INSIDE THE CAMERA NOISE:
NEW PHOTOGRAPHS BY TUCKER HOLLINGSWORTH

BY MASON RIDDLE

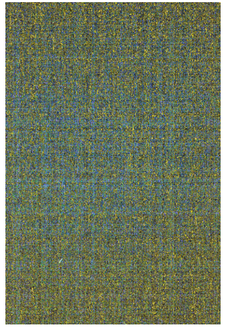
WHEN TUCKER HOLLINGSWORTH DEVOTED HIS ARTISTIC PRACTICE EXCLUSIVELY TO photography in 2009, his critical intention was to explore ways to infuse new digital technologies with passion and subjectivity. Hollingsworth found the medium, celebrated, at least in part, for its capacity for factuality and objectivity, too limiting. He questioned whether digital photography had the aesthetic capacity to create a more expressive, poetic experience. He desired to make digital images more pictorial, even dramatic, and infused by a narrative quality. But what to use as subject matter?

Hollingsworth turned to the traditional, art historical theme of landscape. Specifically, he focused his camera's lens on the nighttime landscape, both urban and rural, using extended time exposures and, singularly, ambient light. Transforming into a denizen of the night, the artist photographed urban avenues and parking lots, the murky shorelines of the Mississippi River, southeastern Minnesota's rolling hills, the Iron Range's ancient forests, and the cultivated landscapes of the state of Virginia. Only a shape-shifting cast of characters including the full moon or other heavenly bodies, street lamps and the head and taillights of passing vehicles illuminated each image. Exposure times were as long as 30 minutes.

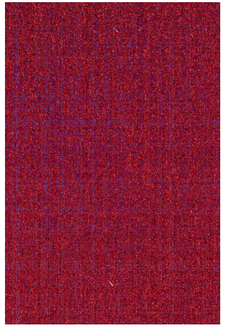
Hollingsworth organized these explorations into several landscape series whose titles include *Urban Parklands*, *Shadows, Horizons* and *Highways.* Ranging from modestly representational to exceedingly abstract, the photographs are defined often by high-keyed, jewel-tone hues and evoke an oblique, narrative quality. Some are visually boisterous and their coloration jars the senses. Others are dark, moody scenarios full of mist and shadow and infused with mystery and the unknown.

During the process of printing his nighttime explorations, Hollingsworth witnessed, to varying degrees, an underlying visual grid pattern creeping across the image plane. Called "camera noise," it is the result of the digital camera failing to capture enough data to make a seamless image under the limitations of low-light conditions. The textured grid of camera noise suggests a tapestry's dense weave of warp and weft threads.

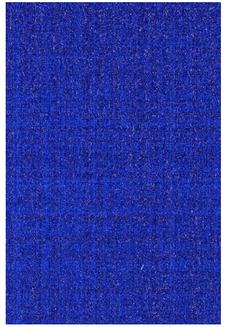
Intrigued by this uninvited visual code infiltrating landscapes of trees or planetary bodies, Hollingsworth began to explore deliberately how to create camera noise. The most sophisticated evolution of these experiments is his 2012 *Noise* series. Although conveying a significantly different aesthetic than his earlier, more romantic landscapes – they are all but emptied of their expressive qualities – the *Noise* images are the result of a surprisingly similar process.



Noise Print # 24, 2012, 70 x 46.67"



Noise Print # 54, 2012, 45 x 30"



Noise Print # 9, 2012, 45 x 30"

Without delving too deeply into the technical minutia of Hollingsworth's process, the *Noise* images, like his landscapes, are shot at night using only ambient light. But, here, the artist uses varying film speeds and exposure times that range from 1/8 of a millisecond to one second. Severely limited by such brief exposure times under minimal light conditions, the camera struggles to complete its specified duty of recording information from the external world. Consequently, its digital sensors shut off before they barely begin to perform and, thus, largely record only the camera's internal digital workings, creating the dense grid pattern of camera noise. Put another way, the camera doesn't have a chance to read its dark external environment and, thus, the RGB (red, green, blue) sensors mostly read the camera's interior.

The white flecks, zips, and specks in the printed *Noise* images are not printing gaffs, but the lone vestiges of the real world – the moon, street lamps, vehicle head and lights. The rest of the external environment in which Hollingsworth is shooting his photographs - buildings, trees or hillsides - never appears in the image.

The downloaded images appear black defined only by the white marks of corresponding light sources. Using a computer program, Hollingsworth hyper-exposes the digital image, which subsequently reveals the textured, woven grid pattern – the noise. The Kelvin-settings of each image are predetermined before shooting, thereby controlling the photograph's final coloration that is manifested only when the image is exposed in the computer program.

Those images marked by hallucinatory vestiges of the moon, planets or vehicle lights – and some camera noise - signify transitional pieces in the arc of Hollingsworth practice from representational to non-objective works. With these, one senses the physical world and perceives a brief semblance of narrative, which altogether evaporates in the total *Noise* images. Completely abstract, the *Noise* photographs are related to the earlier landscape-based work but are an altogether different species of art-making.

Recalling abstract expressionist paintings in one sense, they are defined by an all-over, edge-to-edge quality as if the noise grid could extend indefinitely (and, in fact, it probably could) if not stopped by the frame. However, where abstract expressionist work was driven, initially, by deep psychological and emotional motivations, Hollingsworth's *Noise* photographs are far more calculated from the onset, even cerebral, aligning them more closely to the systems and strategies of minimalist and conceptual art.

Hollingsworth's photographs also reveal his eye as a colorist. In certain *Urban Parklands* or *Horizon* photographs stunningly bright orange or red leaves vibrate against intense cobalt blue skies. In a spectrum of colors, some *Noise* images are luminous with retina-jarring reds and hyper-saturated blues while others are a subtle mix of greys, soft purples, and pastel pink.

Scale has its own power and while Hollingsworth's work is not unusually large in the 21st century scheme of things, with the Brobdingnagian-scaled photographs of Andreas Gursky, Thomas Ruff, Thomas Struth and Edward Burtynsky common, his largest pieces measure 70-inches in height. At this scale, the *Noise* photographs tend to register as zones of visual experience or segments of a more encompassing physical space.

More than 75 years ago Walter Benjamin authored "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" shedding theoretical light on the ways photography had drastically altered our understanding and perception of art. The camera had made works of art accessible to a global audience through reproductions in books, on cards etc. It also changed our cognition of works of art by collectively reducing the scale, perspective, textures and color, among other qualities, of all works of art into to a largely uniform, two-dimensional format. It changed the way we see. Hollingsworth potentially takes the camera's power one step further, by eliminating the outside world and training its lens on itself.

In the end, Hollingsworth's *Noise* images push the boundaries of digital photography. While many still possess a lingering reference to the exterior world, if one can locate the white boomerang mark of a passing headlight, others are completely self-referential. As a literal record of the interiority of the camera – the camera's digital choreography necessary for image production - the *Noise* images are simultaneously the medium and the message, the subject and the object, of digital reproduction.