A Trilogy

Beyond Blue

Jean Dykstra

"A tension so exact that it is peace." That's photographer Robert Adams, quoted in John Szarkowski's Introduction to William Eggleston's Guide, describing the ineffable balance of elements that a photographer aims for when composing an image. The phrase points to the compositional rightness and the subtle lyricism in Jessica Backhaus's luminous Beyond Blue photographs—peace, by which I don't mean the absence of complexity, but its resolution.

She achieves this with an incredible economy of means and the most minimal of materials—a length of string, twisted into a shape against a brightly colored background. You wouldn't think such simple materials could sustain your interest, but each image, one after the other, pulls me into a state of reverie.

Beyond Blue is the synthesis of Backhaus's concern with form, color, composition, and light, encapsulating the most elemental expression of her thinking about photography. In previous series—What Still Remains, for example, or Six Degrees of Freedom—her observational images reframed and recontextualized incidental, ordinary scenes, drawing our attention to a material world that often gets overlooked. She let her keen and curious eye lead her, finding poetry in vernacular objects and scenes—a broken umbrella or a phone book flayed open in the snow or four glass marbles on a gray background. While never making lofty claims for the umbrella or the phone book or the marbles, the images ask us to recognize them, to give them their due. But they also invite us to notice patterns and colors, the play of light and the composition of figure and ground. The images in Beyond Blue are pared down to the simplest figure against a monochrome ground, but they hone and sharpen our attention to the composition in front of us the way meditation sharpens our attention to the breath.

The photographs in Beyond Blue have that meditative quality, a purity that reminds me of visiting the Rothko Chapel and sitting in quiet contemplation of the painter's large monochrome canvases. "You go there and sit and look": This was Agnes Martin's blunt directive about how to contemplate her own spare, minimalist paintings. Just sit and look, nothing more. But also nothing less. Beyond Blue can be seen as Jessica Backhaus's ode to minimalism and to artists like Martin, whose geometric grids were based on the repetition of simple forms. There is an almost spiritual aspect to that repetition; as Martin once told an interviewer: "Art work comes straight through a free mind—an open mind."

Jessica Backhaus's own photographic practice in Beyond Blue involves the repetition of forms as well: Over and over again, she plays with similar shapes—and "play", I believe, is the right way to think about these photographs. There is something unguarded about these works that taps into a memory of jump ropes tossed on the ground at the end of a summer's day, or squiggles drawn on the sidewalk in chalk, a glimpse back into the playful, free-spirited creativity of children, carefree and exploratory. In some of these photographs, the string is doubled by its shadow, dancing alongside it and making us keenly aware of the transformative properties of light.

Like compact visual poems, her photographs show what can be done with the smallest number of elements. As in a haiku, the artist must work with just a few lines, or just a few elements, to evoke a feeling or create a mood. And like the artist herself, these images are optimistic and lighthearted, even joyful. Maybe it's the blue, which is

present in some shade in every image and suggests, for Backhaus, freedom, eternity, and endless possibilities—it allows, as she has observed, for an open mind. The color blue, of course, has played an important role for many artists (think of Picasso's Blue Period or Yves Klein Blue), but in these photographs, Jessica Backhaus explores every shade and hue, playing with shifts in mood and atmosphere rendered by the slightest changes—turquoise or robin's egg, the gray of a stormy ocean or the aquamarine of a David Hockney pool. Subtle shifts from nearly gray to a blue verging on purple, or the small shock of a pink background with the element of blue reduced to a slender string, tap into a surprisingly deep well of memories, and a startlingly vivid sense of time passing.

As much as these photographs bring to mind, for me, meditation and contemplation, they are also about photography itself. Backhaus is a traditionalist, photographically speaking. There's little digital trickery or manipulation in her process; rather, it has to do with a distinctly photographic way of looking and a democratic approach to the medium. Her images are not ruled by an external hierarchy determining the proper subject matter for a work of art, but rather by a finely tuned internal sense of color and composition, the play of light over a surface. And for Jessica Backhaus, the blues, it turns out, can be infinitely expressive.