

This essay accompanies the exhibition *California* by Davida Nemeroff
February 5 to March 5, 2011

Gallery TPW gallerytpw.ca

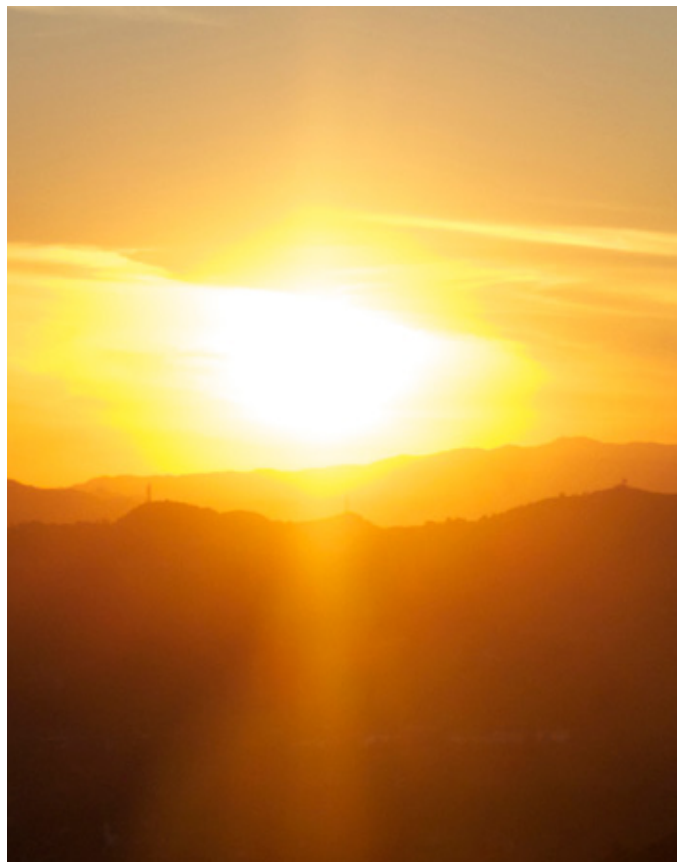
Eyes Like Suns: Davida Nemeroff's *California* by Mieke Marple

It was clear to the ancient Greeks that rays of light traveled in straight lines, due in large part to Euclid's writings on light. However, rather than traveling from the light source to the eye, as is understood today, the Greeks believed light traveled in the opposite direction—from the eye to the light source. The eye itself was seen to function like a spotlight, whose beams encountered or edited the visible world and then registered this information in the mind.

Despite Arabian physicist Ibn al-Haytham's discovery that Euclid's emission theory of vision had in fact inverted the path of light, the idea of light-emitting eyeballs—of eyes like suns—is striking. Even Goethe purports a connection between our eyes and the sun, stating, “were our eyes not like the sun, they could never see it.” Much of the allure of Euclid's emission theory of vision lies in its simplicity: light originates from a source inside the eye, perhaps a fire as Empedocles postulates, and exits the pupil disseminating outward. Where the light is directed depends on where the eyes look—up or down, left or right—and how the body turns—straight or torqued, horizontal or vertical. In this way, having eyes like suns resembles a type of photographic practice wherein the camera is attached to the eye, and hence attached to the body. This is the mode by which Davida Nemeroff captures images.

In *California*, Nemeroff presents us with a range of pedestrian subjects. At the gallery entrance we are greeted with a poster of a sunset titled *O Clock*. The place and time of year in the photograph are unclear. The sunset is flat but radiant. Further inside the gallery we encounter a sideways photograph of the San Gabriel Valley, *Silver Mask (Gabriel)*. The lightness of the sunset poster is reiterated in this sideways landscape with its anthropomorphizing title. Toward the back of the gallery is a photograph of a parrot in a pet shop

with the deadpan title *Parrot*. Behind the parrot in the photograph a pastoral backdrop spans, hitting just a few inches shy of the photograph's left frame. This well-defined edge brings the backdrop into focus as an object rather than an illusion. The photograph broaches issues related to staging and commercial photography, yet stays grounded and true to Nemeroff's concern for quotidian poetry. Nearby, a pair of photographs, *Sun Dog (jake)* and *Red Ochre*, hang on a grey temporary wall. They depict, respectively, a hound dog's



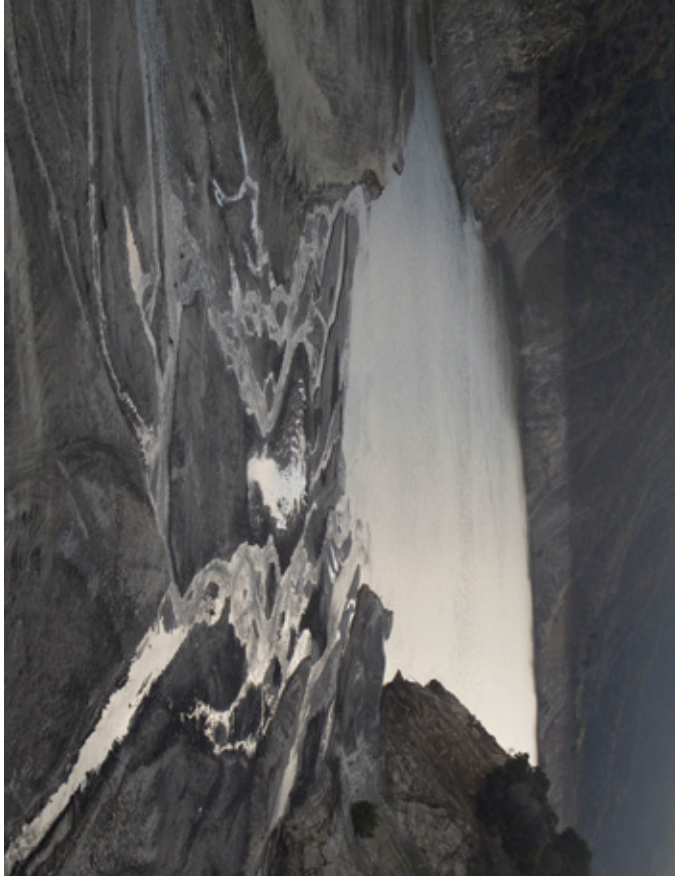
Davida Nemeroff, *O Clock*, poster, 2010

ear caught in mid-air and a tree branch hovering over richly coloured brown water. Two other photographs depict grapes in shadow (*A Study of Seedless Grapes*) and roses peaking through a chain link fence (*Roses [fence]*). The titles of these four works suggest a broad and varied typology, as wide-ranging and variegated as California's social, cultural and geographic landscapes.

A temporary structure in the gallery houses Nemeroff's video *Jacuzzi Time*, a short recording of a ten-year-old girl in an outdoor jacuzzi. Levity, in this case, resides predominately in the video's title for the video is fairly staid in tone. Adhered to the side of this structure is a photograph of rocks titled *Cuddle Rocks*. In *Cuddle Rocks*, as with her other works, Nemeroff charges the photograph with romantic sentiment, and, as with her other works, she creates a discrepancy between the photograph's subject and its title. The title *Cuddle Rocks* is evocative of tenderness and affection but the two rocks do not appear particularly affectionate toward each other. Nevertheless, the viewer is likely to perceive a pair of amorous rocks when looking at the photograph. Nemeroff attaches particular words to her work to manipulate how we view her subjects, forcing us to project human sentiment onto an inanimate object (be it the rock or the photograph) as with an epigraph on a tombstone. We can even surmise

that Nemeroff placed the two rocks next to each other to be photographed. It becomes increasingly apparent that Nemeroff's subjects are purposefully presented as malleable, and that Nemeroff is keenly aware of her ability to control emotional content, regardless of subject matter.

In *California* we see rocks, tree branches, grapes, a parrot, a dog, light reflecting off water, a girl in a jacuzzi. Subjects alternate between alacrity (*Dog [Jake]*), placidity (*A Study of Seedless Grapes*) and something in between. They express melancholy, romance, solemnity and wanderlust. They are framed with oversized mattes, adhered to walls, arranged in pairs and presented alone. They have little in common other than an overarching sensibility that points back to Nemeroff's ambling eye. We can therefore deduce that the formality, or lack thereof, and emotional content in Nemeroff's subjects are contingent on the position of her eye and body, which function as surrogate lens and tripod. In *Jacuzzi Time*, for example, we feel the buoyancy of Nemeroff's body as she records the girl from an outdoor hot tub. The girl looks at the camera and then looks away. Her gaze is blasé but filled with a precocious erotic intelligence. The camera pans right with manual unease and follows the girl's bodiless head as it moves across the water's surface. The unavoidable shake of manual camera movements lingers



Dauida Nemeroff, *Silver Mask (Gabriel)*, inkjet print, 2010



Dauida Nemeroff, *Parrot*, inkjet print, 2010

despite Nemeroff's proficient camera control. The tension in Nemeroff's finger as it pulls and pauses on the zoom trigger is visibly manifest. Time is slow but under pressure. The girl's gaze elicits emotional intrigue, however, the subtle presence of Nemeroff's body reminds us that this emotional intrigue is controlled by the artist from beyond the frame.

Traces of Nemeroff's presence exist in all works comprising *California*. We can discern, furthermore, from the diverse range of subjects in the exhibition, that her subjects do not hold significance in and of themselves. The girl in the hot tub is mesmerizing but her image is fleeting. Her position as subject is subordinate to other aspects of Nemeroff's practice, such as, the extensive framing devices she employs, other subjects depicted in *California*, as well as past and future photographs and videos. We can imagine that if the exhibition were to be reinstalled the photographs might be framed and arranged differently; they might be of the same subjects or different ones. In this way, subject and frame appear mutable. This mutability renders Nemeroff's subjects present but *mute*, visible but without voice—a limitation that permits the role of Nemeroff's body, as tripod and lens, to become heavy with signification. In casting subject matter largely impotent, Nemeroff's general suspicion of arriving at content through subject alone is

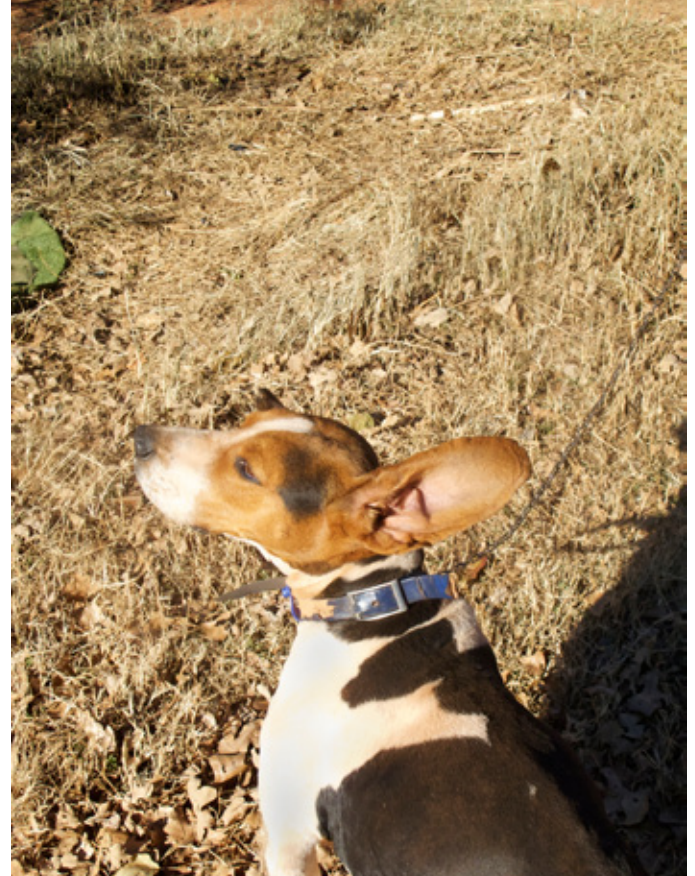
revealed. Content, emotional and otherwise, is thus reliant on elements that lie outside of the camera's frame. These external elements constitute the photographic apparatus; an apparatus, in Nemeroff's case, that strongly relies on her eye and body.

In the essay "Too Drunk to Fuck (On the Anxiety of Photography)," Mark Wyse examines the role of desire in the contrasting photographic practices of Nan Goldin and Christopher Williams. Goldin is known for her snapshot-style documentation of New York's post-punk music scene and post-Stonewall gay subculture in the late 70s and 80s. Williams, on the other hand, works within the tradition of institutional critique and is known for making commercially produced photographs with inventory-like titles. Both practices differ greatly from Nemeroff's. Nevertheless, they can serve as helpful foils to Nemeroff's practice, allowing us to better understand the nature of her work.

On Goldin, Wyse writes, "the subjects themselves are the content. Through photography, her subjects are depicted through—or rather bathed in—a light that seems to resonate with meaning. In this sense, looking at Goldin's photographs gives us a sense of how she feels about her subjects. To experience the meaning of Goldin's photographs is to accept or reject *her* feelings toward *her people*." Goldin's work



Dauida Nemeroff, *Cuddle Rocks*, adhesive vinyl, 2010



Dauida Nemeroff, *Sun Dog (jake)*, inkjet print, 2010

exhibits a willful blindness, as it ignores problems around the false transparency of photography in pursuit of a singular narrative. However, this willful blindness is not unique to Goldin, nor it is a necessarily negative quality. Overlooking issues related to the production of photographic meaning allows Goldin's work to have a nuanced relationship to a specific kind of narrative tradition. Nonetheless, the presentation of transparent photographic meaning—the flattening of subject, content and the author's desire into the same plan—can appear naïvely self-interested.

“I imagine,” continues Wyse, “that for Williams the idea of either a subject or an author dictating so much meaning would be problematic, if not inadequate. I assume so because he so often severs the photograph's meaning from the meaning of the subject depicted. The photograph of corn isn't about corn but about photography itself: about the conditions of a photograph's making, about all photographs, and about how such conditions are never disclosed in a photograph.” Williams deconstructs photographic meaning to draw attention to the photograph as cultural and social construction. He does this often by adopting the tools, aesthetics and motifs of commercial photography while at the same time revealing the apparatus behind commercial photographs. It could be argued, however, that in this act Williams represses his own desire. In Williams' photographs, we do not know how he feels about his subjects. His deconstruction of photographic meaning and embrace of fetishistic photographic tropes form a strategy that avoids the pitfalls, as well as the possibilities, inherent to expressing individual desire.

What then is the role of desire in Nemeroff's practice? If desire is related to the position of the camera in relation to the body, Nemeroff's practice is closer to that of Goldin's. In Goldin's practice, all formal indicators (flash, intimate facial expression of her subjects) point to Goldin's camera being close to or even inseparable from her body. In Williams' practice all formal indicators (studio lighting, inclusion of tools used by commercial photographers) point to Williams' camera being detached from his body, or perhaps even in a different room from his body. In Nemeroff's practice, as with Goldin's, we are consistently made aware of the presence of her body and its proximity to the camera. The ephemerality of certain subjects, their dependence on the photographer's ability to capture the decisive moment, is also reflected in Goldin's subjects. However, there are several notable differences between the practices of Goldin and Nemeroff. First, there is no narrative, in the traditional sense, in Nemeroff's practice because subject matter is not prioritized. Second, not all of Nemeroff's subjects are transient or informal. Many subjects are static. Their conditions are constructed, composed, formal and without relation to the decisive moment. For Nemeroff, the different types of photographs her camera can take, the different ways in which her body can support her camera and the different effects this total photographic apparatus can conjure, are more important than the subjects in front of her lens. We must therefore reevaluate the role of desire in Nemeroff's practice.

If desire is related not to the camera's proximity to the body but to the artist's relationship to subject, Nemeroff's



Davida Nemeroff, video still from *Jacuzzi Time*, 2010

practice is closer to that of Williams'. Like Williams, Nemeroff foregrounds the role of photographic apparatus over subject. However, unlike Williams, the apparatus Nemeroff uses heavily involves her body. As with Williams, Nemeroff supplies us with a range of photographic tropes: a portrait of a girl in water, images of animals and fruit, a concrete landscape. These tropes similarly serve not as vehicles of meaning, but as vehicles of projection. Their realization, whether as videos or photographs, illustrates the artist's position through the suggestion of what lies beyond the camera's frame. Yet, Nemeroff's position refrains from the deconstructive impulse central to Williams' practice. She does not use commercial strategies nor does she depict meta-subjects such as analog cameras, dark room equipment and colour test charts, which feature prominently in Williams' work. Nemeroff utilizes a more pedestrian approach, one that favours quotidian subjects and allows the imperfect qualities of manual camera movement to leak into her compositions. These are the limits and freedoms of Nemeroff's body and photographic apparatus—and by extension Nemeroff's desire.

As evinced, Nemeroff's central content does not extend from subject matter, as with Goldin, or from cultural and social constructions of various photographic tropes, as with Williams. It comes, instead, from the daily act of looking and taking pictures. For Nemeroff, it is sufficient for content to hover in the realm of individual perception without being overly conscientious of either subject matter or larger social and political forces. Her pictures become photographic tombstones infused with poetic intentions and residue of the artist's presence.

The most wonderous aspect of Euclid's emission theory of vision lies in the nature of vision itself. It lies in eyes that radiate—eyes akin to suns—not in the observer's relationship to her subject nor in the gods' bestowment of sight onto humans. It resides in the body, which is presented as both mundane and unearthly. This is the body Nemeroff inhabits. This is the territory of Nemeroff's practice. In *California* we bear witness to Nemeroff as she humbly defers to the photographic apparatus—to her eye and to her body—and searches for the emotional possibilities it has to offer. We begin and end with a poster of a sunset. It is flat but radiant.

Endnotes

¹ Kittler, Friedrich. "2.1.1.1 Greeks and Arabs" in *Optical Media*. Cambridge: Policy Press, 2010: 51.

² *ibid.* p. 50

³ Wyse, Mark. "Too Drunk to Fuck" in *Words Without Pictures*. Los Angeles: Wallis Annenberg Photography Dept., Los Angeles County Museum of Art, 2009: 90

⁴ *ibid.*

Artist and curator **Davida Nemeroff** holds a BFA from Ryerson University and an MFA from Columbia University. She is the director of the nocturnal platform Night Gallery in Los Angeles and one of the co-organizers of Whitney's Biennial in New York, 2009. Her work has been exhibited internationally in venues including the EXiS2010 Festival in Seoul, South Korea, Economy in Frankfurt am Main, Germany, and The Company in Los Angeles. She has an upcoming exhibition with The Torrance Art Museum and is represented by Annie Wharton Los Angeles in the U.S. and Katharine Mulherin Contemporary Art Projects in Canada.

Mieke Marple is an independent writer and curator based in Los Angeles, CA. She is currently working on "The Holy Mountain," an exhibition inspired by Alejandro Jodorowsky's film for January 2012. She is also a champion and regular attendee of Night Gallery, the artist space run by Davida Nemeroff.

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