



**ARTIST**

John Pfahl

**TITLE**

Tintern Abbey Exterior, River Wye, South Wales, 1993/1997

**DIMENSIONS**

13 in H x 16.5 in W

**MEDIUM**

Inkjet Prints

**IMAGE NOTES**

Iris print

**CATALOGUE NUMBER**

1998.014

**CURRENT LOCATION**

NA 13

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**JOHN PFAHL**

**BORN**

1939

**DIED**

2020

**BIRTHPLACE**

New York, NY

**GENDER**

Male

**CITIZENSHIP**

United States

**CULTURAL HERITAGE**

European-American

**LIGHT WORK RELATIONSHIP**

Lecturer, 1978  
Donation, 2007  
by Robert B. Menschel Light Work Gallery, 1979  
Robert B. Menschel Gallery, 1991  
Light Work Endowment Project, 1997  
Fine Print Program, 1998  
Robert B. Menschel Gallery, 1997

## LIGHT WORK PUBLICATIONS

Menschel Gallery Catalogue 23  
Menschel Gallery Catalogue 49

## ESSAYS

The British Picturesque movement which peaked in the 1790's, encompassed a philosophy governing the rules for the presentation of nature as well as for the very act of experiencing it. Prominent Picturesque theorists Uvedale Price and the Reverend William Gilpin defined the notion of what makes a particular setting picturesque as 'a term expressive of that peculiar kind of beauty, which is agreeable in a picture.' British Picturesque landscape painters such as Francis Towne, John Sell Cotman and the early J.M.W. Turner were heavily influenced by 17th century Baroque painters Claude Lorrain and Nicolas Poussin whose idealized depictions of the Italian landscape were enormously popular. Although the Picturesque movement would not continue long into the 19th century, the philosophy of the movement as well as the activity of the Grand Tour -- thoroughly documented in numerous guidebooks of the period -- would continue on for many years. The Grand Tour was associated with the elite class, and connoisseurs of art, poetry, and philosophy. The Picturesque tourist traveled throughout Britain, and in later years, the Italian countryside, equipped with his guidebook, sketchpad, diary, and often a viewing device known as the Claude Glass -- a simple optical device whose convex mirror allowed users to frame and momentarily fix the undisciplined landscape before them. Many of the estates where these scenes were situated erected permanent viewing stations from which the 'perfect' views could be savored through windows such as at West's First Station, or the Grotto at Rydal Falls in Britain's Lake District. Viewing a particular scene through a framed window was a mediated experience which brought the act of viewing the landscape to the level of theater, and many of the writings from the period also used terminology from the theater to describe the Picturesque scene. A series of tinted glass plates were often employed to view a particular setting as it might appear at a different time of day or at another season. Such idealizing techniques were very popular among tourists and artists to conveniently modify the landscape. In Malcolm Andrews' book *The Search for the Picturesque*, the author points out the contradiction between the need for the tourist to discover nature untouched by human hands, but then to improve upon it. In this new series of work, *Permutations on the Picturesque*, John Pfahl looked to the 18th century British Picturesque movement not only for inspiration, but for precise instruction on the subject, appearance, and point of view of each image. Following the original locations pointed out in the guidebooks of the period, the artist traveled to these locations to create a new series of photographs, and returned with his own variation on the Picturesque landscape. Each of Pfahl's images were scanned into the computer to undergo a series of manipulations to emulate the appearance of a Picturesque period watercolor drawing. The computer allowed the artist to modify each image -- removing any distracting branches, misplaced livestock, or to exchange the existing sky for a more agreeable alternative. Within each picture Pfahl has inserted a row of enlarged pixels that span the length of the image. This manipulation draws attention to its computer-assisted construction, and could be considered a type of digital artifact or watermark. It may also be seen as Pfahl's deliberate attempt to disqualify these images from becoming the late 20th century realization of the Picturesque ideal. In this series Pfahl not only expands on his previous work which merges the idealized landscape image with visual traces of human intervention, but examines the traditions of landscape representation which predate the invention of photography. In looking back to Pfahl's *Picture Windows* series, the artist's interest in the permanently fixed vista found through the windows of his subjects' homes mirrored the purpose of the viewing stations frequented by the Picturesque tourist. The computer manipulations made to each image in this series share a similar quality to the visual duplicity Pfahl utilized in his early *Altered Landscape* series. The use of computer manipulation for this particular project adds an additional layer to the convoluted and recursive relationship between technologies, traditions, and the artist's interpretation of nature. In this series, John Pfahl has used the computer as a 20th century equivalent of the Claude Glass to filter his own photographs, thereby creating a new permutation on the Picturesque. Gary Hesse (c)1997 More images by John Pfahl can be found at <http://johnpfahl.com/>. The desert and the "Great American West" are symbolic of the timelessness and power of nature, where the rock dwellings and artifacts of ancient peoples have survived in the dry climate. Early photographs, from Timothy O'Sullivan's government and scientific sponsored expeditions in the 1870's, represent the magnificent natural formations and grand scale of the American West. Their breathtaking beauty was enough to obscure the ongoing elimination of Native American populations. A century later, the power of nuclear weapons have melted the desert sand into green glass at blast sites that dot the western landscape. Since the first explosion of an atom bomb on July 16, 1945 at the Trinity test site, the nuclear age has accelerated our destiny with time. Three weeks later "Little Boy" was dropped on Hiroshima, a city of over 400,000 people. "Peaceful" use of nuclear energy is regulated and protected by the same federal government that makes weapons. The radioactivity in nuclear waste is measured in half-lives. Plutonium, a lethal element of nuclear power, is only half as deadly after 24,000 years. Radioactivity from nuclear weapons and reactors contaminates the air over our cities, the land that produces our food, the ground water, and the cells that we pass on to our children. Work by three photographers, Ingeborg Gerdes, Barbara Norfleet and John Pfahl, are featured in the exhibition, *TIME BOMB*, which presents the desert as the appropriated site for the nuclear weapons industry. These photographers have all made visual records of how Western culture impacts on nature while incorporating the formal traditions of landscape photography in their work. The aesthetic elements of balance, scale and quality of light always contrast the clumsy but ambitious human hand. Ingeborg Gerdes started photographing the high desert of Utah, Oregon, Washington, Nevada and California in 1980 when she was selected to participate in a National Endowment of the Arts and Seattle Arts Commission sponsored Photographic Survey. Gerdes now makes annual treks to desert locations, and her photographs, without reference to the nuclear, represent the as an existential stage for human activity. Her 16 x 20 inch black and white prints pay exquisite attention to the subtleties of texture and space in old mining towns, recreational sites, parks, monuments, roads, and occasional picnic area. The reckless attitude of hardy inhabitants and curious tourists play against a striking background of blankness that holds the portent of violence. The two trailers in the photograph, Highway 95, Near Goldfield, Nevada 1982, could well be the first seekers of fortune on the brink of a nuclear winter. Barbara Norfleet has close contact with American social customs and past-times in her role as sociologist and photographer. Her experience informs her current and ongoing series *The Aesthetics of Defense*. In the past few years Norfleet has succeeded in penetrating the high security places where nuclear weapons are developed, manufactured, tested and eventually abandoned. Among the places she has photographed are the desert bases of New Mexico, California and Nevada as well as the sprawling DuPont-operated Savannah River Plant in Aiken County,

South Carolina where plutonium is produced for nuclear weapons. Unexpectedly, Norfleet found the enlisted men in these remote places, to be “very polite, gentle and not macho at all”. The intelligence officers whom she was not allowed to photograph, “all looked like Peter O’Toole”. In her black and white photographs, Norfleet uses the bright desert sunlight to capture the prosaic quality of the shiny new weapons and uniformed men. The technology is presented in scale with it’s human operators, undermining the “top secret” self image of military science. John Pfahl’s Missile/Glyphs offer a contemporary equation for the second coming of the “big bang” theory of evolution. Each work pairs a cibachrome photograph of a missile relic from the National Atomic Museum in Albuquerque, New Mexico, above a photograph of tiny figures of animals, faces and figures carved by ancient people on desert rock. The petroglyph in the set, Redstone Missile/Indian Creek Petroglyphs 1985, merges into the polished missile part connecting our collective need for power, to hunt or land a job, with the selective dominance of nuclear power. The lifeless missile is an empty icon fueled by fear and the incongruous surfaces of warm rock against cold metal are metaphors of the physical and inimical forces that shape our world. The desert preserves our history in mineral laden geological formations and the artifacts of extinct cultures. Yucca Mountain, in the desert of southern Nevada, is under consideration as the site for the storage of high level nuclear waste. The waste will outlive the physical conditions of the mountain. Recently, the sacred lands of the Middle East have also become the target for new weapons testing. The photographers in the exhibition, TIME BOMB, throw a timely light on our cultural relationship to nuclear weapons without fear or false optimism. Gerdes, Norfleet and Pfahl, with sympathy and great sensitivity, bring the public in closer contact with the nuclear time bomb. Their work is among a growing body of work by photographers who question the time limit on an situation of great urgency for which there is no clear solution. Gina Murtagh Assistant Director Light Work Ingeborg Gerdes was born and educated in Germany. She lives and works in San Francisco, CA. Barbara Norfleet is the current and Founding Director of the Harvard University Visual Archive on Social History in America. She lives in Cambridge, MA. John Pfahl was graduated with a master’s degree from the Syracuse University Newhouse School of Communications in 1968. He currently lives and works in Buffalo, NY.