



Chemical Landscapes

Andrew K. Thompson

Palm Trees & Power Lines

Cover Image

Bleeding Red Palm Tree, 2018

Hand-cut, bleached C-print, thread
27 x 19 in (68.58 x 48.26 cm)

Detail

Title Page

Pale Mauve Power Lines with Rainbow Thread, 2020

Hand-cut, bleached C-print, thread
24 x 17.75 in (60.96 x 45.09 cm)

Detail



Transmission Tower with Fire Sky, 2018
Hand-cut, bleached C-print, thread
17 x 23 in (43.18 x 58.42 cm)
Detail



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Mr. Thompson uses chemicals to obscure rather than enhance the image. These splotches and lines mimic the morphology of the trees and power lines running through the image parts of the pictures. They make the viewer fight their way through these surface barriers to get at the images, but really they are making us aware of the picture's surface and actually wed the surface with the image. – **Alan Klotz**

Two Pink Palm Trees - Bleeding, 2021
Hand-cut, bleached C-print, embroidery floss
14 x 11 in (35.56 x 27.94 cm)
Detail



Possible Photographies

by **Shana Nys Dambrot**

Reality is above all else a variable. — Margaret Halsey

In quantum thinking, existence is a state of perpetual change, driven by fluctuations of context and circumstance. Humans, or at least human consciousness, can arguably be viewed in this way as well—as dynamic points of ceaseless interactions; we are both shapers of, and shaped by, the world around us. In Andrew K. Thompson's studio, the same can also be said of photography.

Beginning with the word itself—meaning drawing with light, from the Greek—photography indicates its active function as recording of phenomena, as well as to its physical manifestation as a film negative, or, perhaps, an accumulation of digital data—each of which is both direct and susceptible to manipulation, fixed and mutable. Photography is also the resulting object, the print and the paper onto which it clings, be it light-sensitive or inkjet or perhaps not paper at all but metal, glass, cloth—anything goes these days. All of that—plus its status as a semiotic site for contesting truth and authorship, and for articulating the special properties of the mechanically optical—is stipulated before an artist like Thompson's signature unconventional material interventions even begin.

Purple Punctured Palm Tree with Orange Floss, 2021

Hand-cut, bleached C-print, embroidery floss, thread

20 x 16 in (50.80 x 40.64 cm)

Detail

Thompson often experiments with the equipment, papers, and chemicals inherent to the photographic process, going so far as to melt, freeze, and generate flowing fountains of fixative. This inversion of the means of photographic production interrupts and deconstructs the idiosyncratic pageantry of images in which our modern minds swim, forcing us to consider the mechanisms by which photographs are produced—their simultaneous, dysmorphic reality and unreality. There’s a raucous philosophical discourse roiling beneath the surface of this aspect of what Thompson does, and an engaging evocation of sculpture and performance work not often seen in photography as a genre.

The images produced in this way have much in common with modalities of abstract, atmospheric, and expressionist painting as pursued by J.M.W. Turner, Willem de Kooning, Lee Krasner, and Sigmar Polke—mottled surfaces and roughly fractal, organic forms. But most of the work for which Thompson is known involves his treatment of the photographic print itself—cutting, piercing, sewing, and bleaching in actions he sees as, “metaphoric gestures mirroring the assault on the land by humans.” Unlike his compelling direct-action abstractions, for this narrative message to formulate, the work requires a picture. For this reason, he favors a lexicon of images expressing the unaesthetic collision of nature and the built environment—palm trees, power lines, and the architecture of infrastructure.

Yet these representational works are in conversation with painting too, expressing physicality and unique objecthood by distressing their surfaces. A photograph is always a stand-in for something real that exists somewhere else, communicating between the mind and eye, informational above all else. But the way Thompson does it, a photograph is also a real thing that shares your body’s physical space. Sewing for example ameliorates the flimsiness of flat paper, creating a presence of the artist’s hand and a sense of surprise—transcending Sontag’s slippery informational and offering no answers but instead asking questions about what else is possible.



6 *Palm Tree Rainbow*, 2021
6 hand-cut C-prints, thread
10 x 34 in (25.40 x 86.36 cm)
Detail



Nearly Every Palm Tree

by **Matthew Gagnon Blair**

In Southern California nearly every palm tree is placed. Some were imported in the late 19th century, but most of the iconic palm trees in and around Los Angeles were planted for the 1932 Olympic Games as part of a city-wide beautification project. 40,000 Mexican fan palms were planted, not because they are native to the region, (they are not), but for ornamental purposes. Palm trees were imported because they are cheap and have a shallow root structure amenable to transplanting. They were placed along boulevards decades before the freeway system was built, when cars were less ubiquitous, and when the electrical grid of the region was in a nascent state compared to today.

It is also a fact that the palm trees of Southern California are vanishing. They continue to die from old age and disease, and when they do die off they are not expected to be replaced.

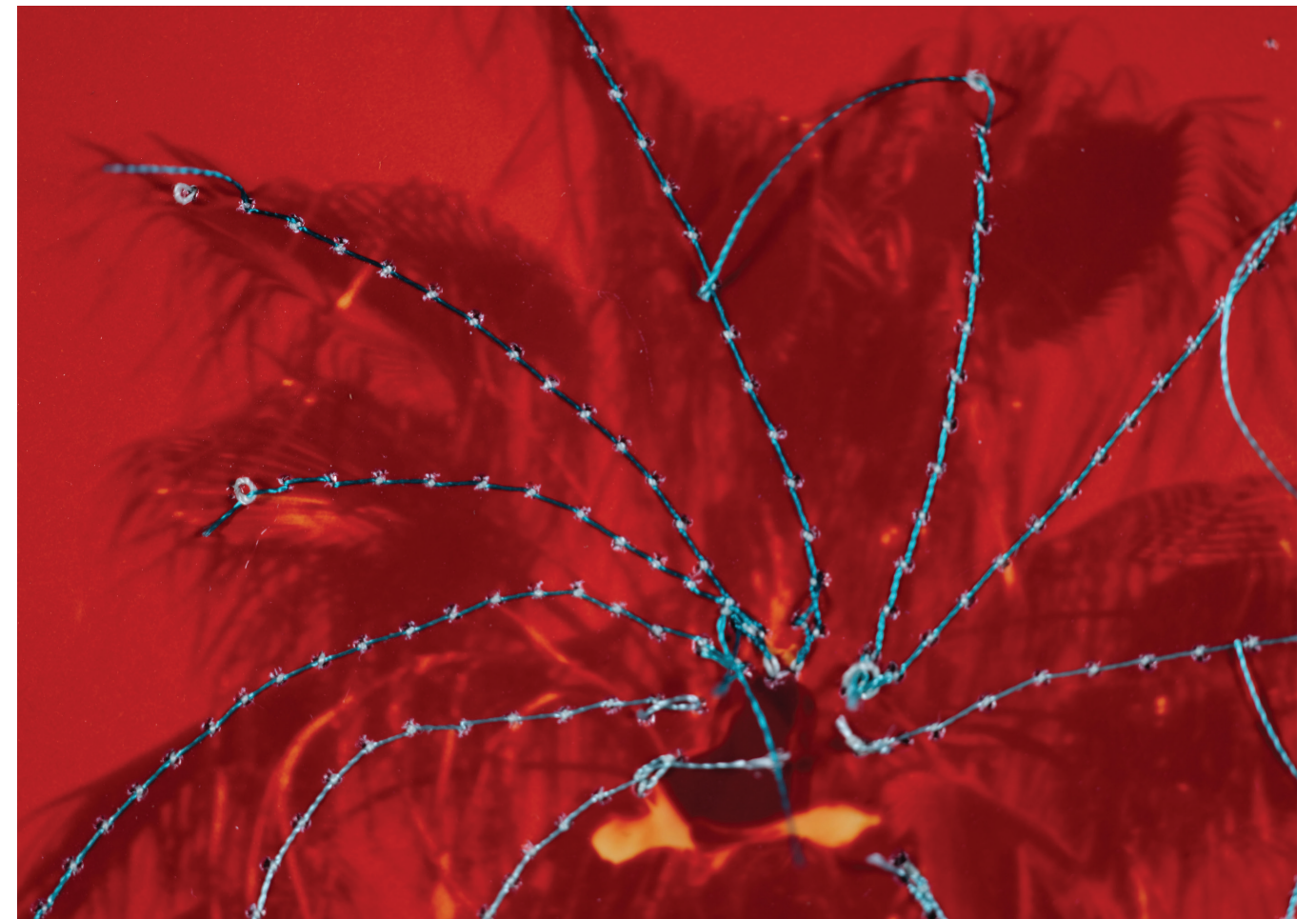
So what is one to make of Andrew K Thompson's photos of palm trees and telephone wires? The images have a formal austerity that the artist picks at, like a scab. Overhead powerline sentinels clutch their cables in angry fists. Wooden poles, palm fronds, and dry skies are stitched and punctured. Chemical atmospheres startle the eye with the beautiful

Yellow Palm Tree, 2020


Hand-cut, bleached C-print, embroidery floss, thread
24.75 x 16.75 in (62.87 x 42.55 cm)
Detail

colors of violence. The pictures themselves are bleached, degraded, altered, and lovingly restored the way a Nana would stitch up a pair of mittens. Subject and the means of documentation are dredged into one thing. They remind you of what a photograph even is, the pliability of the form. They are both scarred and mended. And there's a gnawing sense of discomfort, of Judgement Day in the wings. In some we can almost see Sarah Conner, clinging to the fence as she becomes a skeleton. But less kitsch. Other ones outright slap you in the face. And there's not a soul in sight. Just these telephone wires from the spirit realm. You can hear them sizzling electric heat while the palm fronds burst into magma. The end is near, or the world has ended and we're still here. Or we've long past the end and so we go back to basics, to sewing, to stitching, to making pictures from the clean lines that haunt us. So we mix up chemicals, a little bit of this and that, see what happens, play alchemist in the desert. Create frames and thresholds of pure color. Destroy them, restore them, repeat.

When Robert Frank was shooting the pictures that would become *The Americans*, he was thrown in jail, accused of being a communist, and once told that he had “an hour to leave town”. These pictures feel like that: like you've got an hour to leave town, like things might get ugly at any moment, and there's a moment within that moment where AKT raises a little camera with his hand and sucks a sad poem of America onto film. That's what Jack Kerouac said about Robert Frank, (more or less), but he could have been talking about Andrew K Thompson.



6 *Palm Tree Rainbow*, 2021
6 hand-cut C-prints, thread
10 x 34 in (25.40 x 86.36 cm)
Detail



PALM TREES

Punctured Blue Palm Tree, 2018
Hand-cut, bleached C-print, thread
23 x 18 in (58.42 x 45.72 cm)
Detail

Bleeding Red Palm Tree, 2018
Hand-cut, bleached C-print, thread
27 x 19 in (68.58 x 48.26 cm)



Two Pink Palm Trees - Bleeding, 2021
Hand-cut, bleached C-print, embroidery floss
14 x 11 in (35.56 x 27.94 cm)



Punctured Blue Palm Tree, 2018
Hand-cut, bleached C-print, thread
23 x 18 in (58.42 x 45.72 cm)





6 Palm Tree Rainbow, 2021
6 hand-cut C-prints, thread
10 x 34 in (25.40 x 86.36 cm)

Yellow Palm Tree, 2020
Hand-cut, bleached C-print, embroidery floss, thread
24.75 x 16.75 in (62.87 x 42.55 cm)



Green Palm Tree, 2020
Hand-cut, bleached C-print, embroidery floss, thread
24.75 x 16.75 in (62.87 x 42.55 cm)





Untitled (Red Palm Tree Triptych), 2017
3 hand-cut C-prints, thread
7.5 x 30 in (19.05 x 76.20 cm)

Purple Punctured Palm Tree with Orange Floss, 2021
Hand-cut, bleached C-print, embroidery floss, thread
20 x 16 in (50.80 x 40.64 cm)



Palms, Prints & Power

by **Shana Nys Dambrot**

“The painter constructs, the photographer discloses,” Susan Sontag wrote in *On Photography*. Unless you’re making art with Andrew K. Thompson, in which case, you do both, and also neither. Cutting, piercing, sewing, bleaching, spilling, splattering, dripping distressing; working both in camera and sans lens and sometimes sculpturally; and in a riotous palette of fuchsia, teal, tangerine, indigo, oxblood, sunburn, emerald, aubergine, lavender, and lime, Thompson interferes with his otherwise picturesque subject matter, asserting the physicality of the photographic object, even as he explodes its informational facility.

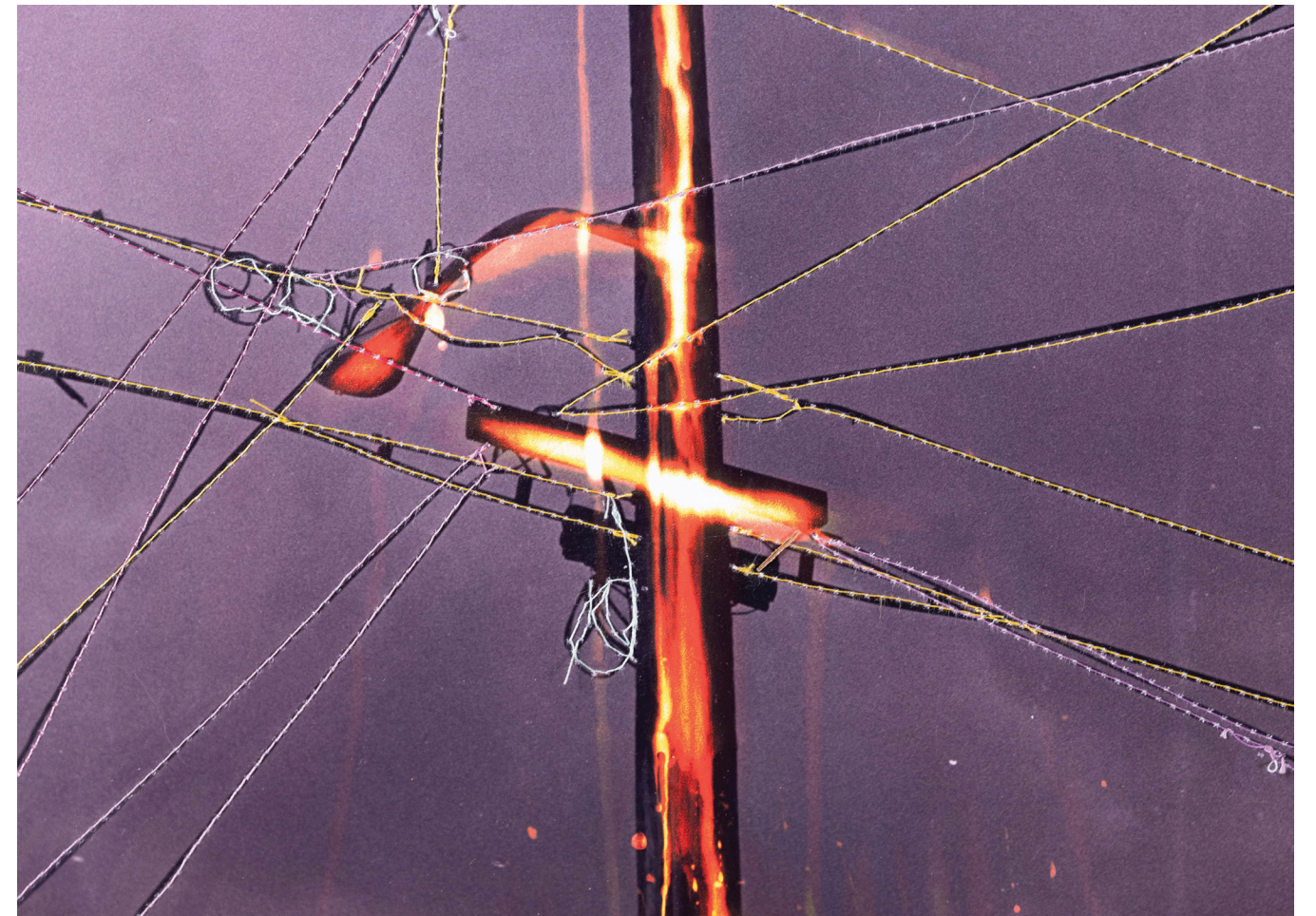
Combining the appeal of the picturesque with the terror of the sublime, while pursuing a new kind of beauty, the artist has said that the interventions in the production process and the trouble he inflicts on the photographs themselves are “metaphoric gestures mirroring the assault on the land by humans.” As anthropomorphic avatars for both nature—with extra points for being ubiquitous across and emblematic of Southern California—palm trees are metaphor-ready. But they also play themselves in popular culture, as signposts of status and cinematic shorthand, as well as thoroughly populating the history of both painting and photography.

Pink Power Line with Blue Cables, 2021
Hand-cut C-print, embroidery floss, thread
14 x 11 in (35.56 x 27.94 cm)
Detail



“No image is presumed inviolable in our dance hall of visual politics,” Dave Hickey wrote, “and all images are potentially powerful.” By interfering with them, Thompson interrupts the quick-hit of expectation-driven cognitive scroll, and forces us to confront a visceral embodiment of the threat facing the palms and all of nature—including ourselves.

In addition to the physicality of the prints, whose treatment by the artist challenges both structural premises of the medium and conventions of the genre, Thompson does what most photographers wouldn’t—Thompson leaves in the power lines. Further—he highlights them in frayed threads, whose stitches pierce the paper and whose loose ends tease the eye to look closer. In this way, the ugliness foisted on the trees, on all nature, in the name of human convenience is made to exist in tangible, metonymic form in the photographs, mirroring the phenomenon in the landscape itself. Except for one important difference—the final trick of the alchemy in Thompson’s studio is returning all this ugliness firmly to the realm of the beautiful. With appealing saturated color and organic post-industrial textures—not to mention the spark of delight in discovering the stitching—the message is clear, the image emotional, and the object full of poetry.



Untitled (Bleached Out Power Line), 2020
Hand-cut, bleached C-print, thread
24 x 18 in (60.96 x 45.72 cm)
Detail



POWER LINES

Punctured Yellow Power Lines with White, Orange, and Yellow Thread, 2023

Hand-cut, punctured C-print, thread
10 x 7.5 in (25.40 x 19.05 cm)

Detail

Blue Power Line with Punctured Sky, 2021
Hand-cut C-print, thread
14 x 11 in (35.56 x 27.94 cm)



Punctured Yellow Power Lines with White, Orange, and Yellow Thread, 2023

Hand-cut, punctured C-print, thread
10 x 7.5 in (25.40 x 19.05 cm)



Untitled (Bleached Out Power Line), 2020
Hand-cut, bleached C-print, thread
24 x 18 in (60.96 x 45.72 cm)



Untitled (Pale Mauve Power Lines with Rainbow Thread), 2020
Hand-cut, bleached C-print, thread
24 x 17.75 in (60.96 x 45.09 cm)

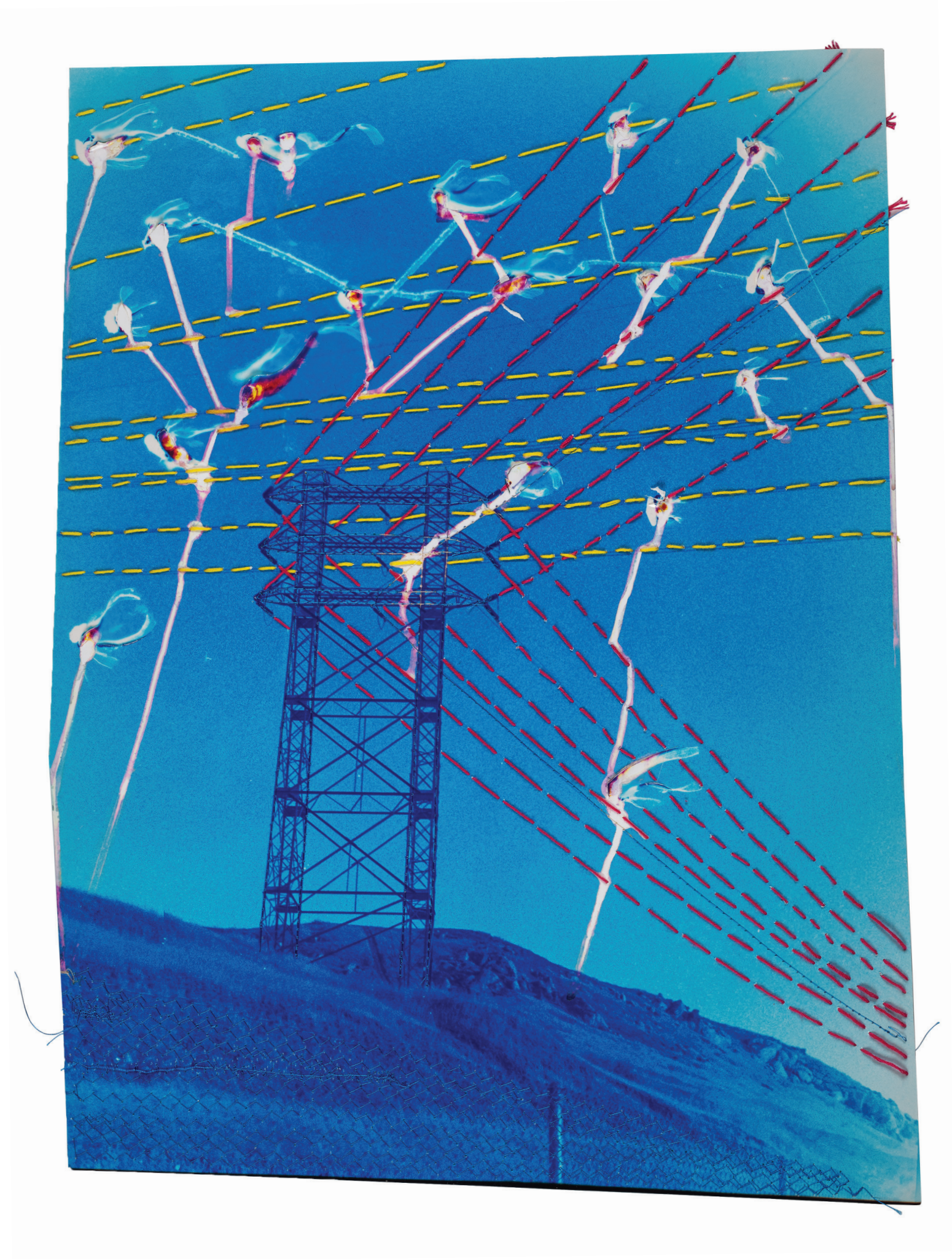




Punctured Sky, 2018
Hand-cut, bleached C-print, thread
16 x 20 in (40.64 x 50.80 cm)

Pink Power Line with Blue Cables, 2021
Hand-cut C-print, embroidery floss, thread
14 x 11 in (35.56 x 27.94 cm)





Untitled (Blue Landscape with Punctured Sky), 2023
Hand-cut, bleached C-print, embroidery floss, thread
19.5 x 15 ins (49.53 x 38.10 cms)

Transmission Tower with Fire Sky, 2018
Hand-cut, bleached C-print, thread
17 x 23 in (43.18 x 58.42 cm)





Green Palm Tree, 2020
Hand-cut C-print, embroidery floss, thread
24.75 x 16.75 in (62.87 x 42.55 cm)
Detail

Destruction by Design

by **Andrew K. Thompson**

Symbol and Meaning

I use palm trees and power lines as contemporary cultural symbols for Southern California. This region, once inhabited by the indigenous tribes of Tongva, Cahuilla, Kumeyaay, and Serrano, with their rich cultural heritage and history, is now mythologized for its non-native plants and a littered skyline.

My photographs are not about the location of a specific palm tree or power line but that they are everywhere, ruling the California horizon from Malibu to Joshua Tree, Lancaster to San Diego, Chula Vista to Imperial Valley, and back to Victorville.

The palm tree is the mascot for Sunny So Cal. Their softly waving tropical fronds send a message to the world, “Come to California and become a star.” But like Hollywood, they are a myth. The only palm native to California is the fan palm (*Washingtonia filifera*). The scores of other palms are transplants, including the non-native Mexican Fan Palm (*Washingtonia robusta*), now the region’s icon and, ironically, considered invasive in some areas. Power lines, of course, are not native anywhere. Civil engineers plant them to expand the electric and information grid to power our daily lives.

The ubiquity of palms and power lines is why I photograph them. They are at the center of our altered and irreversible landscape. They are the myth of nature, not native flora and fauna, but Disneyfied tropes from Hollywood’s lens. They are a facade against which I pick

at with my camera.

I sew/suture these subjects together as a critique of photography. Photography and landscapes have been intertwined since the medium’s inception, seemingly disparate at first but intrinsically linked. It can be argued that nature was photography’s first subject, as it certainly was for William Henry Fox Talbot’s “Pencil of Nature.” The tradition of recording one’s natural surroundings with a lens and its reaction to light represents a rich lineage in photography.

I feel a kinship to mundane images of the New Topographics. At the same time, many other landscape photographers climb the branches of Carleton Watkins and William Henry Jackson, who portrayed nature with grand romanticism: beginning the tradition of sublime vistas and wondrous creations. Even when the view is awe-inspiring, I believe creating pictures so deeply tainted by romanticism is disingenuous because the means used actively ruin the land.

Hands and Machines

The association between hands and machines is a recurring theme in my photographs. Hands appear as shadows on the print, through cutting the paper and the sewn marks. In the printing phase, I will hold my hand out for an extended period over the paper to leave a mark. In the next stage, I cut off pieces of the print that I don’t wish to keep, creating unusual paper shapes. Next, I machine sew and hand embroider elements to draw, add color, and emphasize specific sections. Finally, I spot-bleach the print in areas I wish to bleed or obliterate.

I emphasize the correlation between hand-made and machine-made because hands create and wield tools. Machines do not autonomously mine the planet, build and connect power lines, or document the landscape without the intention of the human user. Just as I am responsible for my photographs, we too, are responsible for destroying our environment through irresponsible environmental interference.



Yellow Palm Tree, 2020
Hand-cut C- print, embroidery floss, thread
24.75 x 16.75 in (62.87 x 42.55 cm)
Detail

Toxic Photos

I feel most connected to the pictorialist because I’m not interested in documenting reality with “straight photography.” I aim to use development metaphorically by bringing photo chemical processing methods to the foreground rather than masking them behind the notion that they are somehow separate from the image.

Photographic chemicals are poisonous. It is a well-known rule in the darkroom not to dump the fix down the drain because it is toxic to the environment. I am keenly aware of chemical waste management and regularly seek ways to reuse my materials. We should examine this relationship, reframe the idea that a camera is an impartial witness to nature, and recognize that the camera and photographic processes are tied to the environment.

Selected Solo Exhibitions

2022 *Toxic Exposure: Violence Upon the Land and Image*, All Eyes Gallery, San Bernardino, CA

2021 *ART @ ONT*, Ontario Airport Terminal 4, Chaffey Community Museum of Art, Ontario, CA

2017 *Cut, Punctured, Manipulated*, SRO Photo Gallery, Lubbock, TX

2015 *Light Sensitive*, Robert and Frances Fullerton Museum of Art, San Bernardino, CA

Selected Group Exhibitions

2024 *Expand and Contract: Photography and Mixed Media*, Los Angeles Center of Photography, Los Angeles, CA (curated by Dr. Rotem Rozental)

2023 *Problematic Palms*, Walter N. Marks Center for the Arts, Palm Desert, CA (curated by Shana Nys Dambrot)
Life Logistic, The Cheech Marin Center for Chicano Art & Culture, Riverside, CA

2019 *In the Sunshine of Neglect: Defining Photographs and Radical Experiments in Inland Southern California, 1950 to the Present*, California Museum of Photography, Riverside, CA

2018 *Center Forward 2018*, The Center for Fine Art Photography, Fort Collins, CO

2015 *ABSTRACT*, Filter Photo Festival, Filter Space, Chicago, IL

2014 *Being Here and There*, Lancaster Museum of Art and History, Lancaster, CA

Andrew K. Thompson is a photographer working in Southern California. His work has been exhibited throughout the US, including the California Museum of Photography, Riverside, California; The Center for Fine Art Photography, Fort Collins, Colorado; Klotz Gallery, New York, NY; Gallery 1/1, Seattle, Washington; and The Photography Show presented by AIPAD, New York, NY.



photo by Edwin Alvarez Loza

Andrew is a competitive bicycle motocross (BMX) racer with a viral video about a frozen asparagus camera. He has been a member of Incredibly Strange Wrestling (1998 - 2004), a punk rock pro wrestling performance group, and was the founder and M.C. of Punk Rock Pillow Fight (2005 - 2014), a national pillow fighting tournament.

Musings on his work have appeared on *Art Life 2.0 Podcast with Andrew K. Thompson* hosted by Xrstine Franco, Claremont, CA (December 28, 2022); *KVC_aRts 91.9 NPR*, San Bernardino, California (August 16, 2017); *The Golden Goal* on Norwegian Television Channel TV2 (2012); and *Saturday Night Live Weekend Update with Seth Meyers*, S36 E22 (May 21, 2011).

His work has been reviewed in *Art in the Plague Year Processes the Experience*, LA Weekly by Shana Nys Dambrot (March 18, 2021), *Being Here and There: Ambiguous Boundaries and Contested Terrains*, KCET Artbound by Larissa Nickel, Los Angeles, CA (January 2015); and *The Here and Now: From A to Z: Contemporary Landscape Photography at MOAH (Museum of Art and History)*, Artillery Magazine by Colin Westerbeck, Los Angeles, CA (March 2015).

Contributors

Alan Klotz (1948 - 2022) was a photo-historian and gallerist specializing in fine 19th- and 20th-century vintage photography and emerging contemporary work for over 39 years. The Alan Klotz Gallery was a founding member of the Association of International Photography Art Dealers.

Shana Nys Dambrot is an art critic, curator, and author based in Downtown LA. She is the Arts Editor for the L.A. Weekly, and a contributor to Flaunt, Art & Cake, and Artillery. She studied Art History at Vassar College, writes book and catalog essays, curates and juries exhibitions, is a dedicated Instagram photographer and is the author of the experimental novella Zen Psychosis (2020, Griffith Moon). She speaks at galleries, schools, and cultural institutions nationally, and is a Co-Chair of ArtTable's SoCal Chapter, an award-winning member of the LA Press Club, and a recipient of the 2022 Mozaik Future Art Writers Prize. She sits on the Board of Art Share-LA the Advisory Council of Building Bridges Art Exchange.

Matthew Gagnon Blair is an artist, writer, musician, and collectivist based in Montreal. He is a founder of Jean Couteau and Q Bloc, an emerging art space in Parc-Extension. MGB is an eyewitness to 9/11, and a day-one participant in Occupy Wall Street. He was a founder and co-director of the Sanctuary of Hope, an artist-run space in a former church in Ridgewood, Queens; he was associate director of Y Gallery in the Lower East Side; he also taught at Brooklyn College and Metropolitan College of New York. He has exhibited his work internationally and his writings have been published by the New York Times, Maisonneuve, and carte blanche.



Purple Punctured Palm Tree with Orange Floss, 2021
Hand-cut, bleached C-print, embroidery floss, thread
20 x 16 in (50.80 x 40.64 cm)
Detail

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