

Witho Worms, *Cette Montagne C'est Moi* & *A Forest Reconstructed* by Loring Knoblauch in *Collector Daily*

Comments/Context: The carbon printing process, invented in the mid 1860s and most popular in the late 19th century, isn't for newcomers to photography, curious experimenters, or casual throwback enthusiasts. In fact, it is so labor intensive, technically demanding, and costly that very few contemporary photographers spend the time to master its intricacies at this point, largely leaving its stubborn subtleties to experts, specialists, labs, and other master craftsmen and women who provide tailored printing services to artists around the globe.

But the reason the carbon process remains of interest is that prints made with carbon (both monochrome and multi-layer color pigments) are exceptionally rich in tone, crisply detailed, and highly stable. And for those who have dug into the specifics, the flexibility of the process allows for plenty of artistic freedom, both in terms of color range and underlying surface texture.

So the fact that the Dutch photographer Witho Worms makes his own carbon prints should be an obvious signal that he has an affinity (and talent) for embracing rigorous technical complexity. This show brings together two of his recent projects, both executed using the carbon process, and provides ample proof for how artists who understand the nuances of carbon printing can extend it in unexpectedly innovative ways.

The series *A Forest Reconstructed* takes as its subject "industrial" forests that have been planted for commercial purposes, like paper or lumber production. The trees in these farmed forests have not been planted randomly, nor has the undergrowth been necessarily allowed to spread naturally. The result is new growth landscape that has been optimized for production, with straight trunks clustered together in much denser colonies than usual.

Worms' images document examples of these types of forests in France, Sweden, and Finland, his compositions arranged so that the insistent verticals of the trees become like layers of thick and thin striping. And while there is some variation in the forest management techniques and tree types from region to region, Worms has printed all of the images in intense triple layer titanium white, creating ghostly white landscapes filled with subtle receding lines. When the ink really piles up, the thin paper ends up rippling just a bit (from the hills and valleys of the striping), creating a bright shimmery effect in raking light. The sum total of all these effects is a set of pictures that are spectrally haunting, showing us places that look like woods we have seen before, but are somehow noticeably unreal.

In the back room, a selection of images from Worms' *Cette Montagne C'est Moi* have been tightly installed. Each of these pictures captures a coal slag heap, in locations in France,

Belgium, Poland, and Wales, with most of the isolated hills forming a gentle pyramidal/inverted V shape. Up close, when your eyes get used to the enveloping sepia-toned darkness of the photographs, the images reveal rich complexities of texture and color, from fuzzy trees and scrub to undulating bumps and runoff channels.

Further inspection also reveals a very subtle gradation of color, from images that are more grey/black to those that are more brown, with darker and lighter versions part of the matrix. This shifting tonality comes from Worms incorporating actual coal from each depicted site into the carbon pigment he is using. This subject becoming part of the object effect has become the hallmark of the work of Matthew Brandt (among others), and Worms makes good use of the duality here. The mundane slag heaps turn out to have unique variable characteristics, and the quality of the color in which they are rendered is a resonant way to highlight that individuality.

Both sets of photographs on display here merge facility with process with an equal measure of conceptual intelligence – these are pictures driven by deliberate, and patient, intention. These are not process from the sake of process pictures, but carefully integrated statements, where the flexibility of the process is employed to generate specific aesthetic end results. In each case, nature has been managed by humanity, and Worms' images actively wrestle with that complex reality, pushing us to rethink just what we are seeing when we peer into the forest or ponder the rolling hills.