

Y O L A M O N A K H O V

Artist's Statement **January 2011**

All my work explores a common set of concerns: our relationship to our environment; photography's material and symbolic structures; and how photographs embody physical contact and suggest notions of transcendence. My approach seeks to re-envision the documentary genre through an examination of the unique character of the photographic medium, its representational strategies, and its link to other disciplines, especially poetry. I am interested in the medium's physical connection to its subject, and the symbolic implications of that connection. I make work that strives to address both a charged material world and a discursive space.

I believe photography occupies a special place in the pantheon of arts. It not only *poses* as the original, but bears a direct material relationship to its source. In a photograph, light bounces off objects in the world, hits the film emulsion or digital sensor, and imprints an image. In other media, questions of the mark, hand, gesture, and performance take prominence. But photography must leverage its unique position and relationship to the things and people among whom we live. It must deal with what is before us, where those things come from, and what they are.

My current project, titled "Empire Pictures," comprises photographs made along the Hudson River and canals and waterways of New York State. This work treats several overlapping themes: the journey narrative, an ecological inquiry, and abstraction and the minimal mark in photography. I am interested in the notion of river as both figure and ground, marked by human activity and impact, and also defining the culture that rises along its banks.

My new work "*Lebende Bilder*" takes its name from 19th century tableaus enacting staged scenes. This work attempts to unpack the idea of the still life genre as studio practice, and representation of something dead and consumed. I bring the studio backdrop into the living environment, photographing what I find with minimal intervention, a tenet of photojournalism that I here apply to still life. My goal is to develop a pictorial strategy that accounts for itself, and speaks to questions of place, aesthetics, and the meaning of objects.

For my most recent solo show at Sasha Wolf Gallery, I used the text of Dante's *Divine Comedy* to explore the relationship between photography and poetry. It is often a truism in photography education that, in their attenuated language, photographs function like poems. As a former Italian scholar, I have long been interested in the Augustinian idea, employed by Dante, of the visible thing as sign for divine creation. Since William Henry Fox Talbot's "pencil of nature," photography has been viewed as the medium ontologically closest to Augustine's formulation. With "Photography After Dante," I examine Dante's poem as a master text in today's Italy, embedded in the popular imagination, perhaps existing in some true form, and potentially visible to a sensitive observer with a camera. For me, culture is the transcendent medium, across which poems and photographs converse as texts, turning maker into reader.