

S U S A N   D O B S O N   F O C U S   F I N D E R





*Fading Light*, 2020/2021, from the series *Focus Finder*



*Peak Flow, 2020/2021, from the series Focus Finder*



### Artist Statement

The exhibition *Focus Finder* comprises a video installation of the moon rising through cloud and various large-scale photographs of Lake Huron that have been overlaid with markings and focusing points found in the viewfinders of digital and analogue cameras. Both the video and the photographs might evoke memories of carefree summers at the beach. The video's audio component, however, invokes the familiar noises of industrial commerce. The serene photographs of Lake Huron are visually interrupted by the viewfinders of cameras, the ubiquitous scientific instruments that have contributed to the establishment of everything from colonialism to surveillance. The photographs and video may raise in our collective consciousness a variety of issues, from rising water levels, pollution and industry, and the plight of refugees to the mountains of plastic that threaten ecosystems and aquatic life. The video and photographs thus aim to operate not just as transcription, but also as metaphor and poetry, framed within the anxiety of the present moment.

## UNEASY BEAUTY

Scrawny treetops poke out from murky water in *Peak Flow*. A black rectangle drawn in grease pencil on the ground glass marks a frame within the frame.<sup>1</sup> These lines, and the gritty overlay muddying the image, remind us that the scene is constructed, but they do not obscure the view. Nor do they detract from affective details, such as the swimmer in the lake. Is the swimmer struggling, or is that arm merely raised in mid-stroke? In a scene that seems as if it has been drained of colour, the water is at once beautiful and menacing. Both trees and swimmer appear threatened.

This artwork is from the series *Focus Finder* — also the name of the current exhibition at the Judith & Norman Alix Art Gallery (JNAAG) — in which Susan Dobson explores image-making techniques and perceptions of the natural environment. The photographs in the series are large pigment prints from digital images. Dobson made the photographs at Lake Huron during the summer of 2020 and then digitally combined them with overlays of focus finders from a variety of lens-based image-making devices, including cameras, drones, camcorders, surveillance equipment, and identification software such as facial recognition systems.<sup>2</sup> By revealing how framing, focus and other conventions give structure to photographic representations, Dobson reminds us that landscapes are scenes of nature represented through the visual devices of culture.<sup>3</sup> The focus finders unsettle conventions of landscape photography, making visible what is normally only seen by the photographer and drawing attention to the mediated nature of both photography and landscape.

For over twenty years, Dobson has explored human relationships with the built and natural environment. Her series *Home Invasion* (1998–99) looked at the disorienting effects of residential and commercial development in southern Ontario, while *Natural Law* (2000–01) examined signs of human habitation within natural landscapes.<sup>4</sup> In bodies of work such as *Retail* (2008) and *By Design* (2011), Dobson considered how suburban and industrial environments shape our experience. In *Dislocation* (2010), she created landscapes disconnected from any specific time and space, thus defying our attempts to understand them. Although cinematic in appearance, the disorienting and imaginary scenarios in that series at once arouse and frustrate our desire for narrative.<sup>5</sup> In Dobson's recent work, she returns to these themes, but through different subject matter.

The work presented in the exhibition *Focus Finder* especially builds on concerns explored in *Viewfinder* (2013–17), a series of waterscapes that lay bare the tangled history of human perception and image-making. The *Viewfinder* series takes its name from the part of the camera a photographer looks through when planning a photograph. The ground glass, which serves as the viewfinder on a large format camera, is an aid to composition. In some instances, a ground glass has pre-existing markings made by the manufacturer (as in *Cambo, circa 1950*), and in other cases, photographers would draw their own markings using grease pencil. These lines guide the slow process of making pictures using a view camera. For the *Viewfinder* series, Dobson worked with a vintage large format camera and a selection of ground glasses dating from the 1850s to the 1980s. The marks on the ground glasses reveal a photographer's penchant for certain pictorial conventions and design principles. Balance and unity are key, and the horizon line is an evident point of interest. The lines and grid effectively structure photographs and are tools for configuring the world in pictorial form.

In *Focus Finder*, Dobson's concerns shift from past practices of photography to contemporary image-making technology. Using a medium format digital camera, a choice informed by a lack of access to film processing facilities during the pandemic, Dobson thought about the effect of the brightly coloured squares and rectangles that dart back and forth in the electronic image sensors of today's cameras.<sup>6</sup> In works such as *Fading Light*, shapes that normally guide the photographer in making an image are projected onto



(left) Installation view; (left-to-right) *Dead Tree Island*, 2020/2021; *Mapping Terrain*, 2020/2021; *Peak Flow*, 2020/2021; *Equivalents*, 2016/2021; all from the series *Focus Finder*  
(right) *Equivalents* (installation still)

the scene. The white corners of a rectangle frame the focal point, where two girls embrace in the water. The narrative quality of the scene is intensified by a recording icon in the top left corner. These elements create the sensation of watching and might also call to mind the experience of being watched. The effect is to suggest the pervasiveness of image-making devices and to question expectations of privacy in public spaces. Instead of a soothing panacea for anxious times, Dobson offers a disquieting scene.

When I talked to Dobson about the *Focus Finder* series, she explained how she had adjusted her process from working with a large format camera to working with a medium format digital camera. Missing the slowness of the analogue view camera, she consciously took time to look around and absorb her setting. She was able to achieve the effect she was after by gradually building the elements of the image, first on site, and later, on the computer. With a digital camera, she said, novice photographers often overlook the edges of the frame. The focus finder directs attention to the centre, privileging a stable image whose subjects are centred and focused.<sup>7</sup> Dobson worked to unsettle some features of the photographs because, she explained, “I’m interested in those moments when we can’t be sure if we’re safe or not.”<sup>8</sup> The pandemic has magnified feelings of vulnerability, and occurrences such as climate change are an ever-present threat. By degrading image quality, extracting colour, adding overlays of focus finders, and adjusting focus, Dobson has created pictorial experiences that parallel the emotional landscape of the present.

The emotional qualities of the photographs resonate with the mixed-media video installation, *Equivalents*, featured in the JNAAG exhibition. In this artwork, what may initially seem like a beautiful scene of a moon rising in a cloudy sky emerges as another site of trouble. The fast-moving clouds, Dobson explained, were caused by tornado activity.<sup>9</sup> Threatening weather, industrial pollution, and ever-present surveillance attenuate the allure of the moon, and the soundtrack builds a sense of unease. Wind and lapping waves blend with the whir of industry, the hum of surveillance planes, and the buzz of drones to evoke the ambient sounds of the Sarnia waterfront. The title *Equivalents* references the work of acclaimed photographer Alfred Stieglitz, who made images of clouds in the late 1920s and early 30s as an exploration of abstract form. As an immersive work, the video installation dissolves boundaries and creates a sense of displacement in which viewers’ sense of themselves and others may shift.<sup>10</sup> According to art historian Oliver Grau, immersion is a process of absorption characterized by “increasing emotional involvement.”<sup>11</sup> This artwork draws viewers in and revisits questions about how humans shape their environment and how the environment shapes us.

Other instances when landscape serves as a source of unease may shed some light on the experience of Dobson’s work. For literary precedents, think of Margaret Atwood’s short story “Death by Landscape,” in which a woman named Lois contemplates her wall of Canadian landscape paintings by David Milne, Tom Thomson, and members of the Group of Seven. Lois recognizes that she acquired the artworks because there was something in them that she sought.<sup>12</sup> Struggling to define what captured her, she realizes that “looking at them fills her with a wordless unease.”<sup>13</sup> In these paintings, Lois senses the presence of a friend who disappeared on a canoe trip many years earlier. The artworks seem to hold her feelings safely at bay without extinguishing them. This story calls to mind an effect that Dobson’s new series achieves.

Photographers have long turned to the landscape genre to explore concepts and emotions, and the history of photography is rife with landscapes that are at once beautiful and unsettling. Dobson’s work contributes to this ongoing thread of investigation by creating new ways to manifest unease in scenes of nature. Subtle tensions, provoked by features such as a dream-like atmosphere and reminders of pictorial conventions, delicately push against our desire for a satisfying image.

**Sarah Bassnett** is an associate professor of art history at Western University. Her research focuses on the history of photography and photo-based contemporary art. She is the author of *Picturing Toronto: Photography and the Making of a Modern City* (McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2016).

## Notes

1. A ground glass is the viewing device on a large format camera which photographers use to compose and focus an image.
2. Susan Dobson, conversation with the author, January 4, 2021.
3. On landscape conventions, see W.J.T. Mitchell, ed. “Imperial Landscape,” *Landscape and Power*, 2nd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002), 5.
4. Marnie Fleming, “When Nearby is Still Far Away,” *Sprawl* (Oakville, Ont.: Oakville Galleries, 2002).
5. See Robert Enright’s interview with Dobson, “Anxious Desires: The Photography of Susan Dobson,” *Border Crossings* 119 (September 2011): 88–97.
6. Susan Dobson, conversation with the author, January 4, 2021.
7. *Ibid.*
8. *Ibid.*
9. *Ibid.*
10. Mark Wigley, “Discursive versus Immersive: The Museum is the Massage,” *Stedelijk Studies* (Spring 2016): 7.
11. Oliver Grau, *Virtual Art: From Illusion to Immersion* (Boston: MIT Press, 2003), 13.
12. Margaret Atwood, “Death by Landscape,” *Wilderness Tips* (New York: Doubleday, 1991), 100.
13. *Ibid.*



*Mirage*, 2020/2021, from the series *Focus Finder*

## Susan Dobson Focus Finder

April 7 – September 5, 2021

Curator	Sonya Blazek
Writer	Sarah Bassnett
Editor	Alison Kenzie
Installation	Dale Workman, Tim Churchill, Shelly Mallon
Photographer	Toni Hafkenschaid
Publication Design	Otto Buj
Printing	Aylmer Express

On behalf of the Judith & Norman Alix Art Gallery and the County of Lambton, we gratefully acknowledge the ongoing support of JNAAG members, donors, sponsors and volunteers.

The artist would like to acknowledge the generous support of the Ontario Arts Council.



© 2021 Judith & Norman Alix Art Gallery

Library and Archives Canada Cataloguing in Publication

Title: Susan Dobson : focus finder.

Other titles: Susan Dobson (2021) | Focus finder

Names: Container of (work): Dobson, Susan (Artist). Photographs. Selections.  
| Judith & Norman ALIX Art Gallery, host institution, publisher.

Description: Curator, Sonya Blazek; writer, Sarah Bassnett; editor, Alison Kenzie; photographer, Toni Hafkenschaid. | Published in conjunction with the exhibition titled Focus Finder, held at the Judith & Norman Alix Art Gallery from April 7 to September 5, 2021. | Includes bibliographical references.

Identifiers: Canadiana 20210223375 | ISBN 9781896636078 (softcover)

Subjects: LCSH: Dobson, Susan (Artist)—Exhibitions. | LCSH: Photography, Artistic—21st century—Exhibitions. | LCSH: Huron, Lake (Mich. and Ont.)—Pictorial works—Exhibitions.  
| LCGFT: Exhibition catalogs.

Classification: LCC TR647 .D62 2021 | DDC 779.092—dc23

## LIST OF WORKS

All artwork is courtesy of the artist and Michael Gibson Gallery  
Height x width

From the series *Focus Finder*:

*Equivalents*, 2016/2021; installation; size variable

*Dead Tree Island*, 2020/2021; archival pigment print; 123.2 x 161.3 cm

*Debris Field*, 2020/2021; archival pigment print; 123.2 x 161.3 cm

*Fading Light*, 2020/2021; archival pigment print; 123.2 x 161.3 cm

*Gathering*, 2020/2021; archival pigment print; 123.2 x 161.3 cm

*Mapping Terrain*, 2020/2021; archival pigment print; 123.2 x 161.3 cm

*Mirage*, 2020/2021; archival pigment print; 123.2 x 161.3 cm

*Peak Flow*, 2020/2021; archival pigment print; 123.2 x 161.3 cm

*Re|Location*, 2020/2021; archival pigment print; 123.2 x 484 cm

## ABOUT THE ARTIST

Susan Dobson has been photographing urban and rural landscapes for more than twenty years, and in recent years has expressly become interested in the ontological, technological, and material aspects of the photographic medium.

Dobson's photographs have been exhibited internationally at galleries and festivals, including CONTACT (Toronto, Canada), Fotoseptiembre (Mexico City, Mexico), Le Mois de la Photo à Montréal (Montreal, Canada), Images Festival (Vevey, Switzerland), Bitume/Bitumen (Brussels, Belgium), and Fotonoviembre (Santa Cruz de Tenerife, Spain).

Dobson's photographs can be found in numerous collections across the world, including in Canada (National Gallery of Canada, Oakville Galleries, Toronto Archives, Art Gallery of Windsor); Switzerland (Musée suisse de l'appareil photographique); Spain (Tenerife Espacio de las Artes); and the United States (Portland Art Museum).

Susan Dobson lives in Guelph, Ontario, where she is a professor at the University of Guelph.

(cover) *Debris Field* (detail), 2020/2021, from the series *Focus Finder*



## Judith & Norman Alix Art Gallery

147 Lochiel Street

Sarnia, Ontario

N7T 0B4 Canada

[www.jnaag.ca](http://www.jnaag.ca)

The Judith & Norman Alix Art Gallery is a department of the Corporation of the County of Lambton