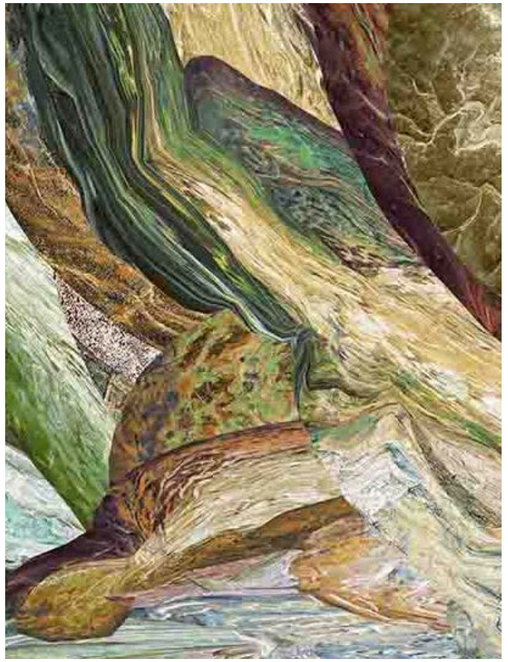
ANNE ROWLAND

MAY 20 – JULY 1, 2023

INTERVIEWED ON THE OCCASION OF THE EXHIBITION "PICTURES"

HEMPHILL

What Is That Thing (Corona, New Mexico, Version 1), 2023
archival pigment print on rag paper, 50" x 37.5", ed. 1/4



DETAIL:
What Is That Thing (Corona, New Mexico, Version 1), 2023

HEMPHILL ARTWORKS: What initially drew you to aerial view imagery?
ANNE ROWLAND: I was drawn to aerial images both aesthetically and via my family culture. I grew up in Great Falls, Virginia in the 1960s, when there were still dairy farms and hay fields. Land was a source of enjoyment and wonder. We had lots of maps: terrain maps, road maps, globes, and some US Geographic Survey (USGS) aerial views of Great Falls. These all fascinated me. They were engaging on a visual and spatial level. We had an aerial photo of the farm that my father grew up on in Warrenton, VA. He would show us what happened, and where. For instance, where he blew up the side of a little hill with dynamite, or where the farmhand dumped him, headfirst, into a barrel of molasses. Aerial imagery often provokes stories of what happened, who lives where, and what is gone, acting as a catalyst for sharing personal history and stories. The USGS aerial photos of Great Falls were particularly engaging to my family as we could see our house, friend's houses, and where we roamed: our particular physical relationship to our world. Our identities were connected to and formed by Great Falls, and the aerial views showed where my life took place, functioning as a map, providing a spatial understanding of life.

HA: Did your early experience with maps and aerial imagery develop a strategic approach to how you manipulate aerial photography? Did you develop a conceptual strategy in your use of arial imagery?
AR: When I started making composited appropriated aerial views, I was interested in showing how development has taken over areas in Loudoun County that used to be dairy farms and hay fields. Later, I became interested in making views of locations that were featured in artworks from the past, such as Thomas Cole's painting showing the Oxbow in the Connecticut River, and Cezanne's pictures of Mont Sainte-Victoire in Provence. I made this work occasionally for about 12 years. But I never developed any particularly rigorous theoretical justification for the work. I had to accept that I didn't care about theoretical stuff. I cared about the aesthetic experience of looking at the online presentation of the landscape from above, and then altering it.

HA: Is the new work an extension of your earlier interest in landscape?
AR: The new work does bear a direct relation to my earlier landscape work that was shot in multiple frames. It all involves an obsessive collection of the landscapes, and an assembling of something big; re-constructing something.

This body of work is another iteration of my interest in landscape. The curiosity is primal and deep. The landscape seems to function emotionally for me in a way similar to old friendships. It provides a sense of connection and companionship, without the possibility of messing it up through various flaws of personality. I recall at the memorial for William Christenberry I almost fainted when you said that William Christenberry had become a place. I am guessing that part of this idea is that a place can hold memories, represent values, and function almost as family, as the site of the family.

HA: You are utilizing images created in part by artificial intelligence. Do you consider your work a form of appropriation? Or do you see your use of the satellite imagery as working with nature?
AR: Of course, it is appropriation. Completely. I am taking machine-made imagery and transforming it into something new. It is really swell that the source material is 'neutral,' made almost by rote, involving planned flight paths by satellites and airplanes for survey purposes, with photography at regular intervals. A variable might be the predilection of the software developers who design the 'capture' equipment. Does my use of the satellite imagery equate to working with nature? Well, I would consider that the material I am appropriating is a 'proxy' for the actual terrain of the earth; in the new work it is 'rendered' in the extreme.

HA: Sometimes technology opens a new avenue of inquiry.
AR: Throughout my artistic life, playing with various techniques and technologies has led to new bodies of work. The pictures in the exhibition appropriates and repurposes machine-made aerial views.

Google presents a combination of various commercial aerial images, from Maxar Technologies,

EagleView, CNES Airbus, and Copernicus Land Monitoring Service, to name a few. The imagery is recorded via automated systems from satellites and sometimes from airplanes for commercial purposes. The photographs are simply 'captures,' processed through software and presented online, neutral; pure material. In them, we see both the natural world and the human interventions that are made on it. There is no foreground, no background, no perspective. There is no hierarchy of information. Everything that is visible is made equal; it is an impossible spatial representation, like a giant flatbed scan of the world.

It all came about as I was trying to wrap up the previous aerial work, to put it in order and to write about it. But while immersed in that old work, instead of wrapping it up, I started to play with it. It is really fun and completely new territory.

HA: You have described the new work as inhabiting a place between photography and painting.
AR: Photography has changed, the uses of it have multiplied, some of those uses stretch the traditional definition. The nomenclature no longer effectively defines the new way it is used and how it affects us. Maybe we need a new name?

These pieces don't operate for the viewer the way photography usually operates. The viewer isn't asked to 'believe' that the pictures are showing something real. They don't show a 'subject' contained within the rectangle and there is no sense of a singular moment in time.

HA: Is there a painter whose work has been helpful to your thinking about the new work?
AR: I have always been a photographer, but I have absorbed, visually, a lot of painting. I was startled to find that, subconsciously, formal properties of painting were coming out in this work. I wondered if I was becoming some kind of art historical mimic. What was compelling me to make these strange looking things? I started looking through art books to find an explanation for what I was doing— I have a new appreciation for all sorts of work that I never really paid attention to before.

When I came across Terry Winter's work, his blobs, shapes, and writing, I thought oh, this is kind of where I am going and what I am doing. A piece I am working on right now makes me think of Arthur Dove's more abstract pictures involving big muscular shapes with a lot of 'sfumato.' I also think of the jagged line that is in so much of Charles Burchfield's work, the swirling sky in 'Starry Night' by Van Gogh. I have made two pieces in which have curvy parts that seem like an amalgam of work by

Georgia O'Keeffe, Michelangelo, and Charles Burchfield. This all just sort of happened, a door opened.

The abstract or semi-abstract appearance of these pieces is the result of a sequence of spontaneous actions and spontaneous reactions to what I am seeing on the computer screen, resulting in an aestheticization of the source material. This can all happen very fast; a piece can change completely over a period of seconds, almost as fast as thinking.

HA: Alfred Hitchcock used distanced camera viewpoints and aerial viewpoints to imply an objective or a 'God-like' view of the proceedings below.
AR: Oh Hitchcock! I immediately think of the aerial view in his film Marni showing Tippi Hedren riding Forio, fleeing the scene of the bloody foxhunt kill.

When I am searching for a location, I am looking at what is essentially a visual display of the surface of the world. Aerial imagery provides a representation of our world on a grand scale. It shows the relationship between all aspects of the planet's geography. The earth's terrain has never been represented so accurately. I enjoy this view that is from a great distance. It allows for a detached contemplation, something undervalued in our world today.

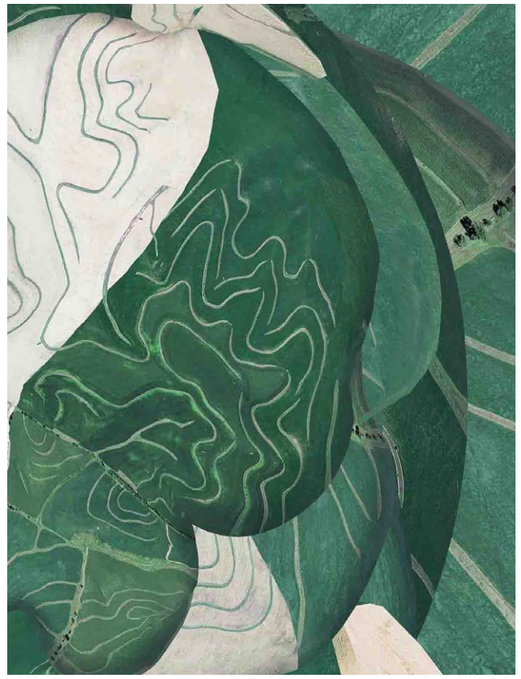
HA: How do you select the subject-location.
AR: The aerial view is beautiful and sometimes startling. Every click and swipe on the computer provides a new thrill of discovery; the imagery seduces with possibility and potential, an extravaganza of optical pleasure. A few locations have been somewhat predetermined. One was an area of Santa Clarita, California that was so massively developed and that I was familiar with from my incomplete graduate student sojourn at Cal Arts. I also sought out a location just east of Corona, NM of the wreckage of a military reconnaissance balloon. The farmer who found the wreckage brought some of it to the sheriff's office in Roswell, NM; it was thought, by some, to be pieces of an alien spaceship. I mean, how can one resist? I did a piece featuring a farming area dotted with lakes in North Dakota just because of the graphic nature of the dark lakes against the pale land. I focused on Council Bluffs, Iowa, Dalhart, Texas, Burlington, Colorado and Moriarty, New Mexico because of the patterns on the land made by agricultural activity. Searching through satellite imagery reminds me a little of wandering around in the stacks at our local libraries when I was young, accidentally finding fascinating stuff.

HA: In past work, you have taken a political position on suburban development and how it damages the natural environment. Is the current work political?
AR: It dismays me to see the rural environment of my youth, outside of Washington, D.C. disappear to housing developments, and, in general, to see domestic architecture warped into fantasy structures that bear no relation to their actual use or environment. If having a critical stance toward that is political, then so be it. At least three pieces in this new body of work feature a contrast between development and agricultural or natural geographic features. These distinctions are somewhat obscured in the finished pieces due to all the shifting I have done to the imagery. One shows Loudoun County just east of Leesburg, and across the Potomac, the Montgomery County Agricultural Preserve. Another piece shows an area of recent development to the northwest of downtown Frederick and just north of Fort Detrick. I visited briefly with one of the developers, who wanted me to photograph a field adjacent to his own house before he put houses up. Another piece shows an area just west of Cal Arts, in Santa Clarita, California. It is a giant excavation in which you can see future lots carved into the hills, as well as roads, water lines and sewer lines. It used to be the Stevenson Ranch. It will include over 4000 houses and condos on 3000 acres.

Here in the rural and suburban areas near Washington, D.C., local citizens never seem to grasp or perhaps they just don't care about the downside of development, and especially that residential housing can't be taxed enough to pay for the services that the new residents will require over a long period of time. Developers capitalize on the local zoning. There are also various obscure laws that determine formulas for the county services that determine the degree of profit for developers, and it is almost always to the developers' advantage. It is fascinating to look from above at how we have arranged our world, to see how our elected supervisors, and the zoning they have allowed, ultimately play out, in an aerial representation.

HA: You do a great deal of hiking with your dog in the area near your home in Virginia.
AR: I love moving through the landscape with my dog. It is usually best with just us two, because I want to be fully in the landscape, not distracted by talking with another person. From an early age I just loved walking on a dirt path. Total freedom, no interference from others, fully engaged with the place.

It Was Just Like That (Emerson, Iowa), 2023, archival pigment print on rag paper, 74" x 56", ed. 1/3



DETAIL: *It Was Just Like That (Emerson, Iowa)*, 2023

I was speaking with a friend about a walk Cotton and I took the other day, on an old dirt road with huge fields on either side, hundreds of acres. Cotton loves running after birds and rabbits in these fields, and yesterday, as I walked along the old raised roadbed on the edge of these fields, he ran far off, about a quarter of a mile. I could see him the whole time from where I was walking. I was telling my friend about the thrill I get seeing Cotton running so far away. The friend brought up the concept of 'aesthetic distance.' To illustrate the concept, he described the storm scene in King Lear and how it is almost always staged so that you see Lear in the context of his environment and the storm; you need to be able to be at sufficient distance so that you can appreciate how overwhelmed he is. We talked about how my pleasure in seeing Cotton running from afar is that kind of aesthetic experience, an example of aesthetic distance, the 'God-Like view' or objective view that you have referred to.

The opposite of the aesthetic pleasure of seeing Cotton from afar was also the closest I have come to a transcendent experience involving the landscape. In this second case I became just another animal inhabiting the landscape, not an observer. I was walking with my dog Beauregard on one of our favorite roads, no one else within a half a mile. It was dark with an almost full moon, a warm summer night. It was sublime. And suddenly we heard coyotes on both sides of the road, very close. It was a little scary and very elemental, an almost complete immersion in the natural world, including the feeling of being potential prey. This experience made me feel very alive indeed.

Cover image: *Get Out While You Still Can (Samora Correia, Portugal)* 2022, archival pigment print on rag paper, 50" x 37.5"