relate to my interest in how the physical world is increasingly enmeshed with the virtual worlds of computer simulation and data.

So these aren't actual places? They're fictions?

They're not fictional, but they aren't quite real, either. I guess it depends on what we mean by *real*. They're simulations of actual places, created using real geospatial data—latitudes and longitudes and altitudes—and software that generates the trees, grass, rocks, snow, light, and atmosphere.

I see your work as a kind of fictional documentary or a parafiction. Looking at the images, which are seductive, calls to mind the inverse of what I experience much of the time. I think of real spaces not as a commonwealth or an endless landscape of trees and grass but as congested cities and threatened, fragile environments haunted by the specter of full-fledged global warming. With that in mind, yours are somewhat idealized spaces.

OPPOSITE:
Mark Tribe in
Queens,
New York, 2014.

OPPOSITE, FROM TOP:
Rare Earth: Sawtooth Mountain, 2012.
Ink-jet print,
24 x 38 in.

Detail of
4348-4352, 2014,
from the series
"Plein Air," UV
print on Dibond,
100 x 90 in.

BELOW:
Documentation
of *Port Huron Project: Angela Davis*, 1969/2008,
at DeFremery Park, Oakland,
California.

Yes, that's right. On one level they're symptoms of a longing I feel for an unspoiled nature. We're part of a generation that's presiding over the wholesale destruction of the earth's ecosystems—deforestation, mass extinction, climate change. Part of me does have a desire, almost a fantasy, for a kind of Shangri-la that isn't subject to the history we're living through right now. But your question also points to the tenuous status of photographs today. Photographs have always been a mix of fact and fiction. They have the indexical quality of recording an actuality, and they're also almost always selected and manipulated. The advent of digital photography intensified this instability, but now photographs are being enhanced and contextualized with data in ways that give them a new kind of legibility. Take, for example, a smartphone photo that's geotagged with GPS coordinates and uploaded to Instagram, or the video feed from a CIA drone. The content of these images is not just in the pixels; there is a lot more than meets the eye. It seems we have entered a new era in the history of representation. We might call it the era of the data image. This is certainly true of the landscapes I'll be showing at the Corcoran; they look remarkably vivid, but in fact they are images of data. Unlike traditional photographs, which are made with machines called cameras that use lenses to capture reflected light, these photographs are made with a new kind of machine that captures information.

Does the fact that they bleed outside the traditional rectangular shape have to do with the type of imagery? Initially it's simply an artifact of the technology. I take multiple

Landscapes are projections of our relationship to nature.



images at each location and stitch them together. The software I use produces composite images with complex, polygonal shapes. Every once in a while the results are really nice. They remind me of the shaped canvases of certain 20th-century painters like Ellsworth Kelly or Kenneth Noland. The shapes appeal to me both on a techno-symbolic level and on an aesthetic level.

Of your piece *Dystopia Files*, 2009–11, you said: "I think of protest and the policing of protest as public performance, and I'm interested in the ways in which video mediates these performances and inflects their position in the public sphere." For that project, you appropriated videos of police interacting with protesters. In the current series, you've removed both the viewer and the viewed. Right, it's like a robotic eye looking at a world without humans.

So can you talk about how you envision what a performance is in this piece, or if this piece is engaging with performance?

I haven't thought about it in those terms. I have thought about this work in relation to the history of landscape representation, which I've come to learn is never neutral. Representations of landscapes aren't just pictures of nature but projections of our relationship to nature. So we could see the 19th-century American landscape paintings in the Corcoran's collection as manifestations of the ideology of Manifest Destiny. The paintings of Albert Bierstadt, for example, were a way of laying claim to the frontier.

Today, the skies are buzzing with drones. Not just the military drones that are in the air over Waziristan but civilian drones, little quad-copters with onboard cameras. The other day one landed on our roof in Manhattan! Aerial photography is almost as old as photography itself, but I feel like with the rise of the data image, it is also a new frontier, a new way of laying claim to the land.

But if this colonizing eye is, in this case, not a human eye, what does that mean about the document that it produces?

It's a way of projecting power by seeing and knowing at a distance.

Looking at these images, I imagine untouched spaces. I think about being stranded on a desert island, a place where we are outside the range of the owned. They appear to be uncolonized, untouched by the human hand, but it's an illusion. As Rirkrit Tiravanija says, freedom cannot be simulated.

Freedom is a loaded word.

There are all different kinds: economic freedom, political freedom, existential freedom.

In *Dystopia Files* you talk about freedom from a kind of mind control, like in George Orwell's *1984*, not even being able to imagine a free space. That relates to things like the Cecily McMillan case, the Occupy Wall Street protester who received a guilty verdict for assaulting an officer and was sentenced to three months in prison and five years' probation.

Here we go again. Show me a landscape and I'll show you a screen onto which we'll project a fantasy. They really do function that way, as a tabula rasa.

What kinds of things are you projecting as the maker? My attraction to these images of unspoiled nature could be a kind of reaction formation, a defense against the specter of environmental catastrophe.

Is there an element of the cynical in this work?

I would rather think of them as critical than cynical.



BOTH IMAGES: MARK TRIBE



BOTH IMAGES: MARK TRIBE

Do you think that relates to your series of protest reenactments, *The Port Huron Project*, 2006–09? That was more wrangling with nostalgia, whereas this work is more about fantasy. *The Port Huron Project* was engaging with what one critic called “new left-wing melancholy,” the idea that, in the mid 2000s, when we were mired in the Iraq War and protest seemed futile, we idealized the New Left movements of the 1960s as a time when protest was more effective, when the youth were more engaged and less apathetic. I tried to deal with that nostalgia critically, but in a way that was also open-ended and not didactic.

I don’t want to oversimplify, but wasn’t part of the success of the radicalization of the Left during the Vietnam War due to the nature of photography, how much of the war was represented? Now our images of wartime atrocities are much more sanitized.

Maybe. My sense is that photography and television were disruptive in part because governments were not yet very good at censoring and manipulating the images that were coming back from the battlefields and from the streets. And activists and revolutionaries were able to leverage those images to shift public opinion in favor of civil rights and against the war. The post-9/11 period was a time when it seemed like protest was ineffective, and I think it largely had to do with activists’ not yet having quite figured out how to use new media to their advantage. That all shifted really quickly with the Arab Spring and Occupy Wall Street, when bodies-in-the-street protest and social media finally synergized in a way that was really disruptive.

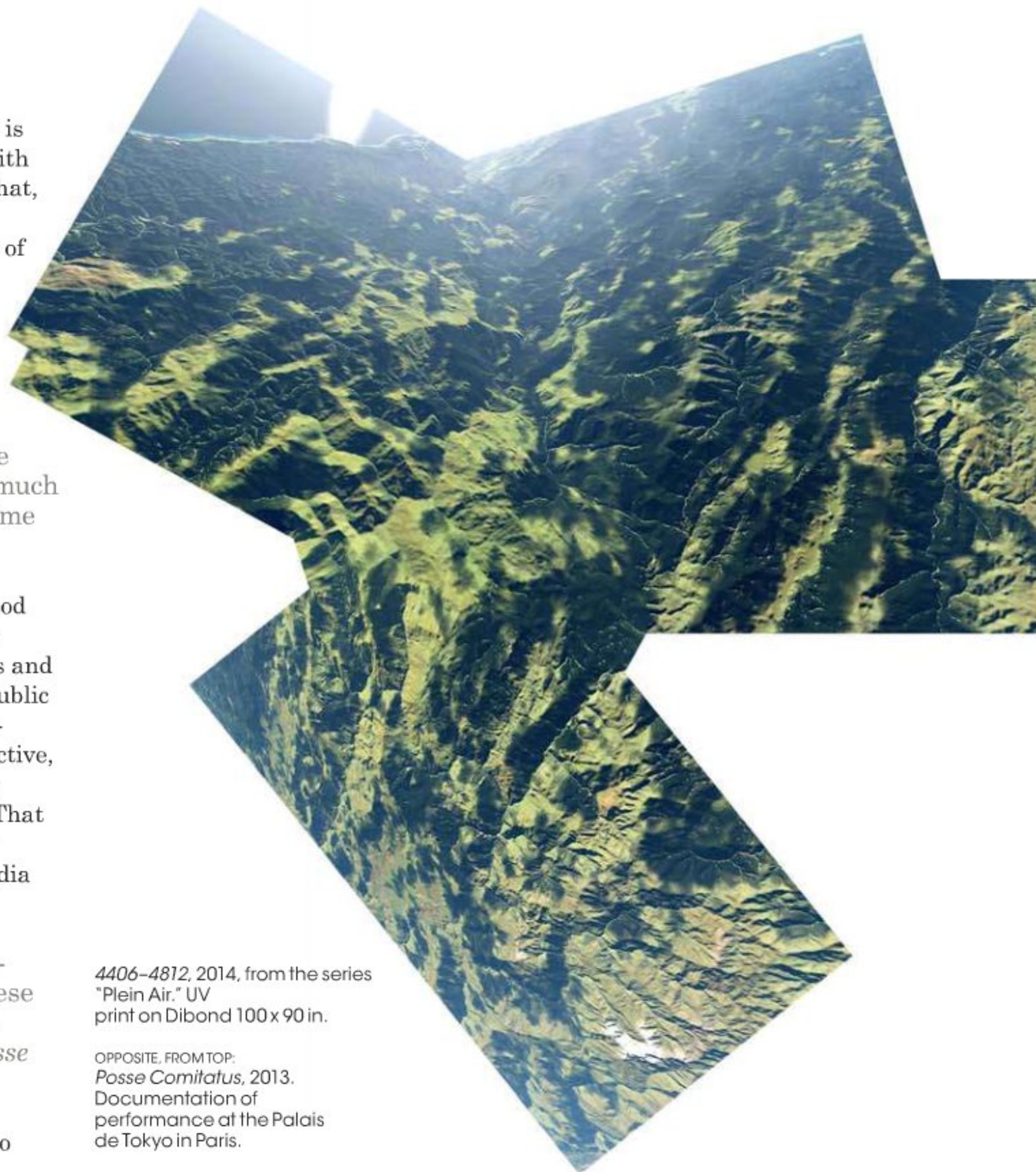
You could say that your simulated images are hyper-political because we don’t see your hand. You use these distancing techniques, and you’ve used them before. Can you talk about that in relation to our project, *Posse Comitatus*, 2012–14, in which dancers re-perform militia and paramilitary exercises?

One of the things we were trying to do in that project was to represent a certain kind of political activity that for most of us is alien and deeply problematic. So we filmed militia exercises and then translated it into the more abstract language of dance as a way of making it more immediate. That allowed people to engage with it, this political other, without dismissing it as crazy, via an encounter with the body that has an inevitable intimacy. One of the things that make dance so compelling is the simple but powerful fact that the bodies of the dancers are physically present, which reminds viewers that their bodies are present. What fascinated me about these different kinds of political performances—protest speeches, demonstrations in the street, militia training—is the role of the body and how those embodied performances are affected by the technologies we use to represent them, from network television in 1968 to social media today. So *The Port Huron Project*, *Dystopia Files*, and *Posse Comitatus* were all about the body, whereas the images in “Plein Air” are completely disembodied.

They’re lush landscapes, but it’s an austere operation. Yeah, it is. They’re post-human.

So there’s a lot of distance between them and me, but it’s a distance that I long to bridge. Can we say they’re objective in some way?

I’m not sure. I can’t remove myself from the process, and I’m not really trying to. I’m not following Sol LeWitt’s recipe for Conceptual art where the idea is like the machine that makes the work, and the execution is a perfunctory affair. The execution of this work is not perfunctory at all. It’s full of highly subjective, intuitive aesthetic judgments about what looks “real,” or what’s a compelling shape. In that sense, they aren’t objective at all. Yet



4406–4812, 2014, from the series “Plein Air.” UV print on Dibond 100 x 90 in.

OPPOSITE, FROM TOP: *Posse Comitatus*, 2013. Documentation of performance at the Palais de Tokyo in Paris.

Posse Comitatus, 2012. Documentation of performance in Forest Park, St. Louis, Missouri.

at another level, at the level of the geospatial data from which the images are produced, they are absolutely objective. The same is true, of course, for traditional lens-based photography. Somewhere, behind all the subjective layers of selection and manipulation—where you point the camera, when you press the shutter, which negative you print, and what you do in the darkroom—lies the referent. In this way, all photography is haunted by the real.

This thing about data seems really important.

Yeah, it is, and I admit I don’t fully understand it. These are pictures of virtual reality. It’s a reality made of data, yet it’s a reality that we inhabit. When we navigate the landscape with a GPS app, we’re using data to steer us through physical space. We can’t see it, but we’re swimming in it, and these images are a way of making it visible.

If you think about something that was once futuristic, like old-school virtual reality, it seems clunky now. I’m curious to see how these images will feel in 10 or 20 years. That’s certainly one of the things that we do as artists: produce artifacts of our moment that capture what it is like right now. Technology is evolving so quickly. This is what virtual reality looks like in 2014. In a few years, it will be different. This version of it will be gone. MP