



Imaginary Arcs: Roger Palmer's 'Spoor'

Roger Palmer

By Chad Rossouw

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Roger Palmer's 'Spoor' is a show in two parts, a device that always suits Commune.1's split-level space. Upstairs is a series of silver gelatin photos, which were shot during a road trip through the far north of Sweden, Finland and Russia; the territory of the previously oppressed semi-nomadic Sami people. Downstairs is a series of colour digital photographs, from another journey, this time following the railroads through the Cape. Linking these two bodies of work is an enormous vinyl cutout, covering the space between the floors, representing the Struve Geodesic Arc. This arc is a set of points, forming imaginary triangles used in the 19th Century to measure the curve of the Earth along a meridian. This arc, and the story behind it, acts mostly as a device to link the two disparate series without being reflected much in the content, reads as a little specious. It perhaps mostly signifies a kind of 19th Century explorer-scientist romance, that finds some echoes in 'Spoor.'



Roger Palmer *Molvika, Finnmark, Norway,*

2010.

Silver gelatin print

Both sets of photographs engage in a language which feels opaque and coded: on the surface they seem to be travel documentary photographs, but they seem to be simultaneously offering something else. That something else, however, is unclear. The problem might lie in the shift of documentary photography in the last few decades into the art context, where one encounters the aesthetics of documentary shorn of its politics and message-bearing function, or at very least a tension between style and content. Some fantastic work has been born out of this problem, like the surprising ambiguity of Guy Tillim, or the remarkable contemplation of

Simon Norfolk, or the sudden introspection of Peter Hugo. Palmer's work, though, feels a little more shrouded.

'Spoor' signifies that it is in this genre with the kinds of language it uses: sharp focus, artful but casual composition, the 50mm lens, and a sense of distance. The arrangement of the photos into an essay also speaks of the genre. Palmer also seems to seek out the mundane. Even in the Northern pictures which I find exotic and unfamiliar, the images reveal the bum of a polar bear statue, a fence, a sea. In the Cape

images, we find railways crossings and roads, a portaloo and a dying palm. For all the daylight in the photos, they are in this sense very cool.

In *Hoopval, Western Province* for instance, a shack and a temporary toilet frame a man by an oil barrel fire. The station is signified by a worn sign on the far right, ironically cut off to just read 'hoop.' But there is an overwhelming sense of distance, a sense of outsidership. The man is turned away, as are the figures in all the photographs. In *Keimoes, Northern Cape*, a broken concrete fence flanks the railway. Yet the photographer appears to be hiding in a tree.



Roger Palmer *Keimoes, Northern Cape*, 2015.
C-print

This banality though, is also the most affective part of the images. There is a sense of slowness, of bleakness, of everydayness, that is redolent of poverty and the slow change for oppressed people.

Besides for this, the images don't give up much. The distance seems to imply that there is a space for analysis, that the images are working towards a sustained message. But the connections, the railways, seem as imaginary as the Struve Geodesic Arc. They are an overarching concept, a scaffolding, but nothing seems to be filled in. I can't figure out if there is a narrative, or if I am watching a man with a camera struggling to engage.

Of course, at this point I am coming across as conservative and lazy. It seems that I am demanding meaning and insisting on closure. And in a sense this is true. A more generous reading would be content with the ambiguity, happy with the mundane and charmed by the linkages. Perhaps my criticism is broader, in that the aestheticization of documentary photography is stripping its value for me: its directness and legibility, and with that its political strength.

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