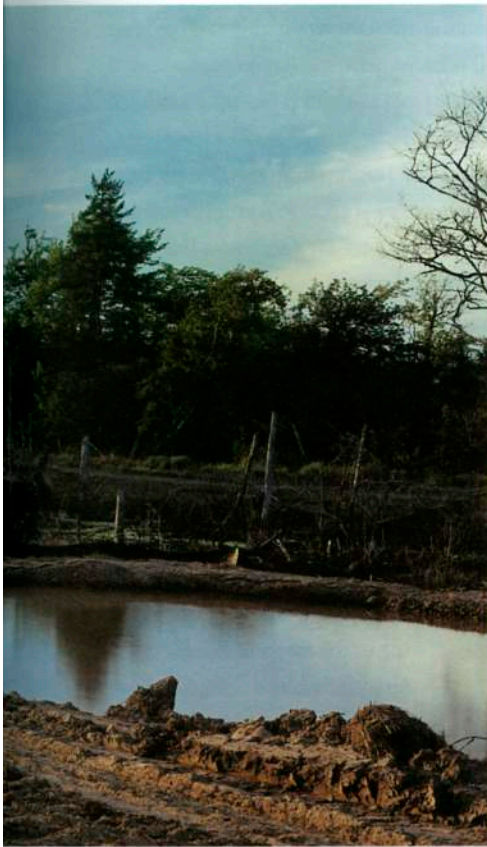




Eyeing the Landscape

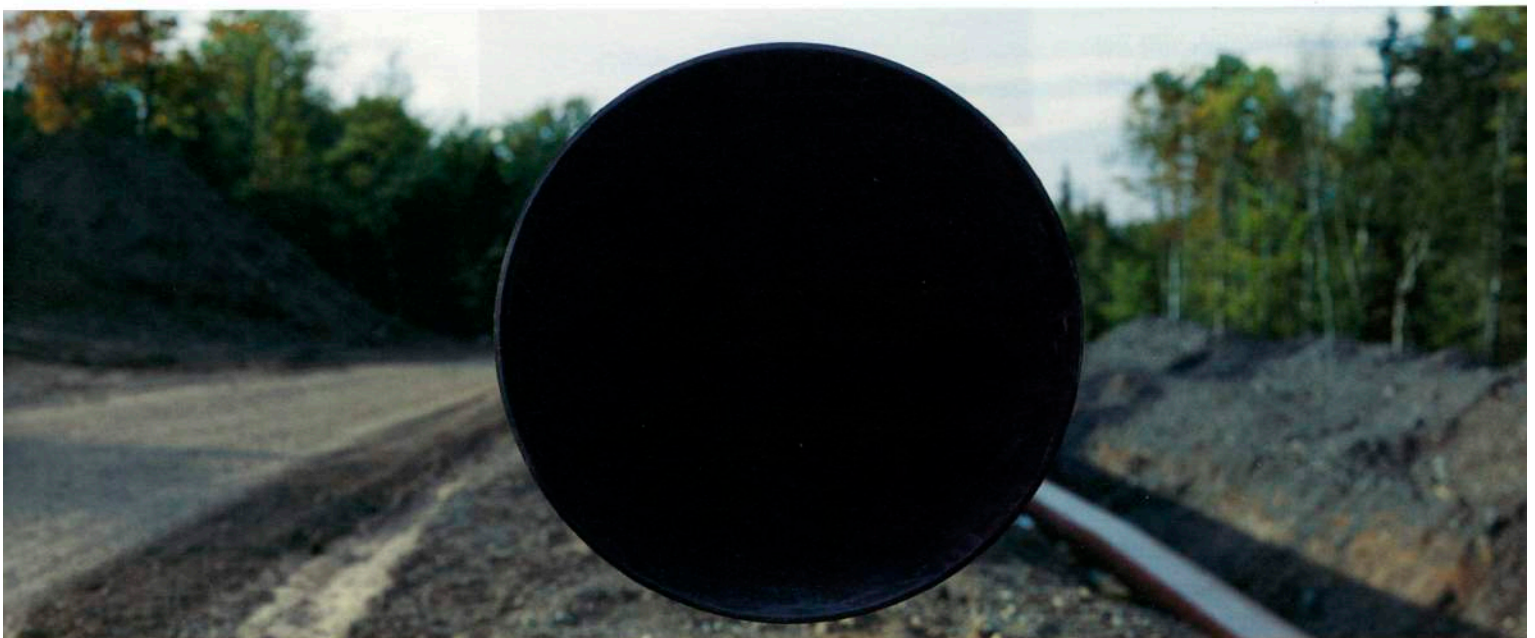




If, as Henry David Thoreau said, the unexamined life is not worth living, then Thaddeus Holownia would say the unexamined landscape is not worth living in. Over a career spanning more than 25 years, the New Brunswick photographer has completed a number of remarkable bodies of work that inquire into the ways in which man has made his presence felt in nature and how nature has resisted that intervention. He has taken photographs of various interactions of land, sea and sky on Sable Island, and of the atmospheric changes visible around Jolicure Pond, an artificial watering pond behind his own house. In the course of 15 years he has documented the return to nature of a 19th-century covered bridge linking the communities of Upper Dorchester and Taylor Village across the Memramcook River in New Brunswick ("Rockland Bridge"), and in the concentrated frame of a single year has traced the construction of a 568-kilometre-long pipeline from the coast of Nova Scotia to the Maine border ("Anatomy of a Pipeline"). All this work has been photographed with a Banquet camera, a large and cumbersome apparatus that produces images of astonishing clarity and depth of field. As a result, the effect of looking at an image made by Thaddeus

The Photography of Thaddeus Holownia

BY ROBERT ENRIGHT



Photographs from series "Anatomy of a Pipeline," 1999-2000, chromogenic contact prints, 16.9 x 42.4 cm.
All photographs courtesy James Baird Gallery, St. John's, Newfoundland, and Jane Corkin Gallery, Toronto.

Holownia isn't just an encounter with a rarely seen landscape, but also with a way of seeing that is no less rarely experienced. Because the camera records what we are unable to see, it is a tool of extra-human capacity, a sort of perceptual prosthesis. The degree to which it extends our perception is startling.

So is the degree to which it makes everything beautiful. If you look at any image in the "Anatomy of a Pipeline" series, what is most immediately evident—and it's a feeling that persists—is how elegant are the markers and pipes and machines used to construct a pipeline that stretches along almost 600 kilometres of forest like a dazzling industrial snake. (In *KM 241* the beauty gets qualified by a section of pipe advancing on the right-hand side of the image; it looks as if a huge cannon has sighted some aspect of the landscape.) Similarly, the changes undergone by the landscape around Jolicure Pond, and the body of water itself, are gorgeous. From the matching deep blue of the pond and the sky that majestically lowers above it, through verdant greens and browns that would impress Cézanne, to the brittle transparency of the scene's winter palette, these nine revisitations to the same place, under radically different atmospheric circumstances, are so varied in tone that you feel they must be manipulated.

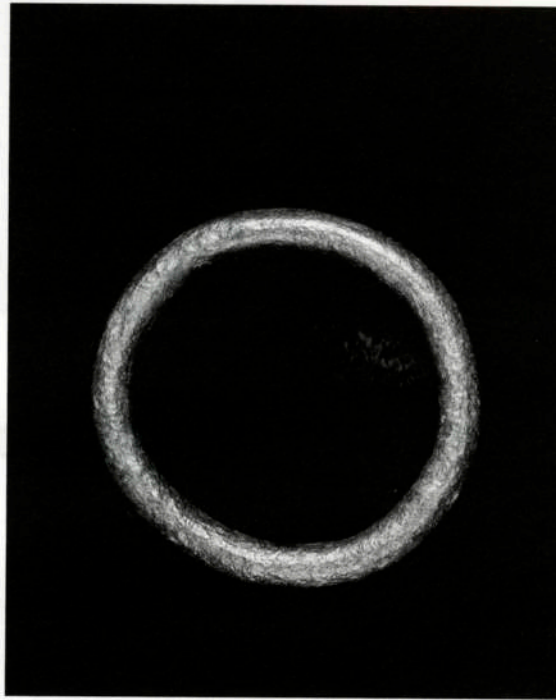
But with Holownia, what you see is what he got. "What I am after," he says in the following interview, "is an honest relationship between myself and the poser." It's an honesty he clearly extends to the inanimate subjects of his photographs and not just to the people whose function it is to add a sense of scale to the landscape. What Holownia says about a series of photographs he took on Queen Street in Toronto—"I didn't really need the people, they didn't contribute anything physically to the pictures"—holds true for the bulk of his work. He is more interested in the evidence of human habitation than its actual presence. When he photographs the Irving gas stations that were a signature architectural presence in the Maritimes, he is documenting the passing of an era and not the people who ran the stations during that segment of time. But it's advisable to use caution in applying the word *document* to Holownia's work, because the

documentary is not his intention, even though it may end up being a by-product of his overall achievement. He has a quick eye and when he leaves behind his view camera and picks up a Leica, he can be momentarily decisive.

His preference, though, is for the meditative. The projects take time and are a measure of time's effect. His most recent is a project that is layered in its accretions. He received a Fulbright Fellowship to conduct a photographic exploration at Walden Pond in Concord, Massachusetts, a place he calls "the shrine of the American spirit." Typically, Holownia comes both to praise and to bury Henry David Thoreau, the high priest of American transcendentalism and the shrine's presiding spirit. He has already

made numerous trips to Concord and among his earliest images is a photograph of Thoreau's grave, a pictorial gesture that lays to rest one reading of the mythology of the site. Holownia has decided to honour the place through its trees, and what has emerged is a series of re-natured portraits that comment on everything from ecology to aesthetics; depending on your associative disposition, the bark of one tree can look like the skin of an elephant or the skin of a canvas by a post-painterly abstractionist. The trees can be demonic or they can be erotic; they can appear wisps of historical memory or emblems of the history of persistence.

There is something appropriate about Holownia's recent photographic inhabitation of a writerly place. Since 1989, when he published *Dykelands* with poet Douglas Lochhead, he has been a maker of books. These collaborations with writers have produced objects of impeccable quality and grace, printed by Holownia on his own letterpress and released under the imprint of The Anchorage Press. In *Ironworks*, 1995, a recent pairing with Peter Sanger, he achieved a new level of personal sophistication in the art of letterpress printing. Along with Sanger's finely forged poems are Holownia's photographs of artifacts—callipers, spades, axes, rigging eyes and links from the Cameron Shipyards in Nova Scotia. The images are an alchemist's dream; they fashion rough metal into gold, a transformation of



from *Ironworks*, 1995, platinum contact print, 38.0 x 29.5 cm.

the impoverished remnants into icons of power and beauty that rival Byzantium.

At the heart of Thaddeus Holownia's photographic enterprise is the need to look hard at what matters and to fix the memory of that looking. All his work has been about considered regard, about the intimate relationship between the eye of perception and the "I" of the perceiving photographer. In 1886, the Canadian poet Charles G.D. Roberts published "The Tantramar Revisited," a poem that celebrates the same landscape Holownia has photographed since his arrival in New Brunswick a quarter of a century ago. The poem is a measured refusal to observe the changes the poet fears his beloved marshlands have undergone. After rhapsodizing the panoramic landscape, Roberts retreats into memory:

Yet will I stay my steps and not go
down to the marshland—
Muse and recall far off, rather
remember than see—
Lest on too close sight I miss the
darling illusion,
Spy at their task even here the
hands of chance and change.

Thaddeus Holownia has, of course, chosen to make seeing his muse, and, in the acute intimacy of his gaze, guarantees that the hands of chance and change will be stilled by the eyes of inviolate remembrance.

The following interview was conducted in the artist's kitchen by Robert Enright in September 2002. Outside the window was Jolicure Pond.

BORDER CROSSINGS: When did you first become interested in using the camera as a way of structuring the world?

THADDEUS HOLOWNIA: That didn't happen until I went to university. The delay was probably because my father was always interested in photography and had a darkroom in the house when I was in high school. I never set foot in it. When I went to university, my uncle actually gave me a very strange camera, a Leica copy, which was built by Nikon and distributed by Sears in this country. Once I started making photographs, I thought, This is something I have a feel for. So I switched from being a fine arts major to communication arts.

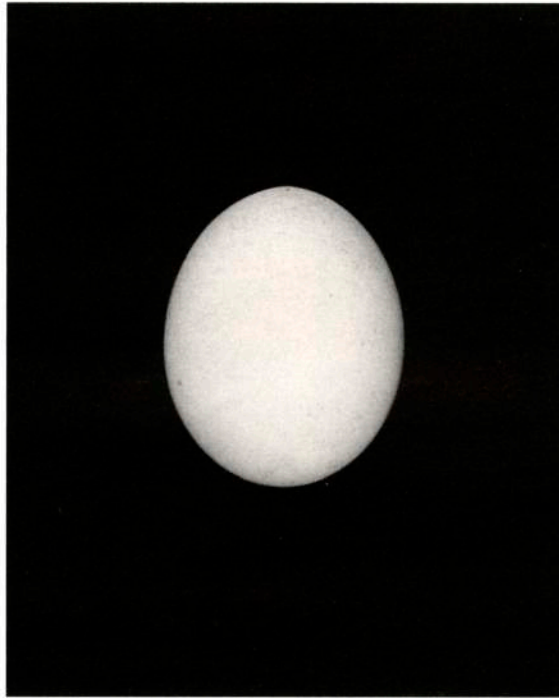
BC: When you say you took to the camera, did it seem like a machine you could use right from the beginning?

TH: It was. I really enjoyed the immediacy of it, the connection to your brain. None of the other mediums spoke to me that way. Being stuck in a studio holds no attraction for me. I really enjoyed the fact that I could take this instrument and walk around and make things happen in one fell swoop. The portable camera was so much a part of my life that at university, if I didn't have it with me, people would say, Where's your camera? Basically, it was the way I communicated and made statements about the world. I wore that camera out and bought myself a Leica and I've had one ever since.

BC: How did you regard the act of photography at that time?

TH: It was just something I was doing every day. I was making images and I was making collections of images. I don't have more than a dozen of them today, although I probably have a lot of the negatives. If there was a political event going on, I was there making photographs; if there was a rock concert going on, I was there making photographs of that; if I was smoking pot and hanging out with my friends, then I was making photographs there.

BC: Was it moving towards anything? What were you thinking of doing with your devotion to the camera?



from "Ova Aves," 2002, chromogenic print, 38.0 x 29.5 cm.

TH: I didn't know. At that time photography in Canada was in a bit of a ghetto. We didn't have the systems and the MFAS as we do today. When I finished university, I didn't go to Toronto to find a job. I went there and said, What do I have to do that will enable me to make pictures and what do I do to avoid having to make commercial pictures? So I worked as a freelance film editor.

BC: When did you first realize the photographs you were taking were good enough to stand on their own?

TH: Well, no light bulb went on. In those days the hierarchy and the divisions that exist weren't evident in the art world. I met lots of artists who started saying, These are really interesting



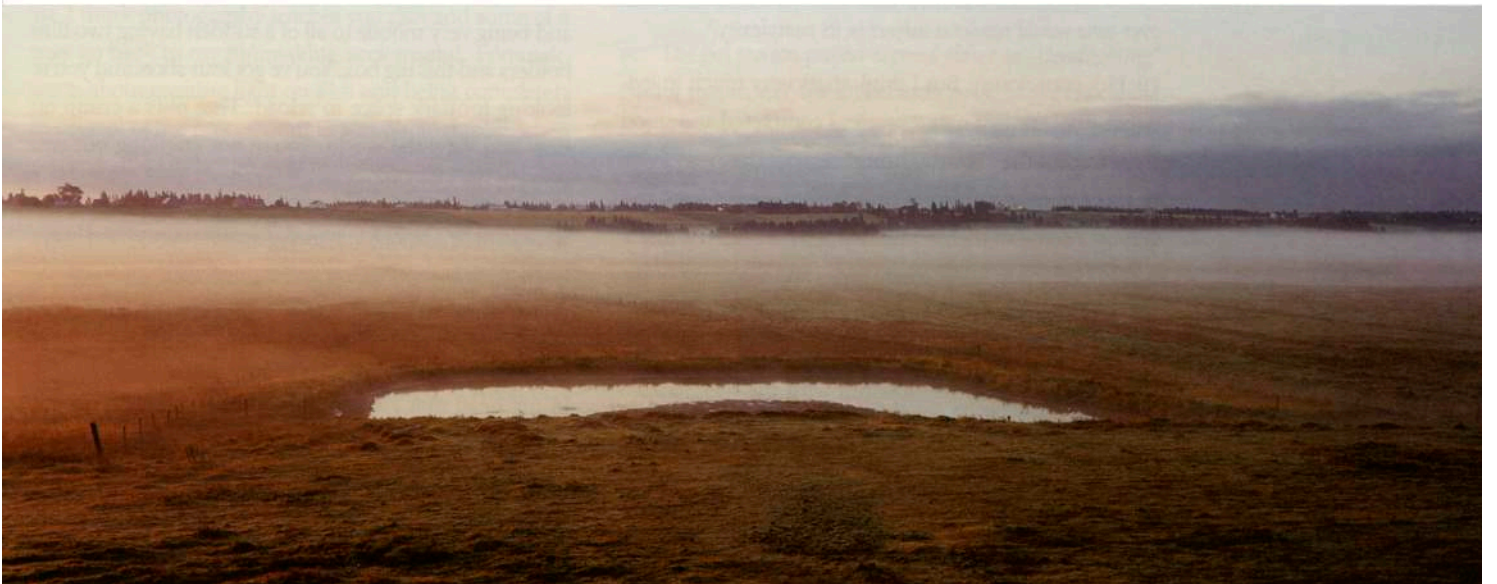
this page and facing page:
from the series "Joliculture
Pond," 1996-2000,
chromogenic contact
prints, 16.9 x 42.4 cm.

pictures, why don't you put some of them up in this show? So my first exhibiting was by default. I was involved with A Space in Toronto and it was a centre of artistic activity. In the daytime you had a visual art gallery, at night you had an underground cabaret. In the background the offset press people were printing rock concert tickets they were bootlegging. In many ways it was very subversive without announcing itself that way. There was lots going on and the lines were blurred between the mediums. It was a good milieu to be in. It certainly gave me my start. And if you were at A Space, inevitably you'd end up at Coach House Press,

where I met Stan Bevington. A lot of the things I had exposure to there—like letterpress printing—affected me further on down the line.

BC: What made you decide to leave Toronto?

TH: It was a strange decision. I went to see Allan Fleming, a Canadian designer who was at the University of Toronto Press. He looked at my work—it was all 35 millimetre—and said, You should use a view camera, I think that would be an aesthetic your work would fit into. Little did I know that a few weeks later I would come across an 8-by-20-inch view camera, which I managed to borrow. I didn't even know what a view camera looked like at that



point. I started making photographs on paper negatives just because that seemed to be the quickest way to start working. The first photograph I developed was in the basement of a collective called Fringe Research, which was a couple of artists in Toronto who were doing holography. Once I saw the image and made a positive of it, I realized this was exactly what I wanted to do.

BC: *So you and that technology were duck to water?*

TH: We were. The immediacy of seeing an image on a piece of glass, composing it and then making the print to that same scale was something I continue to live to.

BC: *Do you remember what that first image was?*

TH: I do. It was a group portrait of four or five artists on the front lawn of Fringe Research. It was about a 10-second exposure, maybe even longer, and I'm in the photograph as well, because I took the lens cap off, walked into the image and then put the lens cap back on. The view camera was completely out of vogue at that time. People would see me lugging that suitcase and note the seriousness with which I tramped around Toronto. There was lots of acceptance about what I was doing. At the time I looked back to Edward Weston and to Ansel Adams. I remember seeing a show at the Museum of Modern Art in the mid '70s of Adams's contact prints and the enlargements he had gotten into. I remember thinking the contact prints were so much better, which confirmed a lot of things I had going on in my mind.

BC: *Were you aware that a single photograph didn't give you what you needed and that what suited you was a process that over time would render a subject in its complexity?*

TH: Not consciously. But I think that's very much in evidence from the first major project I completed and stood back from—the "Headlighting" series. That was three years of photographing people with their vehicles and getting a sense of their combined relationship. At first it was important to know their names and the make of the car. But it very quickly became obvious how unimportant that was. What was important was that the series represented everyone's relationship with the mechanized world we lived in.

BC: *Did you realize you were developing something that had sociological as well as pictorial interest?*

TH: Yes. A real interest of mine from day one has been the fact that the photograph crosses a lot of boundaries. It can be really honest or it can be a lie, and that's certainly been an attraction for me. I'm not coming from a place where people fabricate images out of something else. What I'm after is an honest relationship between myself and the poser.

BC: *How did you choose the subjects?*

TH: What was important was that there be a cross-section, and once I arrived at that I stopped doing it. I think I probably did 50 or 60 portraits across North America all the way to California. I moved to Sackville in '77 and the last one I did was two chimney sweeps who had this incredible truck with a sign painted on the side. I did that photograph and then I proclaimed the project done.

BC: *What did you learn from the "Headlighting" series, either about people or technology?*

TH: I learned a tremendous amount about the process. I'm largely self-taught in photography, I never studied with anybody and I never took any courses. So I was on a steep and fast learning curve. But I think the biggest learning experience from that body of work was that I didn't have to make the "decisive moment" picture. I needed to re-evaluate how the technology I was using was different from working with 35 millimetre.

BC: *Did you have to consciously free yourself from Cartier-Bresson's influence?*

TH: It just happened. In a certain way the apparatus demands it. The other thing that was really interesting was I went from walking around with my pockets full of film and being very mobile to all of a sudden having two film holders and this big box. You've got four shots and you're looking for dark space to reload. That puts a crimp on how you view the world. You're not cranking out two shots of the same thing.

BC: *It must be a process that really focusses your eye and brain. You have to know what it is you're going after.*

TH: Absolutely. I think that's another attraction of the process and of photography as a medium. What do I see in my head that I am interested in composing on this ground glass, which will then be the essence of this experience? And how do I tie image one to image two to image three? You really begin to think—unconsciously

perhaps—about a lot of things that formulate themselves in your mind's eye before you actually make the picture. It also taught me that you have to know where to stand. It's very rare that I set up my tripod and move it. That comes from working with the same thing for a long time and with not having 10 lenses, including a zoom lens, to muck with. You have one point of view that you're pursuing and then you move on.

BC: Are you now able to look at a landscape and figure out where you have to be to get the image you want? Have you developed an instinct for that?

TH: It changes with every body of work. I don't think the Walden trees came out of an experience of setting the camera up in the same position. Then, with the "Rockland Bridge" series I had one tripod position, but because people don't understand the Bay of Fundy tides, those photos were puzzling.

BC: They thought you were constantly moving the camera around?

TH: In Germany people looked at that series of work not realizing that the camera hadn't moved from the same tripod position. Just time had gone by. Because in one shot there were these huge things with the bridge, and in another it's low tide and there's nothing there. If they look carefully they see that the landscape is the same. It's the same thing with the "Jolicure Pond" series. The shape of the pond is there, the landscape is the same, but the light creates a myriad of different experiences that take you into other places.

BC: Had you always been sensitive to light, or is that something that developed as you worked as a photographer?

TH: I think photography teaches you that and some of it may go back to my filmmaking background. Filmmaking is about creating light on film and being completely in control of the process. But in still photography, when you're in the landscape, you really become sensitized to how the light reveals the subject. When I'm teaching, it's a question of breaking down these ridiculous notions people have that you get up early in the morning, and you never photograph at noon, and maybe in the evening you can catch the right light. I tell people there are no rules, there's no sense of when is the right time and when isn't the right time. The right time is when it works.

BC: What was it about the Tantramar Marsh landscape that so attracted you?

TH: I was finishing "Headlighting" and was becoming more interested in landscape when I was invited to come to Sackville. I came up from Moncton by train along the tidal river, past the Rockland Bridge and past the tidal flats of the marsh. I thought, This is a landscape I can work with, this is a landscape I can squeeze into this camera and make something happen, this is a landscape with a lot of humanity showing itself in a way no one has really considered. So I started making those photographs and I'd go back to Toronto every couple of months, then I'd go back to Toronto every six months. Finally I realized I didn't need to be in Toronto. I was working on something and I actually liked being in a rural setting and I liked teaching.

BC: Charles G.D. Roberts has a fine meditative poem on the Tantramar. Were you aware of how loaded a place this landscape was in cultural memory?

TH: I had absolutely no idea. High school does not inform you about the Acadians and the plight of British settlers in early Canadian history. It was more coming here and starting to travel around and being in a small community where there's a sharing of knowledge, which a small university affords. It involved going out onto the landscape with naturalists, historians and geographers. That begins to nurture something that builds on itself. I didn't just do photographs of the Tantramar. It took me 12 years to put that project together before I finally had an exhibition. There were other things going on. I was going to Nova Scotia, then I started a project in Newfoundland. I also began the Irving architectural landscapes, looking at the gas station as this symbol of vernacular rural architecture. I continue to work on projects simultaneously and they find their own resolution.

BC: The gas station project seemed closer to "Headlighting" than it was to, say, the Dykelands work, or the "Rockland Bridge" project, because it deals with evidence of human habitation in the landscape.

TH: Yes. I think it's very much tied to "Headlighting" and the notion of coming here and having a sense that the automobile is represented in this part of the world by the urban gas station. It's in every little nook and cranny and it has its own way of being portrayed. In the process of photographing the Irving stations, something happened to the idea of retailing gas. All of a sudden the little gas station disappeared and went to another model, so the idea of having a work-bay and servicing cars was no longer



a functional concept. I was quite fortunate with that project because within the space of 15 years a lot of what I'd photographed was gone.

BC: *You have always seemed interested in the passage of time and a certain nostalgia about a way of life that was in the process of disappearing. Were you aware that you were becoming the chronicler of lost aspects of human occupation?*

TH: Only in hindsight. Who could predict that all of a sudden people would change the laws about gas tanks in the ground? So when they're upgrading a gas station, they're saying, It's not worth our while putting money into this service station because it doesn't pump enough gas to pay for that change. We're going to close this one but we're going to open a new super gas station at this corner because that's where all the traffic is, and if we're going to have a gas station we might as well have a restaurant so people can pull in and have food. I think "Headlighting" was a nostalgic trip for many people of a certain age because their kids have never seen an El Camino or a Dodge with a front seat the size of a sofa, but I think good work can support that sentimentality without its taking over.

BC: *What were you doing with the Ironworks project?*

TH: It was just a matter of honouring the handmade object. You didn't embellish it with anything but the spirit of the fire that was there when it was beaten into that shape.

BC: *Could the objects themselves have been that beautiful in real life?*

TH: They were very carefully considered.

BC: *The "Ova Aves" series also makes clear your careful consideration of individual eggs.*

TH: Yes. The bird egg project came after the *Ironworks*. I had known about the collection in the biology department because my partner, Gay Hansen, oversees the collection and uses it in her teaching. I've been a birdwatcher since I was 12 years old, so I had an additional interest, but it has always seemed to me that the single beauty of things is lost on people. They don't want to experience it. I was engaged by the notion of a bird egg, which is such an all-encompassing object. How it's formed when it's moving in the uterus and its colouration and individuality make it like a fingerprint. Once I started looking at those eggs, I started thinking that they were as mystical and magical as planets. They're infinite in their variety

and yet they're all linked to one species. The first one I did the was *Osprey* egg, and when I enlarged it and put it on the wall, I thought it looked like a planet, like a heavenly body. So I started choosing individual eggs, photographing and enlarging them so that all their small, uncelebrated aspects would become major components.

BC: *Was there a whole cosmology built into the project?*

TH: Yes. Then there's the unknown one, which has this zigzag thing. It wasn't really identified as a species but it was like an abstract painting. I've gone to nature in a couple of projects in a row, but as far as the art world goes, nature is not in vogue. You really have to rise above the obvious and go beyond parameters that have already been explored. For example, lots of people photograph trees and lots of people make nature pictures that are really bad and generic. They serve a purpose but they don't reveal anything. So you're walking a tightrope. But I like that. It's as delicate as going to the pipeline and working with how human intervention reveals itself in that nature.

BC: *This relationship between man and nature and the way they interact has been one of your major pursuits. Are your photographs traces and measures of that process?*

TH: I think so. I don't go to the purest place, I'm not Ansel Adams looking for ways to get the wires out of the image. For me, the wires are part of it.

BC: *Your pipeline photos document a destroyed landscape and yet it looks impeccable. Do you ever worry that you aestheticize the industrialized landscape?*

TH: Obviously you think about things differently when you sit down with somebody who's got questions directed to a specific project. When I'm building a project, I'm trying to understand what the work is about for me. I'm going to rethink it and I'll go in certain directions, but I don't dissect it to that degree.

BC: *Have you been thoroughly captivated by the contact printing process? What was it about the content of that printing that was so appealing to you?*

TH: First of all, you have to come to the print, you don't stand back and look at it. So there's a demand made on you as a viewer. The 7-by-17-inch print is not overwhelmingly large so you can actually stand in front of it and go from corner to corner. There's the ability to respond to foreground, middle ground and background.

facing page:
from the series
"Rockland Bridge,"
1981-2000, silver
gelatin contact prints,
16.9 x 42.4 cm.

By using the depth-of-field, you can deal with that blade of grass going back to infinity and play the middle ground and the background off each other.

BC: Does the view camera basically do away with the traditional notion of perspective? Does it give you the whole range of perspective simultaneously?

TH: I think probably it's how you control it, where you focus, what aperture you use. In the most recent work, the incredible, deep perspective of the depth-of-field functions very differently from those pictures in Newfoundland, or even the pictures in the *Dyklands* series, where I locked into that F45 and really tried to deal with infinite space, and with the camera's ability to make the relationship happen.

BC: Which our eye won't do for us. In a way the camera is a much more sophisticated instrument than we naturally have.

TH: Absolutely. I suppose if you sat on the hill and had a pair of binoculars strapped to your head and then you took them off, you'd have something of that experience. But the camera also makes everything still, right? You have excerpted from the life going on around you and distilled it to that one flat plain of experience. But the attraction for me is that there's a lot of information there and that it's so infinitely detailed.

BC: In the work you've done around this area, why did you make the decision to work primarily in black and white rather than in colour?

TH: I've always made colour slides, I've used them as a kind of notebook. Even when I got involved with the view camera, the Leica travelled with me. Colour work in large format never happened until I went to Sable Island. I got invited to go to there by Tony Lock, a biologist from the Bedford Institute. He had lived in Sackville and had seen the *Dyklands* series. He was doing migratory bird work on Sable and he said, You should come there and we can probably put you up. I photographed in black and white, and when I came back and looked at the images, something wasn't right. Then I realized that Sable was sand, sea and sky and an elemental aspect that was neutralized in black and white. The changing light on the sand, which was very white, was totally gone and it looked like snow. That's when I went to Kodak and asked, What are the chances of getting colour film made? At first they didn't even want to talk to me, but

eventually they made me some colour film. Then I went back for six or seven years, a visit each year, and tried to take it in. That's when I did the elemental landscape, which really dealt with the place's being a laboratory of light in the way that it took on the hues of the day.

BC: Did you recognize right away that it was a remarkable place?

TH: Well, it's a hard place to get to and any place that's hard to get to carries a lot of mystical power. Of course, in Nova Scotia lore, when people hear you're going to Sable Island, you take on the power of a super hero. It just seems to be everybody's dream in the Maritimes because of the horses and the romance of the place. I liked it because it fell into the parameters of how I build a project. A lot of my landscape projects evolve out of a specific geographic space with which I have to contend. The horses were the unifying human thing. They free-ranged everywhere and they could be used for scale. The rest of it was about an abstract landscape that takes on the colour of the day and the light. There was no human intervention in the work I finally exhibited.

BC: I'm intrigued to hear you talk about the romance of Sable Island because in some ways you also have been involved in creating a romantic landscape. Anyone who views the places you photograph sees them as they're offered, as opposed to what "Jolicure Pond" really looks like outside this window.

TH: But that's the A in art, right? If you can make that happen, then the experience of looking at the work is always going to be better than going and seeing where it came from. Ultimately it comes down to what's in the frame. What are you representing, what is the experience? Photography isn't reality; photography is the image you've presented on the wall, it's the essential relationship you've established with something, which you present as an experience for someone else. There are certain landscapes and certain places I would not go and photograph. Either because people have gone and done it way better than I could, or they have just been overdone. I'm much more comfortable finding something that is not of any interest to anybody and making it interesting by saying, Look, here's a subject that is going to allow me to speak out about something completely different because of how I use it.

BC: Obviously you hope your discovery of what is essential will generate an equivalent experience for the viewer as well?

TH: It would be self-indulgent to just make pictures for yourself and keep them in a box. If you decide that you're going to make a career using this visual medium, then essentially it's going to be a public experience at some point. So "Jolicure Pond" is my back yard, which I have to bring down to the most basic place as everybody's back yard. Through the making of those photographs I'm saying there is an experience to be had in your back yard that could enrich your existence. It can be done from anywhere. The project got started because the question came up at dinner one night about where I was going next and who would get to go with me. This is after my son or daughter had just come back from Utah and Vegas and where they'd had a terrific experience. I answered that question by saying you don't have to go anywhere. This place is as unique and as great an experience as going to Utah.

BC: *You say you don't go to places that have been photographed and yet you end up in Vegas, which must be one of the most photographed places in the world. How do you decide what it is you want to extract from places that are so familiar to viewers?*

TH: Vegas is the ultimate in constructed landscapes. Their buildings are mimicking architecture: the Pyramid Casino, the Eiffel Tower. It's this crazy playground of wealth and I went there just to find that experience and see how I could embody it in an image. But I couldn't stay there for two weeks, so the escape route was to explore other parts of the American southwest.

BC: *Do you also have an instinct for documentary? You have a photograph taken in Mexico of a dog lying in the shade, but what's interesting is the figure who leaves the frame at the top of the picture. The composition indicates the instinct of a decisive moment photographer.*

TH: I don't close myself off to the different styles of photography. I work with all mediums and all formats. I went to digital to learn about the process. But Walker Evans hated the word *documentary*; he liked the phrase *documentary style*. The word *documentary* locks you into a finite experience, whereas talking about the style of documentary opens things up a little more.

BC: *You like sequencing images. In one of your small books, you do an intriguing thing relative to notions of blackness and whiteness. I think of that beautiful image of figuratively shaped delicate impressions in the snow on the left-hand*

side of the page, and on the right-hand side you put the shadow of the horse's neck.

TH: I love to be able to put two images on a facing page. I do that a lot in the Walden books, too, where I play off the relationship of positive and negative, the reality of a shadowed image, which looks solid as opposed to the solid figures in the snow that are translucent and feathery.

BC: *You have a photograph of Hamburg at night. It's a very romantic, impeccably elegant cityscape. Obviously you've been seduced by beauty.*

TH: Go to the pipeline pictures and look at the photograph where the muddy trucks have gone by and sprayed the alders. To my mind it's elegant, but someone else would look at it and think, These trees have been covered in mud. So it's how you formally engage yourself with the subject and what you draw from it personally. I like to think that my point of view in the bigger scheme of things is pretty optimistic. I'm not an ambulance chaser, I'm not looking for sensational images. At the same time, I don't want to reconstruct something that's already been done. I'm trying to find my own page through the images and the subjects that speak to me and if it means it's beautiful, then that's what it is. I think probably the most beautiful work I ever made was on Sable Island. It was the essence of romanticizing the landscape. I don't think any other work I've done has entered into that kind of pure relationship to the landscape.

BC: *On the surface of things, the Tantramar landscape is not obviously beautiful. Like the prairies, it's a pretty subtle landscape.*

TH: Yes, and that's a really important part of the work. I like to choose subject matter that's mundane, that has received very little attention, or a landscape people think they know well and then I go about reinventing it.

BC: *The photographs in the "Anatomy of a Pipeline" come to mind in this connection. It wouldn't be a subject that most people would photograph. Were you attracted to it because you wanted to understand what it would look like when someone puts a pipeline through a landscape with which you're so familiar?*

TH: I heard this was going to happen and it fit into a neat parameter: it was 580 kilometres long, it had a route, I could get the maps. So there were elements that exactly corresponded to the way I like to look at a landscape.





Whether it was a landscape that was dyked by the Acadians and that encompassed so many thousand acres of marshland, or whether it was this narrow corridor that ran through a couple of provinces and embodied another kind of human intervention—to me they were both coming from the same place. The pipeline was very modern and it happened very quickly. I think one of the attractions for me was the fact that it was going to happen, was going to change, and then it was going to be done. I liked the aspect of compressed time. I titled the works by the kilometre, which seemed like an engineer's way of naming.

BC: *For viewers, it's probably the most difficult body of work you've ever done.*

TH: Exactly, and I think more than any body of work, it has to be looked at in a series. You don't look at one image and get it. It's also a body of work that had to be done in colour. It's all that fluorescent tape and the kind

of materials that are used to mark up the landscape. And then the landscape counterpoints that marking.

BC: *The photographs in the series seem to trace some resistance by nature to man's intervention. Are those tensions incrementally involved in the process?*

TH: I think so. I wouldn't consciously go out to make pictures with that in mind, but wherever I go, there's an underlying way of looking at things. Most of the bodies of work have traces of time and humanity and the relationships between them, whether it's architecture or roadways.

BC: *It would be hard to put humans into the kind of photographs you've done.*

TH: If there's a human in the image, it's not for any reason other than scale. Even when I worked on the "Queen Street" project, I intentionally tried to go where there weren't a lot of people on the street. I didn't really need

facing page: from the series "24 Tree Studies for Henry David Thoreau," 2001-2002, silver gelatin contact prints, 42.4 x 16.9 cm.

this page: from the series "Voisey's Bay, Newfoundland," 2001, silver gelatin contact prints, 16.9 x 42.4 cm.



the people, they didn't contribute anything physically to the pictures. For the most part, where I've photographed, there aren't a lot of people and I like it that way.

BC: I want to talk about the "Walden" project and how it came about.

TH: It evolved out of the "Jolicure Pond" project. I wanted to do something in the States with my friend Marie Howe so I applied for a Fulbright and was actually surprised when I got it. I started going down there but I really didn't have any idea what it was I was going to do. I've settled on the trees. I think they spiritually represent time—past, present and future. They can intertwine with other histories of the place, yet they exist on their own. It's a tricky place to work because it already has a big history. I think by doing this body of work I've made a new thing.

BC: But Steichen photographed at Walden Pond.

TH: He did and they were awful. I hate to say that. Well, they weren't awful, they were okay but they were generic.

BC: Did you go back and read Thoreau, or did you want to stay away from his words?

TH: If you start reading something, then when you next go there you start to look for that parallel meditation. The last thing I want to do is have that kind of experience weighing on me, so I haven't returned to Thoreau. I'm looking for my position in that place today. It's important that I made those pictures there, but I could find trees somewhere else and make photographs and put them together.

BC: In some ways you don't deal with what's obvious about Walden Pond. There's no water in your pictures, at least not in the initial body of work. Is that your own sense of perversity?

TH: It's resisting the obvious. It's not going where everybody expects you to go. Once I'm comfortable, then maybe I'll try to discover something about the pond. I just don't want to do what's easy.

BC: Do you feel there's something in the landscape and in nature that we as human beings have to get at? Is it about something that you would understand in the same way that Thoreau understood something about American transcendentalism?

TH: I don't know his work well enough to comment on his position. But I think the first part of your question about the spiritual nature of going somewhere and engaging in some kind of a dialogue is very true. Especially when you

work alone. And again, I'll go back to the way photography works: it's so much about what's in your head. It's not like painting, where you set up an easel and, as you paint, you're physically changing and restructuring your idea. In photography, that all happens in your head. In my case, you set up the view camera, you frame it up and that's it. You've already figured it out mentally and then you make the image. And the image has to represent what it was. I'm not altering it when I go in the darkroom. And I would hope whatever was important enough for me has survived the experience, and that it's the first thing people get, or that it's one of the springboards they're afforded. It took four or five trips to figure out what was speaking to me. Once I started to work there, I could get a handle on how I could reinvent myself. That's another thing: everybody's expecting a horizontal format, everybody's expecting to see something they can relate to an earlier, other body of my work and I didn't want to do that.

BC: So, have you never verticalized the 7-by-17-inch format you're known for?

TH: I've made a few individual images, but never a body of work. I became comfortable with the place and then, three months into the project, September 11th happened. I was down there when that happened. Like everybody else, I thought I'd better re-evaluate what I'm doing because life sure changes fast. Then I realized that nature was even more important to me now and it was more important to everybody. It also confirmed that I can speak through something as simple as the face of a tree. When you look at them as a sequence, I think they really relate to each other. They speak out about the fact that you'd better stop and look at the portrait of a tree; you'd better stop and look at that bark and see what it talks about, about the scars of time, because we're all wearing those scars.

BC: Is photography still teaching you things, or are you now in the position where you're using photography as a way to speak what you already know?

TH: I don't know anything. So it teaches me new ways of experiencing and appreciating the world. If you'd said to me two years ago, or even six months ago, You're going to be photographing tree trunks, I would have said you're mad. But it has to come from somewhere. Then, when you make it, it has to allow you to gain a new understanding about your position in the world and it has to indicate where it's going to take you next. ■