

In titling his first monograph *American Series*, Neal Rantoul gives us a context in which to place his photographs, and a road map to connect the dots between his methods and strategies.

Trying to define America as a specific place is as elusive as trying to find meaning in the word “interesting.” In thirty plus years of photographing both the populated and wide open American landscape, Rantoul hasn’t really looked for a definitive description of America, but has tried to find meaning in the process of looking at many different places in a certain way.

His practice of working in a series encourages us to link his pictures together physically, while philosophically connecting decaying architecture on the East Coast with thriving poetic wheat fields on the West Coast. Moving back and forth between idyllic and encumbered landscapes Rantoul finds potential in what is being observed, and meaning in how he is making that observation.

Working almost exclusively with a square format camera, his photographs begin off-center from our normal panoramic field of vision. Square photographs give us more information on the top and bottom of the frame, hide things that are on either side, and distort perspective in a way that is uniquely photographic. His interest in looking at things photographically as opposed to simply rendering a scene with a camera develops its own visual language complete with syntax and punctuation. As our eyes move around his pictures various objects lead us outside of the frame and like the page-turning process of reading a story, they lead us to the next image which feels familiar yet not quite the same as the picture we just left. Where some photographers might use this as a clever device, Rantoul unfolds it

as an essential component of a visual language that interprets, exaggerates, and questions our perceptions of a particular place rather than simply describing a moment in time.

In addition to slightly off-center framing Rantoul makes other choices, as he says, “to make the truly special out of what, after all, is fundamentally mundane.” He rarely includes people in his photographs but the history, artifacts, politics, and daily activities of individuals, communities, and societies are as constant in his pictures as their physical presence is consistently absent. By removing specific personalities from his pictures we are left to fill the void with our own imagining of who currently is, or who so long forgotten did, populate the places he visits, photographs, and makes permanent.

Even though working in a series gives Rantoul the opportunity to show us a place from different perspectives, this culmination of images, like each individual frame, never concedes to creating something that is completely whole. Individual pictures are framed so that the top of a house might be truncated, or objects like garden hoses and guard rails wander out of the frame to a place that might be more or less vital than the place they started. His series wander from abandoned buildings on an East Coast island to renovated historical Southern neighborhoods, to rural West Coast towns. In the middle of these populated places he also photographed the iconographic Utah Mountains and majestic wheat fields of Washington State. Here his square format can do nothing to disguise the beauty of the landscape we all know so well, and by including these images in the book, we get the sense that he is trying to explode the idyllic myth of the West and at the same time make it whole.

His choice of places to stop and look around is everywhere and nowhere at all. His images are printed with the technical precision taught by Ansel Adams, often contain the sublime beauty found in the images by Aaron Siskind and Harry Callahan, and sometimes exploit elements of the mundane as clearly as the work of Robert Adams.

By embracing the elements of style of these seminal American photographers, Rantoul has created a body of work that pays homage to those that preceded him, and in the process created images that are uniquely his own.