

WEST OF CENTER | EVA DÍAZ



“There aren’t a lot of places left you can go without seeing traces of people.”

– James Hyde, conversation with the author, March 2018

In James Hyde’s work *Forces* (2018), two large painted milky pink circles, think Pepto-Bismol pink, each one eighteen inches diameter, are partially eclipsed by two black circles of equal size bearing down on them from above. One black-pink pair occupies the base and the other the summit of the narrow, vertically oriented canvas a little over six feet tall. Between the pairs is a gap in the center of the work that is free of paint. Around the circles and throughout this middle area a panoramic photograph of a desert landscape is attached edge to edge to the stretched canvas, a photo that has been rotated ninety degrees on its side. Because of the rotation of the image, the slender horizon line of a distant pale blue mountain range is now a vertical strip on the far right, and a sun-bleached mesa and tufts of scrub brush in a canyon, the foreground of the desert scene, occupies the left-hand side of the work.





Atop the mesa in the upper right of the image a few tiny structures are evident. This site, which has the characteristic arid look of the southwestern United States without providing any particularly distinguishing landmarks, is Los Alamos, New Mexico, the notorious headquarters of the Manhattan Project and birthplace of the atomic bomb, and it remains the home of the Los Alamos National Laboratory nuclear research facility.

Many of the paintings in Hyde's show "West" contain photographs the artist has taken while visiting locations, like Los Alamos, that have been subject to various human interventions—the dam at Pyramid Lake reservoir in California, for example, or the McDonald Observatory in southwestern Texas. In his Pyramid Lake images the distinctive terraced triangle of the mountain that was cut away to construct the dam figures prominently, though just as often these infrastructures or other kinds of architecture exist as mere traces in the images, as with the small buildings atop the mesa in Forces.





In the case of Los Alamos and the McDonald Observatory, the magnitude of the human alteration to the ecosystem is not immediately perceptible, nor could it be easily captured by any visual representation. The modest size of Los Alamos, a town with less than 20,000 inhabitants, contrasts with the disproportionate consequences of its atomic energy program, an unparalleled technological transformation of the Earth's ecology. In the case of McDonald Observatory the effects of human-created light pollution are compromising astronomical research, as well as the diurnal cycles of many animals.

While manifestations of the human modification of the environment are subtle yet powerful presences in his work, Hyde's use of bold and colorful painted geometric forms generate episodes of visual tension by framing or obscuring the photographs of mountains, valleys and lakes over which they are painted. In addition to the circles in *Forces* and works like *Limits* (2016), *Condensation* (2016), and *Vale* (2017), other works incorporate ellipses,





rectangles, and sometimes fragmented or torqued elements of these forms in concentric or overlapping patterns. The hybridization of the photographic with the painted geometries, and the radical defamiliarization of vision that occurs when the photographic ground is rotated, turned upside down, or sometimes doubled along a central axis, create complex circuits of topographic restraint and perceptual expansiveness. Various layers of manipulation coexist in Hyde's works; initially, the human alteration of the environment; secondly, his depiction of these sites photographically which are then further estranged from their origin when he doubles, turns, or crops the source images; and, finally, his reworking the images of these places with hand painted shapes that echo, obscure, frame, or otherwise accentuate elements of the landscapes. If we think of painting as an accumulation of countless relays between the mind and the hand, and the hand and the canvas, with each paint stroke a bearer of a daub of colored pigment, then painting is procedurally among the most skillful types of manipulation, a word derived from the





Latin manipulus, or “handful.” To stay with the metaphor of hand, one can say Hyde wrests (from wraestan, Old English for twist or bend, root of the word “wrist” in English) these various forms of manipulation from their separate zones of infrastructure and ecology, photography and geometry, and recenters them in the painting, which has a long and checkered history of rendering the land as an object of visual consumption. In Hyde’s hands these inventive rotations and additions that toggle between painting and photography destabilize viewers’ customary patterns of seeing the land, reworking the possibilities and responsibilities of these media afresh in the era of the Anthropocene. ■







## JAMES HYDE + PHILLIP LOPATE

**PL** Tell me how the works that are on display in this new exhibit came about. It's called West?

**JH** Yes. West. They are paintings over photographs that I took during visits out West, mostly in L.A. around Pyramid Lake but also at McDonald Observatory near Marfa and at Los Alamos.

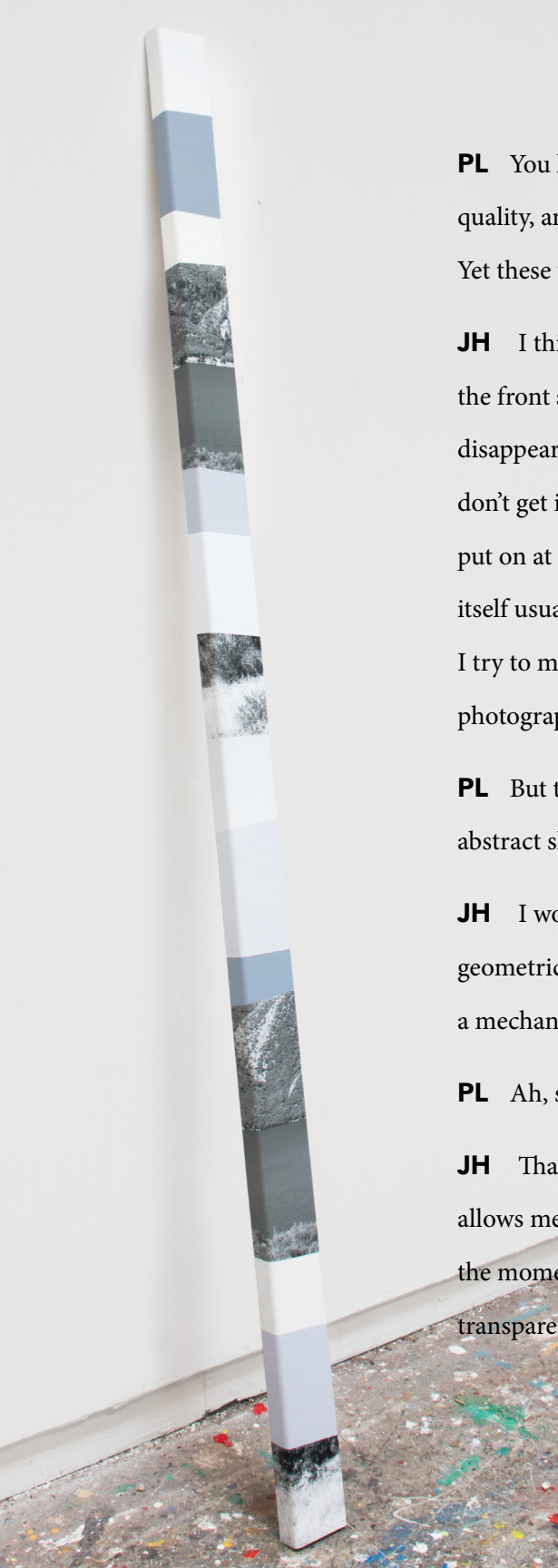
**PL** What do you make of that title, West?

**JH** It's a fairly open title. It's a noun which is not a thing. It's direction, it's a place, but it's also no place at all. I chose the title not to say anything particular but to open up resonances.

**PL** So what about the combination of photography and painting in the same work? Does that pose special problems, special challenges?

**JH** It's a different way of painting. When I started out I was very concerned with the architectural frame. My work comes out of Minimalism and what I took away from that is that the context is the content of the work. So there's a type of architectural content to all of my pre-photographic work that I think that remains with this new work, but it's the architecture of photography which allows a different frame from the architecture of a room, a gallery, or studio.





**PL** You know, in a lot of your previous work there is a three-dimensional quality, and a lot of texture in the brushstrokes or the material that you use. Yet these works tend to be much more flat.

**JH** I think photography is a thinner medium than painting. With painting the front surface is an important edge. With photography that surface needs to disappear as part of its visual logic. I hope with my new works their surfaces don't get ignored. There's a lot of effort grooming the photographic prints — I put on at least six coats of clear varnish. While with these works the painting itself usually isn't impasto, the painted shapes usually have many coats of paint. I try to make them lean, but dense. So then in relationship to the thinness of the photograph, the painted shape has a sculptural weight.


**PL** But there's also the combination of reality in the photography and of these abstract shapes that are imposed in the mimetic quality of photography.

**JH** I would turn that around. I would say that it is the painted geometric shapes that are actual and that it is the photographic image that is a mechanical abstraction.

**PL** Ah, so the materiality is coming from the painting.

**JH** That's how it makes sense to me. When I paint on photographs it allows me to paint in a frame of a distant world that only existed in its fullness the moment the picture was taken. So it's sort of painting on a type of transparency, on the past of a different place. I think that's in part why I use





arcs in these paintings. What I work on is a type of reaching between my studio and these places on the other side of the continent.


**PL** I will say that there's a great history of Easterners going to the West to photograph ... like Carlton Watkins.

**JH** One of my favorite photographers! I think part of the reason that the Easterners like to photograph the West is because visually the land is more available. You can find a vantage point and you can open up your camera to this large and full world. For me, it's about the distance between this open landscape and the enclosed studio. I think of the paintings as shaping that distance. Whereas on the East Coast it always feels like we're at the bottom of the pond under a blanket of trees and buildings.

**PL** And what about this penchant for flipping images? Where it's not quite clear which way is top and which is bottom, and there's something almost counter-intuitive to the way you choose to present the work. Is that a way to get the viewer off balance?

**JH** I just try to make things that look good and feel special — that's the nuts and bolts of studio work. But I like to treat photographs as objects — and materials as imagistic. It's a way of insisting that photography is not only not reality, but also it is not how we see. I think that treating the photograph as a physical object actually underlines the beauty of photographs by subtracting the natural-ness that's associated with photographic seeing.

**PL** So what draws you to photography is its distance from reality?







**JH** What could be more ghostlike than a photograph? It's something that is not in the present; it's the past. And it's something that stirs our memories, tugs our heartstrings, and bears witness. So, you know, photographs are ghosts, often acting at great distance.

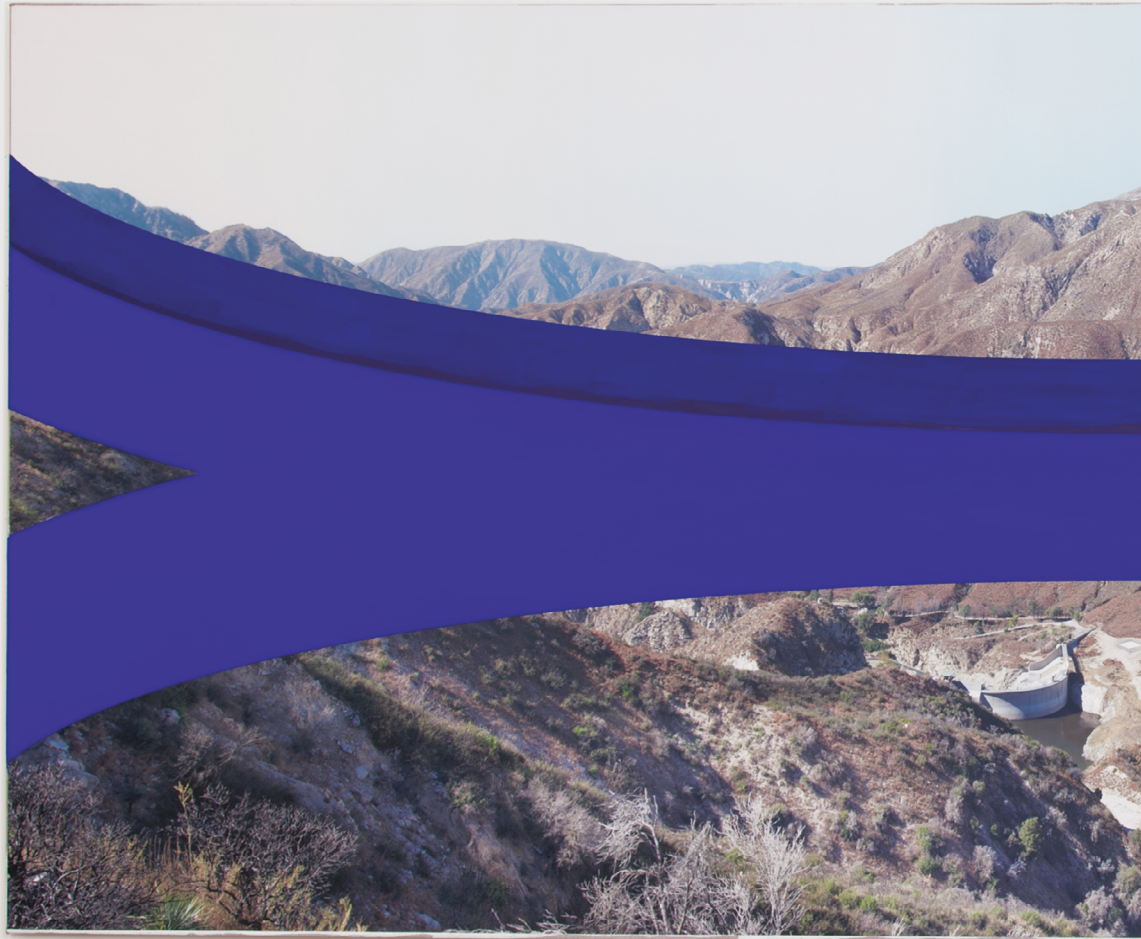
**PL** I do think that there's something about your art that is meant to make the viewer feel slightly off balance, that is not entirely reassuring, and that's been through many changes in style.

**JH** I've always inhabited the outskirts of traditional painting — I think the last time I painted oil on canvas was in high school. I don't have a signature style and I think part of that is restlessness, but it's also a lack of faith that style in itself could contain the totality of a person, or an idea. I don't build my work around style or an investigation of styles.

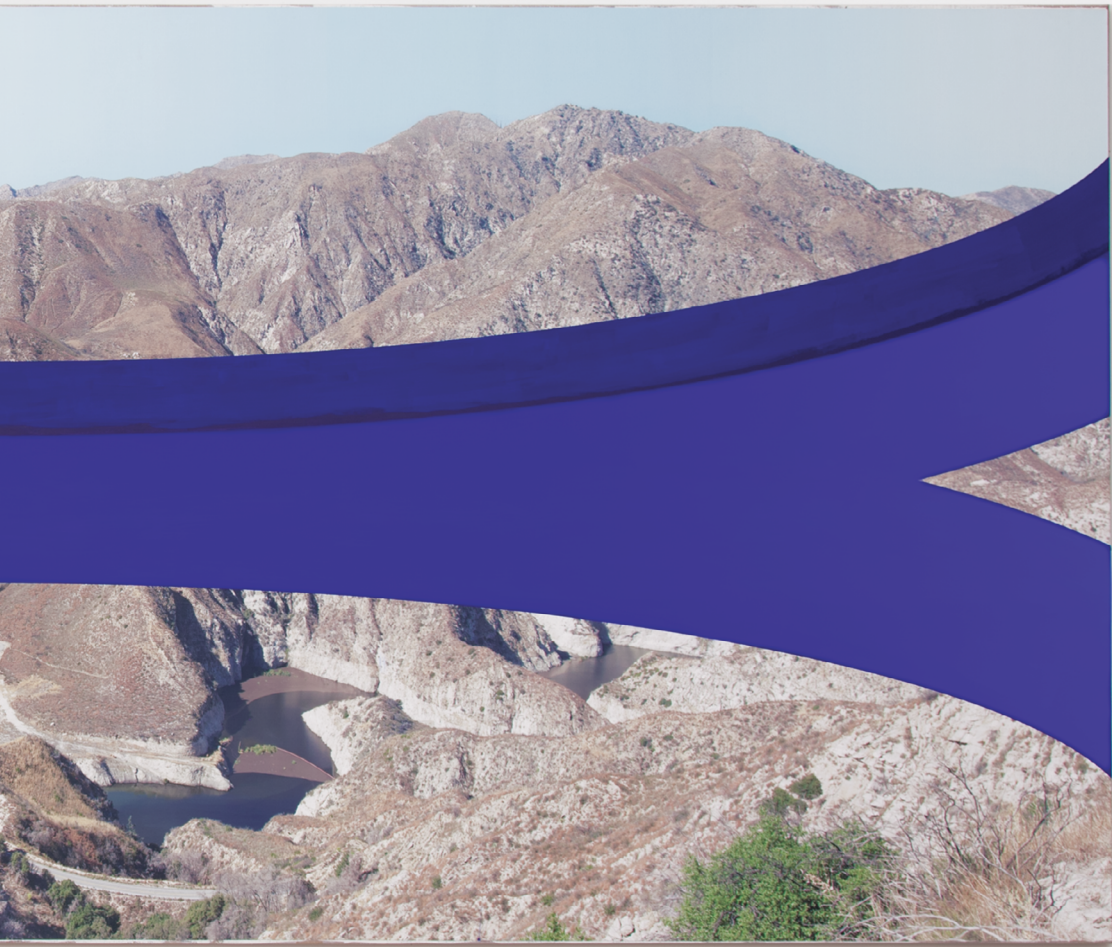
**PL** So how would you characterize the continuities in your work through these changes in expression?

**JH** That's a difficult question partly because I don't think of my paintings as personal expressions. I'm privileged to do the work and I take responsibility for the paintings but the paintings seem most like the product of a dialogue with materials and studio. I don't think my personality is in control — I feel more like a collaborator than an author. I don't try to figure out what I do best; instead I try to find what's best for the work. Really, I'm happiest when a group of paintings starts getting its own personality. But I think there's a lot of continuity within my various groups of work. They develop and I don't ever really













close out a group. It's always possible to come back and continue.

There are some habits that have been consistent, such as working from questions and a taste for materiality. At one point I was particularly interested in the imagery of Styrofoam; now I'm most concerned with the materiality of photography. Earlier I was interested in what an abstract painting could be. At present, questions about how abstract paintings can engage the world through the relationship of vision to painting and photography are most urgent.

**PL** Recently you've been alternating between two types of work, more than two, but two that I'm conscious of — one being the paintings on photographs and the other being these heavily worked, black-dominated paintings.

**JH** But no one in New York has seen those black paintings outside my studio! The premise of those paintings is close to the landscape paintings in this show. I start with a photographic detail I took from an 18th century Genovese painter, Alessandro Magnasco, that are enlarged to billboard dimensions and painted over. I like the way similar premises can produce very different results!

**PL** A lot of your work seems to be a reflection on the history of art.

**JH** Yes, but it's not a strategy — it comes from what I love. Even as a young boy, I loved to look at paintings. But I hope that it doesn't become art about art.

**PL** Right, it can stand on its own as art, but it does seem that you are not just intuitive, but you are thinking a lot about the history of art.

**JH** The history of art is an enormous treasure house of ideas, emotions,





attitudes, ways of thinking about people and ways of seeing the world. There is so much to see and make sense of, not just in Western painting but in Chinese painting, Japanese screens, African sculpture — it is one of the great pleasures of our time that we have access to that.

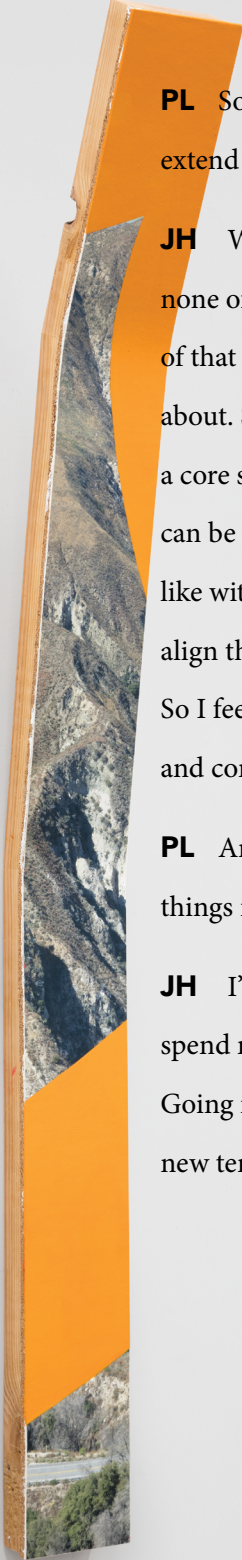
**PL** And the studio? It seems like you've got a great studio in the back of your house with very high, large walls. Is this your dream studio? You have a few studios actually.

**JH** Oh, I can always keep dreaming studios. The thing about studios is that's where it all happens. It's where materials come together and can talk. The imagination of long dead painters becomes concrete and I can connect to distant landscapes. But there are many studios. The camera is a tiny studio, but one of my favorites; the computer as well, but it's not so nice. Really, the studio is the just intersection of self, material and work.

You've written so brilliantly about the self. I remember reading "Portrait of My Body" and just being so surprised at the depth, the clarity and the risk going into the details of growing up in a very unusual family and laying that all out. It was really exhilarating.

**PL** So risk, so you take risks also, don't you?

**JH** I think we have different senses of self. I feel like my self is a studio self. I don't believe that the work I make comes entirely from me. It comes from the contingencies and opportunities that happen in the studio.



**PL** So when you say that you don't really believe in the notion of style, does it extend to self? Are you skeptical of the notion of having a self?

**JH** Well that's a big question! But I don't think it's controversial to say that none of us is composed of a single self. We have multiple identities and a lot of that depends on where we are, whom we are with, and what we are talking about. So, rather than trying to push all that away and trying to distill a sense of a core self, I am more interested in how all the various ideas and opportunities can be developed by the schizophrenic array identified as James Hyde. I feel like with painting it's only when you set up enough interesting premises and align them in the same place that those things conspire to let you do your work. So I feel like my self is always in collaboration with other selves, other ideas and contingencies.

**PL** Are there things you fantasize doing, like building large sculptures or doing things in architecture or things that you see ahead of you or would like to do?

**JH** I'm finding there it is a lot to do with what I have. And I would like to spend more time working — I mean, I have plenty of premises to work with. Going into the studio is an adventure, with each line of work opening up new territories. ■