

GLARING

DEFICIENCY

/LEIGH DAVIS

Glaring deficiency - it is a lack that shines,

apparent in Patrick Reynolds' great photographs of rivers and dams called **POWER**.

POWER is a photographic series commissioned for the **Mighty**

River Power Annual Report for 2001. (Mighty River is an

electricity generating company in New Zealand, some of whose

generating assets are on the Waikato River, which is one of the

biggest in the country).

MARAETAI | GANTRY



THOMAS.

POWER is a photographic *essay*. To call it an essay is to name the rising agent in this photographic series.

If it is an *essay* it is a type of physical and self-conscious trial.

All these photographs are such a wavering setting-out.

They embody risky reach.

Gear change: at the extreme of such wavering, setting-out gestures, at their maximum promotion, there is the echo of Doubting Thomas' reaching into the space between his and Christ's once pierced side. His is a great Western original *pointing*, at glaring deficiency.

Thomas' five-second act: the West's greatest essay.

THOMAS.

So back to the POWER series that you can saunter by or re-read and think about again and again.

POWER is a jump out and across that has all of the unfolding cadence of a walk.

Patrick Reynolds' essay is not something signifying belief and disbelief.

Neither was Thomas' probing at the body of the newly spacious god.

You can see it. The original essay was not a fact-lover's enquiry to downplay doubt and restore or confirm a previous order. Thomas was *without doubt*. In his reaching out, in his addressing, in his famous action Thomas was least himself. He was at the edge of something; absorbed within and conscious of his as a surprising motion in the middle of something. And what was this *something* that the Saint was on the edge of and reaching into? It was a state resembling *Thomaslessness*.



Heck.

So too with POWER which is a series of photographs that you can spend a lot of time with. They appear to be pretty uneventful images at first. Then you can see that they repeat one discovery gesture all the time. But it is a discovery that is indistinguishable from something that you do when you are becoming lost.

It is incredulity's reflex, this repeated leaning of the Hasselblad toward the river.

An *essay* then, and in particular this photographic one: it is a gesture that responds to a call, performed thoughtlessly and before the burgeoning of a gap *where a gushing is now taking or has taken place*.

POWER is the record of an exchange conducted in the face of a river.

" I do not know much about gods ; but I think that the river
Is a strong brown god – sullen, untamed and intractable,
Patient to some degree, at first recognised as a frontier ;
Useful, untrustworthy, as a conveyor of commerce ;
Then only a problem confronting the builder of bridges.
The problem once solved, the brown god is almost forgotten
By the dwellers in cities – ever, however, implacable,
Keeping his seasons and rages, destroyer, reminder
Of what men choose to forget. Unhonoured, unpropitiated
By worshippers of the machine, but waiting, watching and waiting.
His rhythm was present in the nursery bedroom,
In the rank ailanthus of the April dooryard,
In the smell of grapes on the autumn table,
And the evening circle in the winter gaslight."

[T S Eliot, Section 3, The Dry Salvages, *The Four Quartets*]

RIVERS.

The lens is nothing in itself. It is an instrument. Its whole interest is in how and where it is pointed. It projects down a fall line, into its object of attention, as does an object in gravity's pull, '*like a mote in a minster door*'.

A river is not a stable object of attention. Setting up to take a photograph of a river many times is to suffer a pull towards something blurry many times.

This *pull* is a different experience from being *drawn* to a careful searching-out of all of the details of the scene ahead. Why? The scanning of a river involves resolving choices with respect to a watery subject under the aspects of both time and light. The object of attention is always evanescent. Time exposure and light exposure are there in the moment of the essay's opening, and rise without assistance to share equal prominence in the photographic addressing of the water.

RIVERS.

A river is a volatile fluid. It reveals itself as already abstract and becomes an emulsion of ground and figure, primary and secondary imaged subjects rising and falling. It is a complex suspension, this emulsion. A photographic essay upon a river documents some beguiling ply.

You cannot look at a river, other than momentarily. If you attend for longer than a moment then the river glazes over and it is not a look that you are experiencing but a meditation. The proper noun, *Waikato*, struggles to overcome the wealth of the abstract noun, *river*. That is why this river attracts so many similar photographs. There is nothing to look at and everything to see. The moment the shutter races the object of attention reveals once more its low amenability to being caught. It changes state. As the photographing of music, say. This is a river's complexity, the continuous crossing of pictures of time and light that constitute its body.

RIVERS.

Mighty is what gods are.

We know about *Power*.

Annual is the cultured mark of time's passage (and has *annal* too at its outer edges);

Report has about it, in this company, something of repercussion.

But again it is *River* that consolidates the ecclesiastical trace, this sense of Mass said for the space of a year.

Things that flow rapidly up from downriver are light

The river's bluff emerging into view is light

Darkened rain outspread on the horizon

And leading toward it is a reach of water, tapering

Slanted and unable to fall to ground

Falling and rising along its length under the fleet

Unable to pierce the ragged yellow beneath it

Extraordinarily like sound

Where Thomas goes

To pierce a welling of light things alla terra

Abandonnata

(Leigh Davis, Office of the Dead, S VIII)

DAMS.

And the dams that jam this high Greek sandwich of light, time and water?

They do not belong to engineering's history but to art's. They are not local quotes from East European icons of social advancement. Rather they have such a strong counterpoint language, one that is so extremely different from the scoured geography they occupy, that dams echo sculpture's action.

The dams render the water ponded above and behind them simple and idle in appearance; and the water below them mostly diminished.

What they protect against is not explicit. It is in the reservoir. Dams at least *arrest* the abrasion of the water that preceded their construction across ravines.

Utterly indigenous dams; but they are neither native nor colloquial.