

A famous text by the American photographer Stephen Shore runs:

*Photography is inherently an analytic discipline. Where a painter starts with a blank canvas and builds a picture, a photographer starts with the messiness of the world and selects a picture. A photographer standing before houses and streets and trees and artifacts of a culture imposes an order on the scene—simplifies the jumble by giving it structure. He or she imposes this order by choosing a vantage point, choosing a frame, choosing a moment of exposure, and by selecting a plane of focus. [1]*

Another implication of Shore's remarks is that a painter (or sculptor), especially since the advent of modernism, has been under pressure to come up with a distinctly original set of practices (think in this connection of the work of the late British sculptor Anthony Caro, a close friend of John Riddy's and an admirer of his work). In contrast, a photographer is fated to aim at a different sort of originality, not so much a new conception of the art as an intensely personal treatment of the basic parameters of the photographic medium (Shore's vantage point, frame, moment of exposure, and plane of focus—not that these exhaust the relevant considerations, as will become clear). I mention this because it bears closely on the matter of Riddy's considerable achievement, which is one of quiet excellence to an almost exorbitant degree. Put another way, I know of no recent body of photographic work that exhibits a more deeply considered set of reflections on the nature of the enterprise, at a moment—roughly the past decade—when the work of various members of the "tableau" generation of the late 1970s and after has come to lose at least some of its initial appeal. (James Welling, whose conversation with Riddy also appears in this volume, is another photographer of whom this might be said.) In particular the embrace by the "tableau" photographers of large scale almost, it sometimes seems, for its own sake (I am not referring to all the "tableau" photographers, needless to say) has come to feel more than a little formulaic, as well as, perhaps more seriously, leading to works deficient in what I will call point-to-point surface intensity. [2]

In a sense, that sort of intensity has always been the long suit of painting, at least potentially, and it is a quality of the greatest interest to John Riddy. Consider, for example, one of the strongest of his black-and-white "Peninsula" photographs, *Ocean View 5, 2015*, taken with a small, digital camera and printed by Riddy himself with an Epson inkjet printer. According to Wikipedia:

*Ocean View, Cape Town, was established in 1968 as a township for colored people who had been forcibly removed from so-called "white areas" such as Simon's Town, Noordhoek, Red Hill, Glencairn by the apartheid government under the Group Areas Act. It was first called Slangkop and the first resident moved in 1 August 1968. It was named Ocean View, although the government had removed the residents from their previous seaside homes and views. As a result, its history is embedded in apartheid, and there is still much bitter resentment among many people. [3]*

*'Ocean View (5), 2015.'*

All twenty-one of Riddy's "Peninsula" photographs—taken by him as he rode by bicycle through the rather forbidding countryside—evinced an awareness of this history, most notably, perhaps, by the insertion of often considerable distance between the immediate foreground of an image and the townships beyond. This is especially striking, of course, in "Ocean View 5," where the image-field is divided horizontally into three dramatically unequal strata: a large foreground expanse (taking up more than two-thirds of the scene) of sandy-seeming earth largely occupied by small, wiry, tough-looking bushes called Proteas, "the national flower of South Africa" (Riddy). (In fact the Proteas have adapted to their environment and are maintained by periodic bush fires which destroy the rival vegetation. A certain "burnt" quality pervades Riddy's image.) Beyond the Proteas, at a considerable distance, sprawls a darkish stretch of ground containing, more or less directly ahead, a low-lying township—the ostensible subject of the photograph. Beyond that, farther away, jagged hills rise abruptly against a background of sky and clouds.

The dominant impression, to my mind, is of a troubled space—not the largely empty light-filled space of Timothy O'Sullivan's classic photographs of the American West, which up to a point Riddy's images resemble, but of a brooding expanse, constrained, even constricted, despite the distances involved. And what gives the photographs their quite remarkable graphic force is the extreme sharpness of focus—the almost preternatural clarity—with which the entire scene has been recorded, starting (in this case) with the Protea bushes, or perhaps I should say with the well-developed bush just right of center in the foreground, in relation to which the rest of the image inconspicuously organizes itself. This is a perfect instance of what Shore meant when he emphasized the importance of a choice of vantage point, though in *Ocean View 5* there is the further implication of a kind of natural metaphor, intended or not, comparing the unruly and almost unkillable bush to the seemingly orderly but remote and inaccessible township in the distance, itself registered with undiminished clarity even as the modest size of the image (just over seven inches high by roughly nine inches wide) compels the viewer to look extremely closely in order to take it in. This is also to say that the "Peninsula" photographs, all of which are the same size, conspicuously reject the "tableau" convention—and my further suggestion is that they do so both because of their subject matter, which calls for a certain intimacy of address (as if to drive home the point of one's exclusion from the depicted situations), and in the interest of what I earlier called point-to-point surface intensity, the latter having been made possible by the digital nature of the camera, an instrument capable of registering extraordinary fineness of detail, as well as, equally important, by Riddy's mastery of printing with the Epson printer (black and white having proved a particular challenge). (The tension between the photographer's—also the viewer's—near-exclusion from the scene and the hyperclarity of what nevertheless is given to be observed is differently palpable in another especially strong picture, one that yields a closer look at a portion of the same township, *Ocean View 3, 2015*. Here the view of the two main rows of buildings virtually end-on, their blank, illuminated end walls devoid of windows, emphasizes the note of impenetrability.)

Not that Riddy's work is simply foreign to the "tableau" tradition. On the contrary, it would be inconceivable without one of the guiding principles of that tradition—not so much an embrace of size per se as of its esthetically vital corollary, the new convention that such photographs were now required to be hung on a wall (as was

first noted by the French critic and theorist, Jean-François Chevrier. [4] In my book *Why Photography Matters as Art as Never Before* I argue that this simple fact also meant that serious photography was henceforth confronted with the need to come to terms by one means or another with the issue of theatricality—more broadly, the relation of the work to the beholder—that had been central to ambitious painting from the mid-eighteenth century on, and with special intensity since the advent of Manet and his generation around 1860. [5] This is a huge topic, one that goes far beyond the scope of these remarks. But the issue of photographs being made for the wall is relevant to Riddy’s achievement both because starting shortly after 2000 he began to work at a larger, more “tableau”-like scale than previously and also because he has always favored a mode of pictorial structure that is itself strictly frontal, even wall-like, based on a parallelism with the picture-plane of a strongly classical sort. (A related alternative is a scene with a central receding perspective structure).

Early instances of this include *New York, 1994*, shot in Grand Central Terminal, and *Ara Pacis 1999*, [p. xx] and it is basic to the series “Low Relief (2006-2008)”, but it becomes even more forcefully explicit in the recent “Half-Light” (2015-2017) photographs, which represent a striking development in his art. So for example in the superb diptych *London (Rail Sidings Road 1 and 2), 2017* the subject of both images is a stretch of road and high pedestrian tunnel wall built out of greyish and brownish bricks—greyish or greyish-green for the most part, with a vertical “patch” of dark brownish bricks off to the right—the wall impregnated with grime from decades of passing cars as well as, further to the right, descending vertical streaks of whitish residue from the excretions of birds. It mattered to Riddy that the tunnels—also called viaducts—were built in the great engineering and construction phase of the nineteenth century: [6] the bricks themselves seem distinctly British, to anyone familiar with older buildings in the UK. To enter the tunnels now on foot is, in a manner of speaking, to go back in time, a feeling exacerbated by the damp atmosphere. In both images the lighting is subdued, and the viewer intuits that the exposure time must have been anything but instantaneous; in fact Riddy used a view camera with a digital back mounted on a tripod, and the exposure time was around fifteen minutes, which is to say that in actuality the scene itself was much more light-deprived than in the photographs. One wonders exactly what Riddy could have seen with the naked eye; no doubt he arrived at the proper exposure time through a process of trial and error. Moreover, the images are the result of more than a single “shot”; rather, Riddy made them with the aid of a process known as stitching, which involves building a grid of exposures to portions of the subject and then stitching them together on a computer at the production stage.



This yields far more detail than an image derived from a single exposure and digital file but it also necessitates intensive labor at precisely that stage to insure not only that the final photograph is internally consistent but that its fine-grained structure of color- and value-distinctions satisfies the demands of Riddy's sensibility. At this point intensive work not just with the computer but also with the printer is absolutely crucial; characteristically, Riddy prints numerous "drafts" of his images and pins them to the wall in his London studio. These are studied and compared, often over a considerable period of time, by way of insuring that color, value, texture, and detail are exactly right, a process he thinks of as akin to a kind of gardening. (A decisive moment in Riddy's career took place when, about to embark on the "Low Relief" series, he purchased his own Epson printer in order to exert maximum control over the final result.)

The dimensions of each of the photographs is 98 cm x 123 cm, or just over three feet high by almost exactly four feet wide—"tableau" scale but of a modest sort. Considered as a single work, with a gap of 55 cm (about 21 inches) separating the two images, the lateral dimension is more than doubled, and of course the diptych format—but not only that—raises the question as to how exactly the viewer relates to it. What I mean is this: in order to grasp the work as a diptych, the viewer is required to stand somewhat back, let's say a minimum of ten or twelve feet, at which distance, of course, it is impossible to fully grasp the extreme fineness of detail, both textural and coloristic, that the digital camera has recorded and—as already noted—that Riddy has been at pains to realize by virtue of his long labors with the printer. So the viewer has no choice but to approach the paired images and immerse himself or herself in a sustained, intense study of the photographic surface, which is to say not only of the brickwork walls' impressive low-tech monumentality—the sense they convey of the systematic laying down by hand of countless courses of smallish bricks in a world that is no longer ours but to which *Rail Sidings Road 1 and 2* gives us partial access—but also of the evidence they bear of a host of subsequent deposits (packed grime from cars, white flecks of feathers from pigeons, a stretch of dark tarry patchwork, or so it seems, in the right-hand image, the white excremental streaking mentioned above), and indeed of the narrow stretch of roadway with its two horizontal yellow bands at their bottoms.



*'London (Rail Sidings Road 1 and 2), 2017' (Diptych)*

Put slightly differently, Riddy's use of the diptych format in combination with the extraordinarily fine-grained treatment of the photographic surface serves to "activate" the beholder, by which I mean stimulate him or her to exert, more or less consciously, the physical and imaginative effort required to bring the work as a whole into full esthetic focus (a quality I call "presentness") [7]. Indeed one detail deserves special notice: if one peers closely at the lower foot or so of the wall toward the right-hand margin of the photograph on the left one sees a constellation of white feathers which is also to be found toward the bottom of the photograph on the right, about a foot or more over from the left-hand margin. In other words, the two photographs do not depict contiguous or separated stretches of wall, as the diptych format might suggest; rather there is an overlap between them, which is only revealed on extremely close looking and which in fact is easily missed. But if it is noticed, it immediately exerts a subtle influence on the viewer's apprehension of the work as a whole—as if forming an almost imperceptible zone of resistance to a too-quick assimilation of the two photographs into a single compound entity. (The pursuit of "presentness" was never simple; nor is it now.)

I realize, of course, that this may seem to push close looking too far. What matters most, in any case, is the remarkable, almost frottage-like quality of the photographic surface down to its smallest negotiable real-world details, a quality that the eye detects even at a distance but is thereupon motivated to inspect at point-blank range.

Other recent works, such as the coloristically exquisite New York City photographs *Black Star 1–4, 2016* and indeed the entire black-and-white "Palermo" series, exemplified by *Carmine, 2012*, also conspicuously feature an "excessive" degree of photographic detail, there too made possible by stitching, a technique that has become central to Riddy's practice. In the "Palermo" series, indeed, the "excessiveness" is at times almost distancing: in *Carmine*, for example, a view down a roughly paved street in a working-class neighborhood lined with vegetable and other shops, most of which are now closed, the proliferation of visual incident, in tandem with the endlessly nuanced range of darkish tonal values, is more than one can easily take in. The time is early evening, with light lingering above; sliding metal doors close off the nearest shops; crumbling masonry, especially in a building to the left with baroque flourishes, bespeaks better times long past; no persons are in view, and empty boxes line the street, which also contains static puddles reflecting the sky. Plus there are awnings, balconies, TV dishes, street illuminations now gone dark—an inventory that scarcely exhausts the motif. And yet one's gaze continually seeks out additional structures and details as if by way of overcoming a certain reluctance to do exactly that. The result, if I am right, is analogous to the far-versus-near solicitations of the viewer in *Rail Sidings Road 1 and 2*, with the proviso that the "Palermo" series, like the "Peninsula" photographs, operates at less than "tableau" scale—further evidence of Riddy's exceptional freedom with respect to the issue of size.[8]

As for the *Black Star* photographs, modest tableaux like the tunnel wall images, they are among the most sheerly beautiful Riddy has ever made. The subject is lower Manhattan, across from the new Whitney Museum, with Frank Stella's sculpture *Black Star*, (2014) displayed on an external terrace of the latter. In fact *Black Star 2, 3, and 4* were taken within an hour from a room on the fourteenth floor of the Standard Hotel, on a rainy morning; we see the storm and rain in *Black Star 2* and its passing by in *Black Star 3 and 4*. Once again Riddy used a digital-back camera supplemented by stitching, with nine files assembled to form each image. The result, as is plain to see, is a degree of detail that finds its perfect match in the variegated features of the scene—the modest-appearing but somehow quietly distinguished buildings toward the center of the image, the much smaller buildings with their triplets of windows on a side street to the left, a multitude of other buildings near and far, the air-conditioning units on the roof of the Whitney to the right and the water tower of a type made familiar by the Bechers on the central yellowish building that continually draws one's eye (the water tower being the image's ground zero, so to speak), the progressive degradation of the vista in mist and cloud as one's eye drifts toward the horizon (notable in *Black Star 3*), the horizon itself with its ghostly tallish buildings, the spectral intense light in the sky and above it the layers of greyish cloud, and nearer to where we are, at street level, the asphalt glistening in the rain, a few trucks, a row of traffic cones, the nearby rooftops to the left shiny with rain, the almost anomalous planting of birch trees with their subdued greens and delicate foliage toward the bottom center—the whole a resolutely unspectacular but nevertheless acutely fascinating interplay of verticals and horizontals, of relatively large and absolutely minute scale, with the new Whitney an uncommanding presence but yielding, as Riddy's titles imply, a privileged view of a solitary, dark, starry sculpture. Of course, New York city as a photographic subject is virtually a cliché. But Riddy's *Black Star* photographs, in their intricacy and intensity, their restrained but gorgeous colorism (the fruit of intense looking at photographic "drafts" and minute painterly adjustments made over time), and—once again—their exquisitely managed marriage of distance and detail, are something new and, to this viewer at any rate, deeply moving. (Some fraction of the power of the *Black Star* photographs, for an American viewer, perhaps stems from their appearance at a particularly bitter moment in American history. As it happens, I am composing these sentences on July 4, 2018. Is it unreasonable to take the series as a gift from a concerned citizen of the country from which we broke away? An act of generosity, then.)

In effect I have come to the end of these remarks, but I want to say something further about a photograph by Riddy I have found utterly compelling from the first moment I beheld it—*London (Bank)*, 2006, a view of Sir William Reid Dick's marble statue of the great British architect Sir John Soane (1753-1837) in a classically-conceived niche on the exterior of Soane's most important creation, the Bank of England. (*London [Bank]* belongs to a marvelous series Riddy calls "Low Relief," for obvious reasons. By now it seems unnecessary to mention that Riddy's feeling for architecture is one of his many artistic strengths.) Soane stands facing straight ahead draped in a large cloak, holding a scroll and a square in his left hand; his expression is inscrutable but he does not look happy.

In a sense, this is appropriate: as others have noted, the statue was commissioned at the suggestion of Sir Herbert Baker, the architect who drastically revised and in effect demolished Soane's stunning original building, depriving posterity of one of the masterpieces of British architecture. But Riddy's photograph—taken at dusk, using a 4 x 5 view camera and film with an exposure of about ninety seconds—is devoid of irony and indeed of attitude of any kind; rather, the mood is one of uncompromising intellectual seriousness, of what philosophers call mindedness raised to a higher power, concentrated in the figure of Soane but at the same time framed and affirmed by the enclosing niche and pediment as well as by the monumental paired pilasters that bracket the niche ensemble. (Beyond that, is there a hint of melancholy, as if Soane were brooding on the fate of his creation? [9] I hesitate to say.) The hour, as already mentioned, is dusk, with a cusp of light on the curved inner wall of the niche to the figure's right (our left); Soane himself is largely in shadow; and the emptiness of the street, as well as the horizontal scoring or coursing on the monumental walls, compound the sense of solitary grandeur. A feeling of protracted temporality—the time of thought—pervades the scene. As always in Riddy's work, considerations of distance and framing are vital: the photographer has chosen a position across from the wall and directly in front of the statue.

Interestingly, though, the niche and statue are not strictly centered in the photograph but are set off somewhat to the right, which leaves room to the left for the perfect placement of a modest street sign (dark but with a band of silver light, a wrap-around notice of some sort, reflecting the illuminated sky off-picture to the right)—a brilliant element, which one recognizes only after sustained looking. (Imagine the photograph without the sign and see how much would be lost.) Then there are the further details of the patchwork pavement squares on the sidewalk and the painted marks, both the vivid diagonals and, less conspicuous but coloristically vital, the narrow paired yellow bands, on the roadway itself. And near the very top of the photograph, the horizontal pediment borne by the pilasters, framing the image in that dimension with quiet authority. All of this in perfect equipoise in the gathering darkness. It is hard to imagine a more complete achievement than Riddy's in this magisterial work. [10]



*'London (Bank), 2006'*

1. Stephen Shore, *The Nature of Photographs* (London and New York, 2007), p. 37.
2. Let me come clean: these remarks are partly motivated by my experience of Andreas Gursky's 2018 retrospective exhibition at the Hayward Gallery, London, which was on view at the same time as Riddy's most recent exhibition at the Frith Street Gallery. The contrast was striking.
3. Wikipedia.
4. Jean-François Chevrier, "The Adventures of the Picture Form in the History of Photography (1989, trans. Michael Gilson)," in Douglas Fogle (ed.), *The Last Picture Show: Artists Using Photography 1960–1982* (exh. cat.), Minneapolis: Walker Art Center, pp.113–28.
5. Michael Fried, *Why Photography Matters as Art as Never Before* (New Haven and London, 2008).
6. Said in a personal communication. Here as elsewhere I am grateful to Riddy for conversations and e-mail exchanges about his work.
7. A term first developed in my essay "Art and Objecthood" (1967). The notion of "activation" is introduced and briefly discussed in my conversation with Stephen Shore in Christy Lange, Michael Fried, and Joel Sternfeld, *Stephen Shore* (London and New York, 2007), p. 20.
8. Not all the "Palermo" photographs employ stitching, however. And a few of them, notably the very fine Giovanni (2013), a view of a cove at the end of the via Padre Messina Giovanni, offer a stripped down, internally sparse image in place of the deliberately super-rich series norm.
9. A suggestion of Robert Pippin's.
10. Two further thoughts. First, I sometimes think there is a special affinity between representational sculpture and photography; in this connection see the discussion of Patrick Faigenbaum's photographs of busts of Roman emperors in *Why Photography Matters as Art*, pp. 215–218. And second, Riddy's insistence on maximum surface intensity is an instance of what, taking off from remarks by Clement Greenberg, I call "density of decision" in relation to the photographs of Robert Adams, another photographer for whom the act of printing his work is a major concern. See Michael Fried, "Density of Decision: Greenberg with Robert Adams," *nonsite.org*, issue #19.