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On photography



Night visions: Darren Almond's full-moon landscapes

Taken over the course of half an hour at night, Darren Almond's images expose what happens when 'you give the landscape longer to express itself'

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Full moon @Torre Egger, 2013. Photograph: Darren Almond. Courtesy White Cube

At least two guiding spirits hover around To Leave a Light Impression, the new show by

British artist Darren Almond at White Cube, Bermondsey. The most obvious is Charles Darwin, in whose footsteps Almond followed to make several of his images. The other is the lesser-known Scottish nature writer, Nan Shepherd, whose book, The Living Mountain, provides the exhibition's epigraph:

"So there I lie on the plateau, under me the central core of fire from which was thrust the grumbling, grinding mass of plutonic rock, over me blue air, and between the fire of the rock and the fire of the sun, scree, soil and water, moss, grass, flower and tree, insect, bird and beast, rain and snow – the total mountain. Slowly I have found my way in."

Almond is trying to find a way in to a landscape tradition that he belongs to, but stands outside. His preternaturally still photographs evoke all kinds of precedents – from painters of the natural sublime like Caspar David Friedrich to early photographic pioneers like Edward Steichen and more recent ecologically attuned photographers including Robert Adams – but they also evince a kind of beautiful unrealness.



Full moon @

Argentinian Patagonia, 2013. © Darren Almond. Courtesy White Cube

For his Full Moon series, taken in Patagonia and Cape Verde, where Darwin's ship *The Beagle* stopped on its great voyage of discovery, Almond shot by the light of a full moon. He stood attentively by his camera waiting for clouds to clear, then used long exposures of between 12 and 30 minutes. The results are both natural and unearthly, recognisable and oddly alien. Volcanic rock emerges from a sea that looks like misty cloud seen from an aeroplane window. A river's torrent is rendered smooth and sculptural, and the

eucalyptus forest it runs through seems impressionistic and ghostly. Shadows lose their edges; they become soft and almost indistinct. "With long exposures, you can never see what you are shooting," Almond told me when I walked around the exhibition with him. "But you are giving the landscape longer to express itself."

Unlike, say, the seascapes of Hiroshi Sugimoto, in which the grey of the sea imperceptibly meets the grey of the sky in epically long exposures, Almond's landscapes have a deep, painterly tonal range that is often autumnal: ochre, rust, faded reds and wintry blues. The prints can look so rich they appear hand-coloured, but there is no post-production here, digital or otherwise. (His images, though, are scanned digitally and he uses latex ink prints that, he says, expand with the giant sheets of Perspex on which they are printed.)

In his close-ups of melting glaciers in northern and Chilean Patagonia, one can sense the speed at which the natural environment is changing. In one triptych, *Present Form Exposed*, a long-hidden, blue interior dating from the ice age is revealed in arresting detail, the stains and crevices disrupting the illusion of placid nature that holds sway in some of the other landscapes.

At the centre of the exhibition, a room is given over to a new series of a group of standing stones on the Isle of Lewis in the Outer Hebrides. Made in daylight, the colour and detail of each lichen-stained stone is astonishing in a more subtly dramatic way, each one shot against a dull grey sky as if to emphasise their place in this muted landscape. Some historians believe these 4,000-year-old monoliths are a lunar clock in tune with the long cycle of the moon, which, every 18 years, hangs so low that it appears to pass slowly between them. These are part of an installation that also includes 12 small bronze cylinders positioned around the gallery, each engraved with the initials of astronauts that have walked on the moon. (Some cylinders are laid flat to denote those who have since died.) Almond's standing stones seem so at odds with the Callanish Stones he has photographed. But they, too, allude to time – mortal and historical – and the lunar distances travelled scientifically since 3000 BC, when the earliest of the stones were erected, as well as since Darwin's time.



Full moon @ Cape

Verde, 2013. © Darren Almond. Courtesy White Cube

All in all, this ambitious show makes you see that Darren Almond may be operating as much in the tradition of land artists such as Richard Long and Hamish Fulton as to any photographic precursors. To Leave a Light Impression has at least a double meaning here: photographic and physical, for these images are the only traces of his presence in these landscapes. Darren Almond's images will leave you wondering what words like landscape and nature can possibly mean in a world where environmental change is so rapid that both are fast disappearing into myth and memory.



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