

BRIDGETTE MAYER GALLERY



SHARON HARPER

by Mark Alice Durant



There is that famous Casper David Friedrich painting, *Wanderer above the Sea of Fog*, which presents a lone gentleman standing on the brink of a mountain. He contemplatively gazes across a craggy-toothed landscape. There have been many dissenters of course, but this image remains a powerful romantic symbol of the artist's relationship to the sublime. I don't imagine Sharon Harper in such dramatic terms but I am intrigued by what she physically must do to generate her unusual images of the firmament. It often involves travel. It almost always requires the setting up a sturdy tripod and clunky large-format camera in the middle of the night. And then comes the gazing up and waiting. Some of the photons that reach Harper's emulsion have been traveling since the beginning of time. And there she is on a beach in Alaska or a meadow in upstate New York, like some infinitely patient 19th century amalgam of photographer / astronomer / philosopher, gathering the light in eccentric patterns while posing questions regarding the instruments of our perception and the shape of our consciousness. Harper is Associate Professor of Visual and Environmental Studies at Harvard University. Her work has been shown at many museums and galleries including the Whitney Museum of American Art, Rick Wester Fine Art in NYC and Galerie Stefan Ropke in Cologne. Her work is in the collections of MoMA, the Whitney and the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston among many others. Her monograph, *From Above and Below* will be published by Radius, October 2012. This conversation took place in Sharon Harper's studio (a converted squash court) in Harvard Square, Cambridge on August 10, 2012.

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Sharon Harper, 'Sun/Moon (Trying to See through a Telescope)', 2010, 2010 Jun 2 3:30:43 AM – 2010 Jun 2 3:31:05 AM'

MAD: Tell me about your book that will be released soon

SH: The book brings together twelve years of photographs and video stills that use the sky as a site for images we can't see without a camera. The photographs flow freely between projects and are sequenced to build an experimental, symbolic relationship between the camera, the image-maker and the natural world. Throughout the book, images of the moon, stars and sun bridge the medium's ability to verify empirical evidence and to create poetic connections between our environment and ourselves.

MAD: How did you come to photography? Was there a particular image or photographer that turned you on to the medium?

SH: Oh, it was such a long road through the back door. I connected to photography when I was in high school. The college I went to didn't offer photography in its curriculum. I worked at the communal darkroom, and for the school newspaper, and became its editor after a while.

MAD: Where was that?

SH: At Middlebury College in Vermont. When I graduated I got a job with the town newspaper that had a fantastic staff, some of whom went on to do fairly prominent things in journalism. I did that for a year and meanwhile took classes at the Maine Photographic Workshop with Mary Ellen Mark and David Turnley. Then I moved to Portland Oregon and fell in with a dynamic photo community. During that period I worked for artists, teachers, architectural and commercial photographers. I had lots of flexibility, had my own darkroom and made my own pictures. I continued with documentary work but I began feeling that although I was observing other people's lives, they did not know anything about me.

MAD: You started turning away from documentary

SH: I still love documentary but I needed to figure out what I wanted to say and stand by it. I had no concept of process or how to use photography for self-expression; nevertheless I did eventually apply to the School of Visual Art. My education in Portland was Powell Books, which takes up a city block and was probably one of the first bookstores with a café inside. I would go there every Sunday and sit for hours looking at Mary Ellen Mark, Josef Koudelka, Diane Arbus, and the Magnum photographers.

MAD: Funny you should mention Koudelka. I too coveted any photo book I could get my hands on, the Arbus and Frank books were especially vivid, but my first experience with an

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immersive photography exhibition was a Koudelka show at the Carpenter Center here at Harvard in 1981, I think. It was so different than thumbing the pages of a book. First of all the pictures were relatively big, at 16x20 and 20x24 inches, which seems modest now but at the time was an impressive size. There was something about being able to wander from image to image, being immersed in Koudelka's exotic world of gypsies and eastern European landscapes. They were so visceral and otherworldly, I felt utterly transported. I understood the importance of the exhibition of images where you cumulatively get a sense of someone's image making.

SH: Koudelka was absolutely key for me in terms of understanding photography could be surreal, could speak to a mystical realism, could connect to a greater world that is very hard to describe in words but that we feel all the time. Koudelka found the fables in everyday life, the mythic in the instant.

MAD: Vivid and strange simultaneously

SH: I could see in his work the strangeness that photography is so good at capturing. This was a big pull for me toward practicing photography. I loved that it could connect us the unknown and things we cannot explain even if it is seemingly so clearly described in the photograph. It was my second year of graduate school when I worked against all that formal training I had and could begin to make images that spoke metaphorically, beyond description. My teacher Joel Sternfeld was really helpful in that regard.



Sharon Harper, 'Moon Studies and Star Scratches, No. 6, June – September 2004 Saratoga Springs, New York; Middlesex, Vermont; Johnson, Vermont; Eden Mills, Vermont; Greensboro, North Carolina'

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MAD: Let's talk about your current work. I like how your images suggest science, illusion and chance, oftentimes within the same frame. While these are conventionally oppositional positions, for example, multiple exposure images have a history that is split between the evidentiary as in Marey's motion studies and 'trick' photography. – I think artists understand that they not only can co-exist but that they are in some ways inextricably related.

SH: I think that is so true. Science is given such weight in our culture; if we cannot provide evidence of something in a scientific or provable sense we tend not to give it value. I feel that the poetic and the scientific co-exist simultaneously, that you can't strip things down to some basic objective reality. It is a richer experience if we can appreciate the scientific as well as the poetic or metaphoric nature of phenomena.

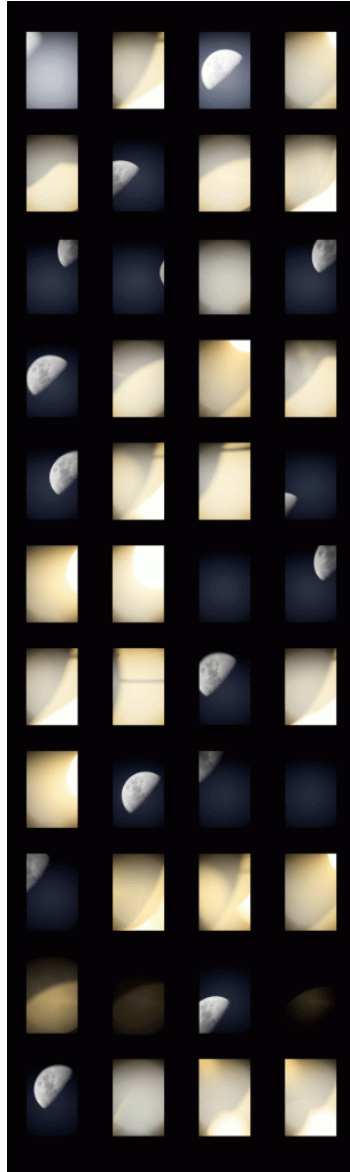
MAD: That is part of our fascination with Hubble imagery – we know they represent scientific knowledge but they also generate a sense of wonder and the sublime.

SH: Yes. They are venturing into the unknown and because the imagery is so wonderful, we are not inured to it.

MAD: As you are, I am interested in the relation between astronomy and photography. Thomas Ruff claims that when he was younger he had to choose between being a photographer and being an astronomer. I think the connection is partly to do with an attraction to looking through optical devices. Not only to see things more clearly, but also to observe how the viewing device effects perception. I am not sure astrophysicists are interested in that phenomena for its own sake, but artists are. We are not only interested in what is there but also how vision can be mediated and interfered with.

SH: That is a huge pull for me, a lot of the work I have been doing, especially since 2003 is to undermine the seamless surface of photography, turning the image into a record of our perceptual experiences. It is fascinating that photography can do that even though it is so connected to the here and now. There are ways you can extend that moment to becoming a record of a process, something that has duration.

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Sharon Harper, 'Sun/Moon (Trying to See through a Telescope), 2010, 2010 May 27 10:48:35 – 2010 May 27 11:08:34 2010 Jun 19 8:16:30 PM – 2010 Jun 19 8:23:40 PM No. 2'

MAD: You do that through multiple exposures, time exposures, gridding, sequence....

SH: Yes, I think *Sun/Moon (Trying to See through a Telescope)* is the series most explicitly connected to challenging the seamless surface of photography and drawing out attention back to the process of perception. The first iteration of that series was a sequence of images made within hundredths of a second of each other. I took the time/date data and put in into the frame of the image. If that meta-data were not there you might think it was a record of the waxing and waning of the moon or a moonrise or some phenomena of the object being recorded. But when you understand that all those images were made within one second you begin to see that the variations from image to image were a result of the device or the artist, so the attention is directed back to the perceptual process of understanding the object. In fact, especially with the sun images, it is unclear what we are looking at. Is that undifferentiated blob the sun, or is it the light bouncing around inside the telescope? I love the ground being

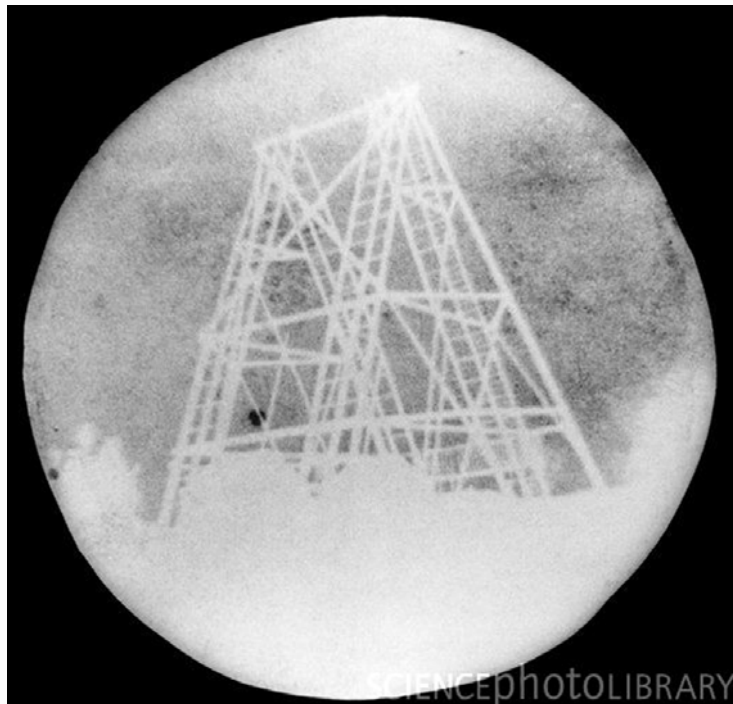
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taken out from under me in that way. Now we have the Hubble and we have ways that we can instantly verify an object, but if you use a less precise apparatus you are back in the shoes of someone from the early 19th century trying to photograph the sun and the moon. How did they know what they were looking at?

MAD: I love those early photographic images of celestial bodies that look like a dirty snowballs photographed on black velvet that visually proclaim "Behold Pluto" – the suspension of disbelief involved in accepting those images requires a great leap of the imagination.

SH: That's a metaphor for the reality of photography every day. We just don't think about the apparatus as a mediating force because it's so precise in its description. But all of materials and processes of photography—lenses, films, digital receptors— lend qualities to the image that have nothing to do with the objective reality, they are as much a record of the photographic materials as the thing that was in front of the camera in the first place. It's the materials and the object observed that you are looking at, and that is exaggerated when you are looking through a telescope. Through the telescope you experience the artifacts of distortion and movement.



View of telescope at Slough, by Sir John Herschel 1839

MAD: Speaking of telescopes I wanted to show you an image. I just found this image of a telescope that William Herschel built outside of London in the early 1800s. Herschel was a German born scientist and composer. He discovered Uranus and two of its moons, discovered the existence of infrared radiation, built 400 telescopes and composed 24 symphonies. Really? We are nothing compared to these people. Anyway, his son, John was also an astronomer and one of the early pioneers of photography – John invented the cyanotype and the method for permanently fixing photographs – he invented fixer! He was also one of Julia Margaret Cameron's subjects. And one of the earliest photographs is this one – an image John Herschel took of his Father's telescope in 1839. I am not certain but I believe it is printed from a paper negative – a Calotype. This image, which seems so primitive to us now, at the time

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was a real and symbolic manifestation of technical and optical progress – of the revolutionary new medium of photography and a monumental telescope gazing into the deepest heavens.

SH: The negative image is so beautiful. It includes the circle, it looks like he took it though a telescope. This is why I start every semester with the period of the 1830s to 1850s. No one specialized. The Renaissance model was the reality of the educated class – look at Muybridge, he was a survey photographer, an entrepreneur, an inventor, and he devised the zoopraxiscope, the precursor to cinema.

MAD: So this relationship between viewing devices, how perception is distorted by those devices, this continuing lineage of technical progress and looking further and closer yet each image is its own kind of artifact, its own fiction, its own kind of contradictory sign of the progress and limitations of our knowledge.



Sharon Harper, 'One Month, Weather Permitting, 2009 Night Sky over Banff, Alberta September 12 – October 10, 2007 5 October 6 October'

SH: That's what drew me to the night skies. Before I started photographing in the *Moon Studies and Star Scratches* series, I was not a night person. I was not obsessed with celestial photography. I was trying to use the medium in a way that I didn't know or couldn't predict what the outcome would be. You are at the technical limits of photography when you are in darkness and making long exposures. You just don't know what is going to happen exactly.

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That was appealing to me—that photography's limitations and parameters are inscribed in the process. You are on the unpredictable edge between failure and revelation. I was doing a residency at the Headlands Art Center and I was watching the reflection of the moon on the ocean surf, there was a point when the wave built into a dark wall and the moon's image disappeared – it was a powerful moment, frightening actually. But there was this technical problem of movement in darkness, how do you film or photograph that? I was looking through the camera and it occurred to me that the ocean was rife with potential cliché, which has never stopped me before (Laughter), but I just pointed the camera up at the moon itself and I thought 'That's bright enough, I'll start there.' I became interested in this notion of charting of our own time through something like the moon, which is beyond our time. Now looking back on it I realize that I was trying to shake up the relationship between the photographer, the camera and what was being recorded.



Sharon Harper, 'Moon Studies and Star Scratches, No. 9 June 4 – 30, 2005 Clearmont, Wyoming 15, 30, 20, 8, 5, 1, 5, 2, 1 minute exposures; 15, 8, 10, 14 second exposures'

MAD: Have you seen Jeanne Liotta's film 'Observando de Cielo'? I think you would like it. It was shot on many mountain tops, open fields, showing us swirling night skies, light streaks, graininess a great soundtrack by Peggy Ahwesh and Barbara Ess. Anyway Jeanne speaks about experiencing moments of real terror in the middle of the night under this

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enormously deep canopy of stars. Even though you are interested in how the tools mediate the image, did you have those existential moments as well?

SH: It isn't just about images, the experience of making the images is important for me as well. In New York City I would go to the far Rockaways or Palisades by myself at 2 in the morning. It was amazing to be standing by myself with a large format camera in the middle of the night; it was as peaceful as it was at times frightening. I eventually started taking a friend with me but when you are alone there is this vivid experience of the night. When I say something like I am interested in something exterior to us having an impact on the photograph, it sounds so abstract, but there are ways in which our lives are in sync with something larger than ourselves. We might think of it as supernatural but many cultures think of it as natural. It's interesting to mix up our ideas of reality because that opens the way for new perceptions.

MAD: That's what happens for me when I look at your pictures. I mean, in no particular order I might be thinking about time exposures, how emulsions react to moving light, I think about photographic devices like lenses, aperture and shutters, but then I shift towards thinking about the limits of our knowledge, what that limit looks like through the mechanism of photography. The work inspires contemplation, not to mention their elegance and loveliness. They are pictures of the night skies but also pictures that invoke a way of thinking that complicates our ideas of perception while simultaneously providing so much visual pleasure. That's a tricky thing to accomplish.

SH: Thanks; I'm so glad it works that way for you.

MAD : I wanted to ask you about that four screen video piece *Afterimage*. A moment ago you claimed you never let a cliché stop you from proceeding, (Laughter). The lightening bolt figures prominently in *Afterimage* and lightening can be every bit as loaded or over-determined as a sunset. It is hard to represent a lightening bolt in a way that lets us see it anew. But you do accomplish that via the sequencing over four vertical video screens, through slow motion, almost stop motion, letting us see the pulsing power as almost a form of life. That's very different than the singular bolt of forked lightening striking some barren desert landscape. For one thing there are no horizon lines in this or even many of your pieces.

SH: There is never a horizon line in any of my images because I am interested in experiencing space perceptually. A horizon line grounds us in our normal perspective. That piece is called *Afterimage* after the visual phenomenon of persistence of vision. In some ways it was almost impossible to edit the video because there was always this residual light in my mind after the light dimmed in the image. So again we are always marrying external stimulus with an internal experience, and that is what vision is. You mentioned Barbara Ess before; she and I were filming this storm separately but side by side up at Yaddo, where we were in residence together. It was one of my favorite experiences, the storm went on for an hour and a half, Barbara and I were standing outside while we could hear someone playing incredibly operatic piano back at the house.

MAD: Some of your images are accretions, celestial palimpsests in which you expose the skies from several geographical points and / or several nights on one piece of film. How did you come to that procedure of exposing a single sheet of film over multiple sites or multiple nights?

SH: There was one night in Greensboro North Carolina, where I was living and teaching,

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and there was an eclipse of the moon. I moved the back of the camera while making multiple exposures on a single sheet of film. Usually eclipse images chart the progress of the shadow across the lunar disk while often charting the moon's path across the sky moving left to right. My image shows the moon in varying positions but not in a chronological way. So it is a record of that eclipse but again it also records the movement of the camera. The image seemed scientific, like something in a petri dish, but it was also somewhat enigmatic. I liked the results, and it occurred to me 'Why can't I do that over the course of a month and chart the moon's changes on a single sheet of film?' I kept notebooks of what I photographed—what nights and what position the camera was in— because I didn't want all the moons piled up on one spot on the film. I never knew compositionally what the image would look like exactly but I knew that I had some full moons, quarter moons, etc.

MAD: When I look at your pictures, one of my thoughts is 'What kind of knowledge is this?' Your pictures can be as confusing as they are mesmerizing. One tries to decipher the movements, the evidentiary traces of light that imply a kind of studied observation. But our perspectival and compositional anchors are unstable – undermining our fixed positions. Strangely it reminds me of a thing that James Baldwin says about identity – in an entirely different context of course – that "if I am not what you think I am then you are not what you think you are either" in other words – identity is established vis a vis. In Baldwin's case he was referring to race relations in the U.S. But I think one could take that idea and apply it to studying the cosmos or any other epistemological construct.

SH: That's exactly what I am getting at, that's a beautiful reference. I am not so interested in someone looking at my images and nailing down the mechanics of how they are made, but I hope they will question knowledge itself, question our ways of understanding and perceiving information, and for a moment let ourselves be upended and see the richness of seeing something from two or three perspectives. I hope we can accept the possibility that we cannot immediately know what is going on, that what we know of ourselves and our place in the world can be fluid, not fixed. Photography is really good at making things look like they are understandable, that they are visually wrapped up in the neat package of the photograph, but I am interested in finding a way with photography that upends our certainty.



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Sharon Harper, 'One Month, Weather Permitting, 2009 Night Sky over Banff, Alberta September 12 – October 10, 2007 25 September'

MAD: I was reading an article by Jimena Canales, one of the essayists in your forthcoming book. She writes about how the foundational gesture of modern science is to make the invisible visible. Your work promises that but what it delivers is unexpected. Furthermore in that same article she explores the meaning and metaphor of light as knowledge explaining that until the enlightenment – light was not so ideally pure – that it was closely associated with heat and smoke as well – creating a kind of ambivalent trinity where light could also bring destruction and obfuscation.

Some of your images are deeply shadowy, smoky even – manifesting Canales idea of that compromised light. I like this image of the smoky light – because it suggests interference, veiling, but also unexpected moments of revelation both in terms of when the smoke momentarily clears but also when the smoke takes on suggestive shapes that might be interpreted. This is a kind of simultaneous dualistic experience of reason and imagination. What do you think of that?

SH: I am always interested in the moment the light is being sucked out of a scene, when the light is both obscuring and illuminating. My most recent series from a residency in Norway is a series of images I took as the sun was setting and the light was leaving the water and sky. I also have a series from a decade ago called *Moonfall (As Imagined by the Off-Duty Ferryman Charon in Flight over the River Styx)*. I was making silver gelatin prints and then toning them blue and copper in the darkroom, when you tone a black and white image the tonalities begin to solarize. You put the image in the toner, it starts to gather copper or blue and then you put it back in the developer it sucks out the tone and reverses the tonalities so that it solarizes. This sucking out of the light and the appearance of this silvery gray in its place felt like the moment in the landscape when the light is receding. The moments of transformation are the moments when the light comes and goes, when you can and can't see, creating an energetic changing point. I like that tipping from one understanding of something to another, from seeing to not seeing, to seeing something else.

<http://saint-lucy.com/conversations/sharon-harper-2/>