

## Fields of Wonder: Neal Rantoul in the Palouse

When Neal Rantoul travels to the southeastern corner of Washington State, which he has done 15 times since his first encounter in 1993, he goes home. Not that the agriculturally rich region known as the Palouse is a residence, or his birthplace. Rather, this patch of Earth is home to a vision that finds respite and nourishment in the undulating fields, shifting light, and constant change occurring in these fields.

Wheat grows in the Palouse, abundantly. Also rapeseed, lentils, and other legumes. Spaces where native prairie species like Bluebunch wheatgrass and Idaho fescue once grew wild have become, with the advent of machine-assisted farming, a logistically challenging but sufficiently profitable landscape; a landscape of cost-benefit analysis that finds its limits drawn by fuel, labor, and irrigation costs. Urban development and anything human scaled is miniaturized by the expanse of land. For the farmers of the Palouse, time is a resource calculated in potential profit per hour. For Rantoul, time is a tool, calibrated by attention. Obviously, as a photographic artist, time is essential to his medium; time is his collaborator in the realization of vision. Time signifies regard. Regard is fueled by wonder. And wonder is abundant in Rantoul's photographs of the Palouse and elsewhere; wherever this photographer settles himself becomes a home for his vision, a vision that exemplifies regard.

The itinerant photographer (based in Massachusetts, Rantoul has photographed around the world) arrived at this space out of frustration. Persistent rain in Seattle, inhospitable for his large format black-and-white explorations, pushed him east to Spokane. The farmed landscape there was compelling enough for Rantoul to expose his last sheets of film and add a new destination to his must-revisit list. But the Spokane area topography was only a warm-up. In 1996, three years after the first visit and fresh off a trip to Italy, Rantoul returned to eastern Washington and a stay in a Spokane bed and breakfast. A conversation about the area's visual spectacle produced a tip, which sent him south from Spokane to the small towns of Pullman (Washington) and Moscow (Idaho) in the heart of the Palouse.

*Wheat: An American Series* is not a pictorial narrative about farming, soil conservation, or ecological realities. This is not a documentary project, nor a story about contemporary lives along the Washington/Idaho border. It is an eloquent series of pictures about an immensely, almost overwhelmingly picturesque space. Rantoul chooses to stand within this physical space but remain outside of its commercial and cultural implications. He chooses to become immersed in wonder and contemplate the cumulative effects of time: eons of wind-borne loess, shape-shifting like dunes; more than a century of tilling, first with massive teams of horses, then with horsepower; the color shifting by seasons of grain, and the moment's change of a cumulus shadow gliding across a hill or the sun spotlighting a ravine through a break in the cloud cover.

Clearly, it is difficult to look at Rantoul's photographs without admiring and wondering about the agricultural collaborators who unwittingly play such a large role in the ultimate appearance of the photographs. It is, after all, their plowing, irrigating, and choices of plantings that constitute the material of the photographs. Yet, when Rantoul is working there, his tendency is to abstract himself from specific thoughts about agricultural practice in order to immerse himself fully in the commitment he has to reaping fully realized images from these fields. He works diligently, systematically, but not obsessively or scientifically. His attraction to the Palouse is comparable to Monet's for haystacks, or the Barbizon painters to the forests around Fontainebleau—more as bearers of light and shape than as narrators of riparian tales. Painterly sources have, in fact, influenced Rantoul more strongly than any from photographic fields, although his experiences with the pedagogy and imagery of Harry Callahan and Aaron Siskind remain very much part of his practice. "It's all about the picture" is a refrain from these two masters that continually returns to him while he works. A mantra, perhaps, that guides him in a meditative *Pas de deux* with the landscape; hours can pass while he works, moving carefully and watchfully from one spot to another, watching the sun slide shadowed clouds to and fro, finding ideal moments when perspective, scope, and depth combine into pleasing forms in his viewfinder. His approach is intuitive, even trance-like; he admits to carrying modern minimalists like Steve Reich, Philip Glass, and Keith Jarrett on his MP3 player, enjoying the auditory phenomenon of progression within repetition, the alluring rhythms of these soundscapes that echo the changing constancy of the arable lands that crest and fall around him. The hills are even graced with the contour-tracing ribbons of ploughed furrows that suggest musical staves gone awandering.

Some of these photographs were made from airplanes. It's not always easy to tell; the rolling hills and the absence of reliable scale markers sometimes leave us feeling elevated even when the photographer stood on terra firma. Typically, though, the pictures without horizon lines, without the sky visible above the undulating land, were shot from the tripod with wings, also known as a high wing aircraft. These images are typically shot in the morning, when the crossing light models the fields most effectively. The aerial photographs are guided by some very practical working methods: don't worry about depth of field, set focus at infinity, use a fast shutter speed, and keep the camera inside the plane when shooting, as even the fastest shutter speed can't nullify the blur imposed by winds at 100-plus miles per hour. In these photographs, Rantoul amplifies his groundwork; elevation affords the aerial images a graphic clarity that strengthens their claim to "just picture"-hood. Just pictures, perhaps, but also images of wonder, curiosity, and intrigue.

In different hands, photography assumes different roles. Some practice it as an art of intimacy, some as an exploration of infinity, some search for truths, others conjure credible fictions. In Rantoul's hands, in the fields of the Palouse and elsewhere he travels with camera, photography takes the form of honest regard. He does not seek to interpret, to analyze, to judge, or to explain. But he does want to convey his

admiration, and his powerful sense of wonder at the confluence of man's intentions and nature's myriad responses. Photography offers an ideal space for these reflections; within the frame's four sides he can compress an enormous amount of space and material into a picture—a new thing, a graphic device that both encapsulates reality and enhances it. The wondrous spectacle of the Palouse, then, is communicated to us here, at a distance, in compact, two-dimensional parcels. From those rolling fields Rantoul has reaped a bountiful harvest of images—a crop I wager no farmer would admit planting. But many of them would recognize the familiarity and fascination Rantoul has found in their fields.

—George Slade

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Bio:

George Slade was born and raised in the American Midwest, a true city boy in the midst of the expansive Great Plains. As an adult with young children, summers in Vermont oriented him to agricultural lives. His knowledge of photography stems from his father's travelogue slide shows, Yale University's American Studies program, the tutelage of Alan Trachtenberg, Ben Lifson, Tod Papageorge, Rosalind Krauss, Sally Stein, and countless photographers since the mid-1980s when he worked at Aperture, Magnum Photos, and other picture-related businesses in Manhattan. Slade was the artistic director of the Minnesota Center for Photography from 2003 to 2008, and the director of the McKnight Foundation Photography Fellowships Program from 1998 to 2008. In 2008 he was awarded a grant from the Andy Warhol Foundation/Creative Capital Arts Writers Program. A frequent contributor to photo-eye books, his writings can also be found on his blog, re:photographica, and in various print and online venues. He is currently the curator and program manager at the Photographic Resource Center in Boston.