

*Interview with: Todd Hido*



© Todd Hido, 1951, 1997 from "Houses at Night"

*1. Shooting a specific image often means to complete a complex process after a deep investigation. The photographer is supposed to find the subject following too many signs. Those signs are often inside us, many of them come from our past. How is it possible to recognize those signs? Is it possible to explain how every feeling, every memory, can be put together in one single image?*

A firstly let me start out by saying that I completely agree that the signs you are looking for, many of them do come from your past.

But no, I don't think that's possible to put it all together in one single image. If it were then this would not be a lifelong pursuit?

A body of work does not even do it sometimes.

I have noticed that within my own practice that often adding a genre, or another way of taking pictures, often adds an extra layer that complicates things more deeply.

I believe that all those signs from your past and all those feelings and memories certainly come together, often subconsciously, and form some kind of a fragmented narrative. Often you're telling your own story but you may not even know it.

One of my most valuable bits of feedback for me came from an art therapist that I did an independent study with when I was in graduate school.

He taught me that I was on the right track with my subject matter and gave me the confidence to pursue it. What a gift that was in retrospect.

He looked at the beginning of my houses at night, the beginning of my foreclosed home pictures, and the beginning of my portraits—all back in 1995 when I had just two or three of each, and he told me that I was right in the midst of telling the story of my life and that my photographs clearly represented that.



© Todd Hido, 1536, 1996 from "Houses at Night" / 1637, 1996 from "Interiors"



© Todd Hido, 1765, 1996 from "Portraits"

2. The image "Untitled #2312-a, 1999" from the series *Houses at Night* is one of the few images without a visible illumination coming from the house. A beam of light cuts the front of the house but no light comes from the inside. In every house you have photographed the human presence is implied. The quality of the light is also the quality of their presence. Thanks to this perception, you are able to establish a relationship between the viewer and the image, as a personal relationship. Could you explain something more about this particular choice? How important is it for your work to show inhabited houses with human beings' presence instead of empty houses?

You are very perceptive.

Yes, that is the only house at night that does not have a light on the window.

I chose that particular one because it was actually a place that a lot of my ideas about home and loss and longing came to fruition.

That photograph is the only exterior photograph that is taken of a home that is been abandoned. It was taken in the Love Canal, New York.

I used to live in Boston when I went to the Boston Museum school and I would drive from there to Ohio for holidays and visits to my parent's house.

I had always heard of that neighborhood and so I decided to get off the turnpike and go find it one day.

What I found was really remarkable to me as it was a neighborhood that had simply been walked away from by many of its inhabitants.

Not all of them. But most of them.

I find that house I shot to be particularly lonely and it was shot on a Blue Moon in the fall that can be seen behind the clouds and that's where a lot of the light comes from.

That neighborhood was so spooky to me I can't really even explain what it was like to stand there. You felt like you were being watched. But there was no one there except for just a few homes where people were holdouts



© Todd Hido, 2312-a, 1999 from "Houses at Night"

Yes, it's true that most of my photographs of homes at night have a light on in the window. That is a very important part to me as it implies that someone is in there.

I have often said; "The lights come on and the inside seeps to the outside."

The light being on in the window makes the picture more about the people inside—and that is what attracted me to it in the first place. That there was someone there—and I was wondering about what his or her life is like.

One thing that we should say that hasn't come up yet is that all of my photographs are made on analog film with long exposures and there is no lighting that I am adding to the scene.

I do not collaborate or get permission from the owners to make the photographs. I just do it. Also, 99% of the time I am alone when shooting.

Also, I find it much more interesting to simply discover my locations and shoot them then and there.

I'm not the kind of photographer that goes out and creates something from an idea that I preconceived...at least not with landscapes or buildings. With portraits there's always some kind of collaboration inherent in the process. But we can get to that later...



© Todd Hido, 2314, 1999 from "Landscapes"

*3. You often choose the vertical format over the horizontal one. Is there any particular reason (formal or narrative) for choosing this kind of frame?*

Yes, I do often use the vertical format. With the houses I do it quite a bit, and the reason for it is that often times I just wanted to get a single home in the frame. The place seems more isolated that way. Also it was easier to focus the viewer's and my attention onto a single home.

I also like that it shows lots of the sky and lots of foreground and that tends to flatten out the scene and utilize the negative space more.

*4. You frequently have photographed interiors. How did you find the places, do some of them have a special meaning for you?*

Yes, I love to photograph interiors.

They often add another layer of narrative to a sequence of photographs.

And I really like what that does—it sort of brings the viewer inside of the home.

Even though none of the interiors are what is inside the homes they are often juxtaposed with.

It is all just implied.



© Todd Hido, 1447-a, 1996 from "Interiors" / 2479-a, 1999, from "Houses at Night"



© Todd Hido, 1952, 1996, from "Interiors"

I found the interiors in a few ways. Some of them are the childhood home that I grew up in. I grew up in Kent, Ohio. There's a picture of a single pillow on the bed. "#1447-b", And there's also a big console TV that has the light blaring out of it, "#1952", those are both my childhood spaces, where I spent most of my time.

Some of the other photographs are motel rooms that I have stayed in and photographed.

The third place that I find interiors were from a project that I started back in 1996 of foreclosed homes. This was way back before anybody was talking or thinking about foreclosed homes. I have added a few new ones to the group recently and hope to do more.

I am very much interested in the loss that happens in the spaces. Walls do talk.

I was interested in the family drama that had occurred. A lot of my work is really about home and family.

In these spaces I often recognize something of my own unstable childhood in them. Many of the places and people I photograph, resonate with me.

5. *You curate very carefully every aspect of your books and exhibitions. Could you tell us a little bit*

*about your approach when it comes to creating/editing a book and how different it is in comparison to preparing an exhibition?*

Thanks for noticing how careful I am with those things. It is nice to know that someone sees it. Yes, I think about every single detail of my books, as those are something that I can for the most part predominantly control its outcome

A book is an enclosed and encapsulated medium that you can actually come pretty damn close to perfecting. I also tend to think that the book is sometimes more important than the show, as the exhibit is a temporary thing, often hanging for a month or six weeks and then it goes away.

Maybe a couple of thousand people see it?

But a book is something that I always say is on your "permanent record" and it never ever goes away—so you better get it right!

And I am blessed to have a publisher, Chris Pichler of Nazraeli Press, who allows his artists to do what they envision and to be involved in each detail of the process.

With shows there's always many people involved and you're dealing with several different places, as each and every gallery space is its own unique thing.

Often the gallerist who is in that space every day is the one that knows it the best. They know how people walk through a space. What wall they start at, what the site lines are from room to room, etc. They also know the audience who comes in. So sometimes, they are the ones that layout the shows.

At the Stephen Wirtz Gallery—which is my home base in San Francisco, I have always been very involved in selecting what I show and where each piece goes. Since I live here, I am able to go in and lay my photographs out in the space while I'm actually midway through making them, so I am able to get a feeling of how it will look, and be able to better choose the sizes and layout that I will exhibit there.



© Todd Hido, *Between the Two*, installation shot, 2007

But I also have to say there is definitely value in letting go and having others select your images and exhibit them. It's always curious to me what other people come up with.

As far as putting together the books, I spend hundred & hundreds of hours shuffling around my photographs, making dummies, turning pages, and switching them around and all that. To me that is really the only way to do it, to print the pictures out, paste them in a physical blank book dummy, and turn the pages.

{Oh, and smoke cigarettes, drink wine, and listen to loud music. Very important.} But seriously, that feeling of turning a page and what happens there is something that you cannot simulate on a computer while you are doing the design. It is just not the same.

Also another incredibly important aspect of a successful book is, of course the graphic design. I have always been very fond of excellent graphic design and I have worked with the same designers for all of my monographs, Post Tool Design in San Francisco. I work mostly with Daya Karam and Gigi Obrecht these days. David Karam chimes in with his mastery on occasion. {In the past Herb Thornby, Meredith

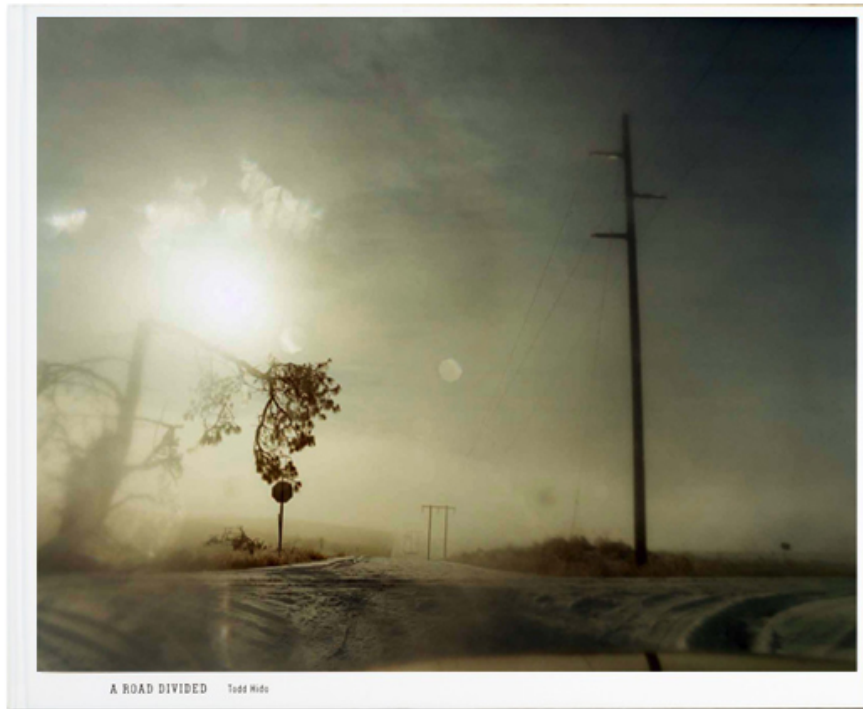
Bagerski, and Kim West have been there and worked on my books too.}

Post Tool and I have had a great long-term relationship that goes back to a tiny newsprint catalog they made for a group show 15 years ago. We are able to really flesh out the details, find the very best fonts and typographic treatment that matches the style of the pictures and the mood I want to convey for the book.

One other thing that is important is that when it is time to do new book we start by lining them all up in chronological order, and make sure we are building on to this body of books, and consider all that we have done as a whole, before making the next move.

But I think most importantly we push each other. I push them to do new things, and they can recognize that even though I have never studied design, that I can still walk in, and immediately call it out when it needs to be tweaked more. On their end, they push me to be open to new ideas as well. Like pink end sheets.

It really works.



© Todd Hido, "A Road Divided", book cover

6. *Some of your photographs have been used as cover images for Raymond Carver's books. Do you feel that your work is somehow related to his writings?*

I feel very, very fortunate to have my photographs on the cover of what will ultimately be a whole suite of Raymond Carver's books. And yes, I do feel that my work is somehow related to his writings. There is a kinship. I often read his work and I "see pictures" and think of things I want try to make. In fact, in two of my previous books, "Roaming" and "Between the Two", I had selected Carver poems to be included as I felt like there was something in those poems that really extended my selection of photographs. They didn't literally illustrate them, but what they did I thought was open to them up.

I was deeply flattered when his designer & publisher contacted me about using my photographs to be on the covers of his books.



© Todd Hido / Vintage Books, *Redesign of Raymond Carver's backlist for the 25th anniversary of Vintage Contemporaries*

7. Larry Sultan has been a friend and mentor as well as one of your teachers at the California College of Arts in San Francisco. Would you tell us something about your experience with him?

Larry Sultan truly was one of the most remarkable people that I have ever known. I was so fortunate to have been able to study under him and also become his friend and colleague. He was so incredibly articulate about talking about pictures and I learned so much from him about what photography can do and how it can mean something that extends way beyond what you are picturing in your images.

I remember when I first got to CCA back in 1994 he was very happy because myself and a couple of other graduate students at the time were good, old-fashioned photographers. He always said that was very excited about that because ultimately he was too, but he had been doing lots of Public Art at that time, and he relished being surrounded by people that cared about photography so much. He missed it, making pictures, going out and “getting the loot,” he called it.

I can certainly trace moments back in time to graduate school where Larry said something or saw something in my work that really influenced the path that I am on now. I very much miss him and so do so many, many of the people that knew him well or had him as a teacher. He was such an influential figure, especially out here in the West Coast, where many people were able to directly have contact with him on a regular basis.

8. You once told that you had the chance to see Emmet Gowin's darkroom and how he made his wonderful prints in such a simple space situated in an extra room of his home. What does your darkroom look like?

My darkroom is extremely basic, in fact it's probably archaic but it works. As with much else in life, it's not really about the tools but how you use them.

I rent space in a commercial photography lab and I use it after hours. I usually go there a couple nights a week and print with my assistant Lance Brewer, and we just print as much as we can for five hours.

9. In your series “A Road Divided” you photographed through the windshield of your car. Even if we can't see clearly through the glass, we get a perception of vastness, infinity; we try to look beyond the blurry parts of the window.

The images consist of two parts, on one hand there is the landscape, which is somehow exterior, and on the other hand the windshield of the car that creates another (interior) space. Do you think that this aspect influences the viewer in his photographic perception?

Yes, I do think that influences the viewer because, as you mentioned, it's not just a photograph of the landscape but it is a photograph from my personal perspective. I'm somehow in the picture in a way. That is my breath fogging up the window! It has more of an intimacy I think. It has a subjective, diaristic quality and now that I really think about it—it's the opposite of something like an “authorless” objective view, which is most often seen from a higher, uncommon viewpoint.





© Todd Hido, 7557, 2008, from "A Road Divided"

10. All the images in "A Road Divided" are defined by an open horizon, a view that leads to infinity. Do you think that making the photographs in a different landscape (for example in the mountains) would change the meaning of the series?

I'm definitely interested in that open horizon. It's basically the landscape I grew up with in Ohio. That openness and those open roads are the kind of roads I'd ride my BMX bike down going to the next town over.

As for making the photographs in a different landscape, it certainly changes, but not as much as you would think. I have been most recently making that kind of photograph back in the suburbs and shooting homes again with the same kind of treatment. It is exciting to make images that combine elements from two groups of pictures.



©Todd Hido

11. You recently worked on a project initiated by Harvey Bengé and the publishing house Kehrer Verlag called "One Day: Ten Photographers". Like the title says, ten selected photographers had to take

*pictures on one single day. Could you tell us a little bit about this experience? How was it for you to make photographs in just one given day?*

At first when they asked me to participate in the project I was a little bit worried, as I've often said to my students "you can't make great art on demand". Great stuff can't be forced and those kinds of situations often turn out poorly. But it was such a great group of people I could not decline participating.

So what I ended up doing was planning it out and re-visiting areas close to where I found good photographs before, so I was not wasting my time driving and just hoping I'd discover something that would work. That is what I usually do, is just drive, and drive, and I enjoy that search a lot but that does not work if you have to come up with a book that can hang with Rinko Kawauchi and John Gossage in just one day.

I also worked with a really great model that I had recently shot with so I knew just what to expect from her.

One thing that I did that was very different was to use a couple of assistants and a professional hair & make up person. I usually work totally alone in shooting my art, but in this case I had to maximize my time so I could vary the looks of the model quickly, so it looked more evocative, and more narrative, like more time had passed.

It was the most planned out shoot I have done to date and I have to say I was really surprised and happy with the results.



© Todd Hido



© Todd Hido

*12. Your latest publication "Nymph Daughters" has been published by the Japanese publishing house Super Labo. How did this collaboration come about? Could you tell us something more about the project?*

Yasunori Hoki, who is the publisher of Super Labo, contacted me. He had done a few small books by other artists that I found were interesting, especially one by a favorite artist of mine, Ed Templeton.

The books are almost 'zine like and small editions of 500

I had really wanted to do something that was much more loose and experimental and take chances and risks in a way that you would necessarily do with larger scale projects.

What I ended up doing was exactly that. I revisited some of the sequencing experiments that I had done in a class with Larry Sultan called the Narrative Workshop. This was back in graduate school, where I would combine found photographs with my own photographs to sort of broaden the story in a way.

Larry was teaching us about how to use an archive of images and to make something else completely different out of it, very much based on his experience with his classic book with Mike Mandel, "Evidence".

For "Nymph Daughters" I started with a typical 50's studio portrait of a woman who seemed to be a mother to me. And then I had a 1950's newspaper photograph of the immediate aftermath of an automobile accident. I put the mother at the front and the car wreck in the back and set out to bridge the gap between those two photographs.

In doing this I worked off the 1950's theme and style present in the found pictures and had dug up an old pulp fiction book called "Nymph Daughters" I owned that had a great cover—all it had on the it was the title and I just scanned it and represented it. Altered a bit by me with pencil.

For the interior I weaved together a sequence of some 126mm-snapshot photographs that I had recently taken, plus others that I have mostly never shown before, photographs of homes and models and a few other twists that I was excited to work with. Including spray paint. It is racy and ends in tragedy. I think there is a lot of meaning inside of it.

I could see many of these elements popping up in other work of mine.



© Todd Hido, image from photo-eye.com

*13. If you would have to choose ten photographs (by ten different artists) for a little book/slideshow, which images would you select?*

It's funny that you asked that as I recently edited "Witness #7" that is published by Nazraeli Press & JGS, which is a journal that comes out a couple of times a year where one photographer is in charge of the entire contents of the book.

In the back end I made a section that is just what you mentioned—photographs by other artists put together in a sequence in a book. I ended up photographing books from my own library that are really important to me, and books that I live with, and have often left open to the specific pages that I really liked best.

*14. What are you working on right now?*

Right now I am getting ready for show in New York of some of my recent portraits and nudes. It will be at Bruce Silverstein Gallery in early 2011.

I am also working on shooting new images that incorporate figures into the landscape. That's something that I've not done that much, to photograph people outside, and I find that to be quite interesting at this point in time.



© Todd Hido

I also made a photograph earlier this year that is at the edge of the water, which is usually a place that I don't shoot much but I'm quite captivated by this picture. I could see myself going and doing many more.

That is how things always start for me—I will make one or two photographs that I don't necessarily fit with my other ones and then I go out and try to build on them. Slowly it adds up into something.



© Todd Hido

*Interview by Daniel Augschoell and Anya Jasbar*

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## Critic's Picks

### Todd Hido

STEPHEN WIRTZ GALLERY



**Todd Hido**, *Untitled #7557*, 2008

America looks bleak yet hopeful and reflective these days. Buffeting a stormy economy, human rights skirmishes, and the promise of lucid new political leadership can't help but have an effect on this country's self-image. Todd Hido's recent photographs were taken in advance of Obama's victory, but as images of the US landscape, they seem aligned with the cultural moment. Hido is known for his moody nightscapes depicting lonely suburban abodes with home fires ominously burning, and his current work approaches twilight: The hazy images, bathed in an atmospheric light, could easily have been taken at dawn or dusk. Hido's camera is most often positioned inside the windshield of a car. He's traveled this road before, notably in his 2004 series "Roaming," which presented similarly chilly views of flatlands. The new work maintains the compositional outlook—views of two-lane highways bracketed by snowy flatlands and scraggly foliage—but the pictures feel deeper, more nuanced, and more painterly in intention. While it is apparent that they are from a driver's vantage point, the blur of condensation or wiper-blade distortion has the effect of nudging these works more wistfully toward Impressionism than toward Stephen Shore's pictures. Hido numbers each picture; one, *6405*, 2007, a nearly monochromatic view of a muddy road and bending tree, evokes the French countryside, an allusion that channels a humble, romantic position. The duskier *7557*, 2008, feels storm-rattled; with dark lines of electric wires looming forward, it exudes more ominous pulchritude. A tiny glow of oncoming traffic in the distance evokes hope as well as a potential collision, and Hido deftly handles the tension, which in this case, seems to have as much to do with the merger of painting and photography as with the shifting psychology of American terrain.

— Glen Helfand

# EYEMAZING





Todd Hido Between the Two







An empty room, a barren place, the unwatched television and haunting light reside both by day and by night. The poetic loneliness of Todd Hido's work reveals imagery to which we somehow already know, a place that is within all of us that we may avoid or retreat in. These metaphorically muted spaces have a corrupt beauty all of their own. By playing polar opposites against each other the stage is set to explore and even intrude into the human unconscious of the women that appear amid the pages of his latest monograph *Between The Two*.

The anonymity of the locations and women in Hido's photographs are no surprise to anyone familiar with his work. They retain an intensity and mystery that tempt you to investigate your own emotions in response to the ones expressed by his sitters and the dwellings in which they reside. Presenting more questions than answers creates an uncomfortable atmosphere for the onlooker who is ill-informed to the situations on view. The women are in varying stages of dress or undress, and although some look directly at the lens you can't help feeling like you have invaded their privacy at a particularly important personal moment.

The photographs contrast beauty alongside the depressing loneliness of the barely furnished rooms, which seem to echo within the women's faces and body language. The sentiment we are witness to, compel a response but the empathy varies. The projected demeanours of the women differ and the inference that some of them may be prostitutes is hard to avoid. By ambiguously bringing this conjecture into the photographs we are encouraged to respond with our own prejudices and understandings of the human condition.

The moral issues are only as small or great as the individual onlooker wishes them to be. In keeping the identity and surroundings indistinct Hido plays with our thoughts and empathy. Hido's approach does not betray a typical male gaze. There is a sexual element here but it is also one of a psychological nature as we try to comprehend the thoughts of his models. Some look troubled or even victimised, floundering in such oppressive rooms. By illuminating each scene with available light Hido offers an intense ambience, which governs the psychosomatic implications of each individual photograph therefore adding another dimension to his work.



Due to the austerity and featurelessness of the rooms, the women do not look like they belong there. They are not in their own homes. There is nothing of themselves inside these places. Have they been placed there? Are they waiting to be found? The sense of abandonment is tangible. It is as if they have summoned us to rescue them from an uncertain fate and at the same time an aura of intrusion is ever present. Opposing factors haunt the unconscious spaces Hido composes with verve.

In some of the images, the empty used beds are strangely seductive as the folds and creases of the sheets are reminiscent of painterly classicism, the detailed contours of the fabric brought forth as they catch the light. We have no indication to how recently the beds have been vacated or if they will be used again but the traces of activity ring louder than observing their use. It is unclear if sex or slumber made the creases and indentations and this disparity is once again left for us to decide. You cannot look at these pictures without somehow sexualising them – however the resistance to do so is also unavoidable.

Punctuated by equally barren landscapes and unpopulated interiors, which act as pauses or intervals between the portraiture – Hido suspends time whilst simultaneously propelling it forward, positioning us in the same limbo as his sitters. There is a sense of dissatisfaction and waiting for life to change that comes from being in a dull and lifeless town. The implication of waiting for something better or the hope of being taken from your own reality and into another brighter one suggests the need to be rescued by another person. Looking at these women you feel the urge to liberate them or perhaps identify with their plight. Yet again we enter a paradox.

The use of a poem by the great American poet and storyteller Raymond Carver frames Hido's work beautifully. Carver, himself no stranger to hardship, was born into a family with an abusive alcoholic father who died at aged 53 and a mother who supplemented the family income by working as a waitress and retail clerk. Living on the margins of society, in a house with no indoor toilet, Carver's writing was inevitably honest and empathic to the plight of the disenfranchised and poor of America. His poem







*Energy*, used in Hido's book, is the compassionate story of a woman whose lot in life seems as disappointing as her mother's whom she resembles. His words comparing her ability to smoke in the same way as her mother is an eerie reprise as she "can take a cigarette down to the filter in three draws." Such a woman worn down by circumstances can still – in the eyes of a poet – have a hypnotic beauty all of her own and can aspire to a better life despite the unlikely certainty of her fate. To fall in love again is a dream that "pulls us relentlessly on."

Hido's photographs portray this hope in a sensitive way without avoiding the harsh realities of their predicament even endangerment. Although these are not documentary photographs recording a specific situation, they do portray a possible life which we already know exists both mentally and physically in many parts of the world. His astute depictions should be considered in a literary sense in the way they are intended. The piercing eyes of these women seem to yearn not look. Their beauty is still present even if providence does its best to fade it. In these images, strength of character shines through in the

harshes of circumstances. Hido's understanding of womanhood is quite extraordinary and should be appreciated for the deep non-judgemental sentiment it holds. Raymond Carver would love this work for that very reason.

TEXT BY LAURA NOBLE

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[www.toddhido.com](http://www.toddhido.com)

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#### Upcoming Exhibitions

Stephen Wirtz Gallery, San Francisco Jan – Feb 2007 (portraits)  
Rose Gallery, Los Angeles Jan 2007 (landscapes)

## TODD HIDO

4/7/09

Stephen Wirtz

By Mark Van Proyen



### San Francisco

In Todd Hido's exhibition of 17 recent large and medium-scaled C-prints, titled "A Road Divided," unpopulated, fog-shrouded landscapes are the recurring subject. Playing off the artist's well-known nocturnal photographs of isolated suburban houses bathed in colorful and ominous light, these new, portentous pictures focus on very different kinds of illumination, but one that also reveals lonely and impersonal worlds. Recalling the moody pictorialism of Steiglitz's early images, these impressionistic works depict country roads and snow-covered vacant lots, forlorn places that convey an unsettling sense of emptiness.

Hido photographs these landscapes at liminal moments of early or late afternoon, when sudden changes in light and atmosphere can dramatically transform their appearance. By shooting all of the images through a car windshield and tilting his camera slightly upward, Hido creates striking compositional effects that gently toy with conventional depth of field. In *Untitled #6237* (2007), a curving dirt road runs from a distant foreground to an amorphous horizon – a route that seems, in essence, to lead us nowhere. Here, as elsewhere, the fog and clouds swirling overhead are seen through layers of frost or condensation on the windshield, resulting in refractions of light that quietly disrupt the legibility of detail.

While a somber and evocative tonalism predominate, surprising flashes of color enliven the works. *Untitled #6426* (2007) is the only photograph that features a figure. At the very center of this panoramic composition, a woman in a yellow coat stands on a precipice overlooking the ocean. Ripe with Hitchcockian suggestion, the image especially recalls a scene from the director's 1958 film *Vertigo*. Because of the spatial distortion created by the sloping windshield that intervenes between camera and subject, the woman seems simultaneously near and far. This effect heightens her tense body language and enhances the enduring ambiguity of the moment.

Above: *Untitled #6237*, 2007, chromogenic print, 20 by 24 inches; at Stephen Wirtz.