An American perspective

By Mark Feeney

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We like to tell ourselves that art is universal, that it transcends such mundane considerations as nationality and place of origin. Yet looking at the 62 black-and-white photographs in "Neal Rantoul: Twenty-Five Years (1980-2005)," which runs through Jan. 4 at Panopticon Gallery, one wonders.

Could a European have taken these pictures of Peddocks Island and Moab, Utah, and Cody, Wyo., and a farm near Hershey
, Pa.? Surely not. Rantoul salts curiosity with acceptance — a marveling so matter-of-fact it seems like mere observation, except there's nothing mere about it. His response to these American places is embrace as much as documentation. "He cannot discover America by counting," Robert Lowell once wrote. A person could do a lot worse in the discovery process than looking at Rantoul's photographs and their loving, dignified recording of external reality.

That isn't to say there's anything grandiose or didactic about these pictures. They possess something much more interesting, and complicated, than that. Call it a grandeur of absence. Rantoul's open spaces and clean lines express a sense of democratic nobility, an eloquent simplicity. They're restrained without being doctrinaire about it.

Rantoul, who heads the photography program at Northeastern, usually shoots his subjects straight on — face to face, you might say. His work, in that respect, is reminiscent of Frank Gohlke's. Both men's photographs offer such elegant directness. More generally, Rantoul can be seen as extending the approach of the New Topographics photographers without in any way being derivative of it. Those photographers, who included Gohlke, Nicholas Nixon, Joe Deal, and Robert Adams, presented a different way of looking at American terrain, as an often melancholy interweaving of the natural and man-made. They were part of the landmark "New Topographics" exhibition, which was mounted in 1975.

When a Rantoul photograph includes any effect other than the most straightforward, the result can be ravishing. A picture of the Northampton Fairgrounds shows a tree in snow, an image of almost Zen spareness, yet cropped in such a way that a delicate tracery of shadows from the branches fills much of the photograph. In another photograph, of a lake in Georgia, sky and water blend in a texture of damp, almost-mystical gray. The five photographs of office towers from Rantoul's "Boston Infrared" series are shot from below at a dramatic angle so as to include the sky in the pictures — to give a sense of these stark structures in a context beyond the urban.

The sky also figures in one of Rantoul's photographs of a cemetery in Oaksdale, Wash. We see a shed, a truck, a tree, a bush, and a sweep of sky as undefined — and inevitable — as tomorrow. There are two series from cemeteries. The other is of Mount Auburn, in Cambridge. People aren't visible in Rantoul's photographs, though their handiwork is evident in almost all of them. Their presence would detract from the cumulative effect his work conveys: of a world tempered by time, chastened by space, and abjuring almost any non-essential ornament. As a setting, cemeteries fit that bill nicely.

The dozen photographs from Mount Auburn are simultaneously austere and luscious (part of the lusciousness is owing to their being gold-toned prints). They are scrutinies of textures — stone, vine, vine on stone, and, both the finest and fiercest texture of all, time. Saying only an American could have taken Rantoul's pictures isn't quite right. Here is an exception. Looking at these images, one thinks of Atget: the solidity, the seriousness, the unwavering gaze.

Also on display at the Panopticon are 10 photographs of John Lennon that Roger Farrington took on Aug. 7, 1980, when he was recording what would become his "Double Fantasy" album. The pictures are engaging in both their casualness and unfamiliarity. With his long, sharp face beneath a Stetson, Lennon looks like a Plantagenet cowboy.