

Photographic inwardness, photographic outwardness

Torrance York and Neal Rantoul show how a direct approach can go in different directions

By [Mark Feeney](#) Globe Staff, Updated December 8, 2023, 3:50 p.m.



Torrance York, "Untitled 8768," 2020. TORRANCE YORK

[Torrance York](#) was diagnosed with Parkinson's disease eight years ago. "My camera," she writes, "became a tool to help me better understand and manage this significant change in my life." The 27 color photographs in "Torrance York: Semaphore" are a response to her condition. The show runs at the Danforth Art Museum at Framingham State College through Jan. 28.

Nothing in the photographs relates to Parkinson's, per se. The show's subtitle comes from a centuries-old method of signaling over long distance, using flags or other devices. So semaphore is not an immediate form of communication, as speech is or telegraphy or telephony. Messages come from afar and require translation.

In that sense, semaphore can be seen as a metaphor for these often-arresting photographs, which are visually direct but emotionally oblique: an inwardness that's no less felt for being veiled. It's not surprising that all of the images are untitled. Although York presents, she doesn't guide.



Torrance York, "Untitled 6341," 2020. TORRANCE YORK

The photographs are all square, though their size varies: 13 inches, 20 inches, 40 inches. The subject matter is even more varied: bird's nests, typewriter keys (an Underwood), a rolled-up tape measure, birch bark, cherry blossoms. York is fond of hands, which figure in six of the photographs. In the most striking of these, a hand and the bare arm it belongs to emerge from soap suds. York also likes spheres, circles, and curves. The hands stand out further for not being rounded.



The photographs are tightly cropped, which makes them seem all the more direct. York doesn't give a context, which makes them seem all the more oblique. What is perhaps the most striking image does have a context: a kitchen. It shows a carving knife and a single Brussels sprouts on a cutting board. Two drops of oil or water are also visible. The arrangement is clean, simple, neat — and dominated by an item that's as much weapon as tool. The temptation is great to infer menace as well as utility.



Neal Rantoul, from the series "Pulaski Motel, Virginia," 2012. NEAL RANTOUL

Also through Jan. 28, the Danforth is showing 14 photographs from [Neal Rantoul's](#) "Pulaski Motel, Virginia" series. In southeastern Virginia, Rantoul found himself driving past the Pulaski on a very hot, overcast day. This was in 2012. The motel, which had been closed for two years, would soon be demolished. The Ritz it was not.

The 14 black-and-white images are studies in gray. They're 23 inches by 15 inches, which makes them sizable without being overwhelming. The motel looks evacuated as well as derelict. No one is visible by its doors and steps. There are no cars in the parking lot. Rantoul presents things from the outside — no inwardness here — and that's just fine.



Neal Rantoul, "Untitled," from the series "Pulaski Motel," 2012. NEAL RANTOUL

A couple of photos show rudimentary columns. Did the original owners want to evoke Southern plantation architecture? The sight of these forlorn-looking columns recalls Walker Evans's differently forlorn photographs from the mid-'30s of [ruined plantations](#) in the Deep South.

There are also 14 pictures in "Wheat: New Photographs of the Palouse by Neal Rantoul." It's at the Acton Memorial Library through Dec. 28. The [Palouse](#) is a grain-growing region in southeastern Washington state. Rantoul has visited there to photograph nearly two dozen times, doing so for more than a quarter century.



Neal Rantoul, "Untitled, #28," 2023. NEAL RANTOUL

The photographs are in color, with a dunnish yellow (the fields) and blue (the sky) predominant. People are nowhere to be seen, but the hills and fields have all been shaped by man. The setting is natural without being altogether natural.

The visual elements are simple and basic: sky, shadow, cloud, field. The simplicity is almost austere, but that austerity contributes to the grave handsomeness of these images. Eight of the photographs show the fields from above, the others from the ground. One of those is so close as to reveal stubble. It's only then a viewer realizes how nearly painterly these photographs are, owing more to color field canvases, almost, than to the detail and specificity of agricultural photography.

TORRANCE YORK: Semaphore

NEAL RANTOUL: Pulaski Motel

At Danforth Art Museum at Framingham State University, 14 Vernon St., Framingham, through Jan. 28. 508-215-5110, danforthartmuseum@framingham.edu

WHEAT: New Photographs of the Palouse by Neal Rantoul

At Acton Memorial Library, 486 Main St., Acton, through Dec. 28. 978-929-6655,

www.actonmemoriallibrary.org/services/art-exhibitions/

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