A Palimpsest of Pale Fire: The Fabulist Photography of Michael Flomen

James D. Campbell

Résumé de l’article

James D. Campbell avance que les éloquents photogrammes de Michael Flomen circonscrivent un espace abstrait et onirique, difficile à documenter parce que ouvertement ambigu, oscillant entre le rêve et l’éveil. Qu’il s’agisse de paysages enneigés, photographiés directement en pleine lumière du jour, ou des traces bio-luminescentes de lucioles prises dans un papier tue-mouches photographique, alors qu’elles tentent de s’accoupler au beau milieu de la nuit, ces œuvres délimitent, une fois achevées, la mince ligne séparant le visible et l’invisible, le perceptible et l’imperceptible. L’auteur soutient que Flomen a pris les empreintes digitales de la Nature et les a imprimées pour que nous puissions les voir sur du simple papier photographique, qu’il nous a rapprochés intimement de l’écriture du Livre de la Nature en mettant devant celle-ci son propre miroir prosaïque. À son avis, il ne serait pas exagéré d’affirmer que Flomen, le photographe sans appareil photo, est un fabuliste étonnant.
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JAMES D. CAMPBELL

Seeing light is a metaphor for seeing the invisible in the visible, for detecting the fragile imagined garment that holds our planet and all existence together. Once we have learned to see light, surely everything else will follow.

—Arthur Zajonc

We work for that part of our vision which is uncompleted.

—Frederick Sommer

Fireflies have a way of lighting up the night with their flashings, making us nostalgic for those moments in early youth when, come a sultry summer evening, they would superimpose on the night sky their own incandescent constellations that were wont to blink on and off incessantly, entrapping the eye. The transient spectacle afforded by those periodical versions of celestial maps never failed to induce in us a welcome state of startled wonder. Fireflies light up Michael Flomen's photographic work as well, and to equally exalting effect. He freezes the movement and the form of a firefly on photographic paper with alacrity, and creates a seductive fantasia of the heavenly firmament, with web-like traceries of pale fire left on the face of the deep.

In his large-format, exquisitely printed, and beautifully framed black-and-white photographs, Flomen captivates our optic and draws it toward what is hidden in plain sight, sequestered between the darkness and the light. He draws our attention to the liminal spaces that exist between tenses, conditions of matter, and even states of being. By making visible parts of a world previously unseen, and even unsuspected by many of us, he places us squarely on the threshold of an ineffable visual space that dwarfs, seduces — and promises to swallow us whole.

We become like little children again, beggars on the precipice of infinity, as we find ourselves standing on the doorstep of the Milky Way galaxy, say, or squarely ensconced upon a vast ice-age glacier in summer clothing, Book of Genesis close at hand. Whether it be the mating dance of fireflies, or the metaphorical interaction of "oil" and "water," or the evidentiary bioluminescence of fireflies caught on photographic flypaper in the dead of night as they seek to couple and multiply, the finished works demarcate the fine line between the visible and the invisible, what is seen and what is unseen, the perceptible and the imperceptible.

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In his earlier series, Riising, Flomen referenced the light of the sun and reflected light on snow in the creation of ambiguous tableaux that frustrated easy identification even while seducing the eye and mind with their beauty and indeterminacy. In his firefly-inspired works, he has moved on to a purely organic interior light suggestive of life, gestation, survival — and self-knowledge.

As Peter Sibbald Brown once wrote, "In this latest work, Michael Flomen presents an anonymous wilderness of magnificent ambient beauty — an atmospheric space without specific representational form. We become involved — steeped in the dreams of Seurat, Turner, Rothko; submerged in the light absorbing surface of Thoreau's pond, and confronting the 'eternal silence of these infinite spaces' as the seventeenth century writer philosopher Pascal described the heavens while peering through Galileo's telescope." This is a fitting tribute to Flomen's accomplishment, for, whether with solitary snowflake or firefly taillight, Flomen has taken nature's fingerprints and imprinted them for all to see on simple photographic paper, bringing us into close proximity with the writing in the Book of Nature by holding up his own prosaic but telling mirror to it.

It would be no exaggeration to state that Flomen the photographer without a camera is an unabashed fabulist. If that suggests the making of fictions, well, Flomen has created some lovely fictions out of nature's own whole-cloth handiwork, bounty, and progeny. In this respect, his work calls to mind an earlier pioneer of photography, Frederick Sommer, and we sense that the aesthetic impulse is as central to his existence as it was to that of the great (and sadly deceased) master. And his work shares a similar transformative, alchemical-driven compulsion to create works of art never seen before.

The works in the Bain Mathieu exhibition specifically recall for me Sommer's images of smoke on cellophane and glass supports. In Golden Apples (1961), Sommer conjured up ethereal genies from the smoke-fraught residue the way that Flomen evokes unknowable terrain in works such as Breakthrough (2005) and Site (2004) and, for that matter, all the works that chronicle the mating dance of fireflies. Both photographers seize upon the unforeseen and run with the ineffable and bring into play a vast array of possible worlds.

It should be no surprise that the lightning traceries of fireflies' seductions move us still. It is interesting to note that the unique light in question is generated by male fireflies eager to mate. They flash patterns of light to females who signal in response from hideaways in or near the ground. When the male sights the female's reciprocal flash he continues signalling and heads toward her at full throttle. They trace out one another's location through a rhythmic series of flashes, and mate. The luminescent tango of this mating ritual results in luminous hoops in Flomen's photographs that the optic is enjoined to jump through with alacrity.

Like the male firefly of the species Photinus pyralis, Michael Flomen seduces the eyes wide open — and with the recorded light given off by fireflies during their abdominal flashes. The bioluminescent remnants of the "glow worms" and "lightning bugs" that populate Flomen's photograms with wild abandon are integers of the ineffable — and unlikely emissaries of wholesale aesthetic truth.

The Aztecs used the term firefly metaphorically, meaning a spark of knowledge in a world of ignorance or darkness, and this understanding is perfectly in keeping with the luminosity of Flomen's photographic work; for the latter is truly a beacon of light that keeps flashing at us whenever we become too jaded and indifferent in negotiating the deep and difficult waters of contemporary art.