

ART REVIEWS

By DAVID PAGEL
SPECIAL TO THE TIMES

The Long View: Miles Coolidge's mesmerizing photographs represent something of a breakthrough for the 35-year-old artist, establishing him as one of the more talented photographers of his generation. Unlike his earlier color prints, which crisply depict the interiors of garages and elevators or the streets of Safetyville (a two-thirds-scale stage set of a town where schoolchildren learn to cross the street safely), Coolidge's new pictures of California's Central Valley are curiously hazy. They marry a captivating exploration of an extraordinary landscape to an astute study of visual perception.

Each of his six images at ACME Gallery (along with a similar group that is simultaneously being shown in New York) depicts nothing but

what's out there: acre after acre of flat, fertile farmland, interrupted only by telephone poles, trees, trailer homes and scattered machinery. What's amazing about the artist's utterly unembellished photographs is the way their format, scale and quality of light come together to allow viewers to see a lot more than meets the eye.

Only 10 inches high and more than 10 feet long, Coolidge's pictures initially invite you to see them as sweeping panoramas, all-encompassing overviews that fill at least 180 degrees of your visual field. But after a moment or two of careful looking, it becomes clear that these vast landscapes share less with traditional panoramas than with an entirely original type of tunnel vision.

Your eyes do not glide across a horizon-hugging photograph by Coolidge as much as they get

pulled into its deceptive depths. To scrutinize one of these works is to feel as if you're looking at the world as the light at the end of a long, dark tunnel—except that you never feel cramped, claustrophobic or put off by the distance.

Because the terrain they portray is so flat, hundreds of yards—sometimes even several miles—separate objects that appear to be right next to one another. As a result, these works wreak havoc with the accuracy of your depth perception, occasionally creating the sensation that you can see beyond the horizon.

Although such a feat is logically impossible, it goes hand in hand with Coolidge's capacity to make the exceptionally unromantic landscape of industrial-scale farming look absolutely beautiful. While the stunning light, sensuous textures and gorgeous palettes of his

photographs may not belong to a world that's too good to be true, they certainly depict one that's too weird to be ignored.

■ *ACME Gallery, 6150 Wilshire Blvd., (323) 857-5942, through Oct. 3. Closed Sundays and Mondays.*



Unblinking, a series of open elevators stare out – empty, resonant chambers; cubes waiting expectantly. But perhaps this description is too poetic. After all these are merely deadpan photographs of corporate-looking lifts, yet more images of generic contemporary spaces. They are marked, as is usual, by an overwhelming sense of geographical sitelessness, a lack of rootedness so conducive to the workings of global capital.

Before the elevators, Miles Coolidge took similarly straightforward photographs of garages. Crammed full of a particularly American accumulation of stuff, these cubes also looked back at the viewer with the same uncompromising gaze: a continuous loop created by the fall of a shutter. Empty and full boxes, the two series of photographs play with the dilemma of space and how to fill it. The square garages and lifts become symbols for the white cube of the gallery. The back-to-back presentation of the two bodies of work recalls the game played in Paris by

Arman and Yves Klein, where in 1958 Klein removed the contents of the gallery, calling the exhibit 'Vide' (Empty), and two years later, Arman took the bait by filling the same space with garbage and dubbing it 'Plein' (Full). While Coolidge's stark photographs certainly engage in the Modernist debate around the white cube, underneath their cool technological polish they also play with the more submerged history of early photographic image-making.

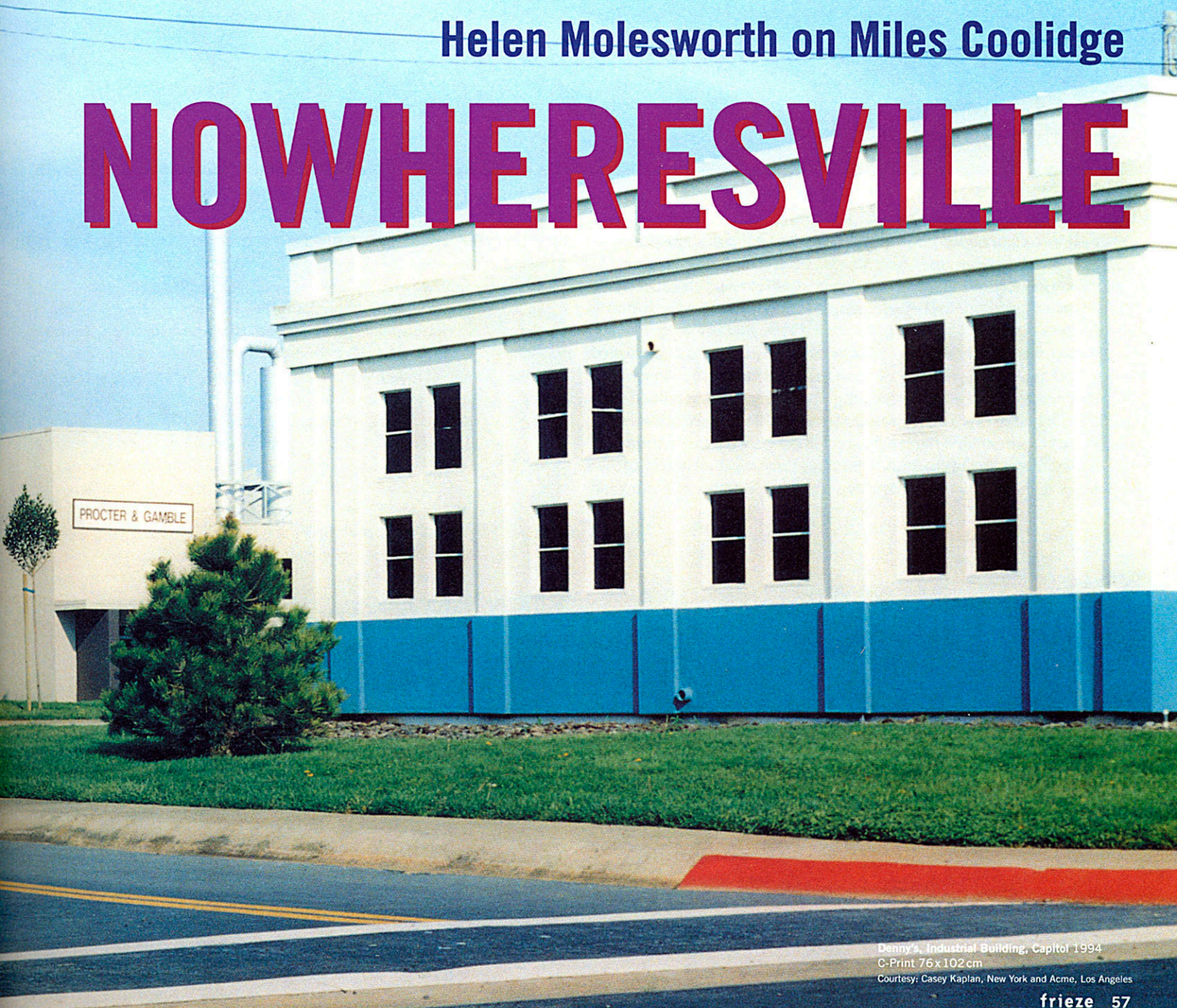
For his most recent series, Coolidge photographed California's Central Valley in a panoramic style, each image printed roughly 25 cm high by 300 cm long. All were horizon-scapes printed on metal sheets that shimmered on the wall. The form adopted by these vistas recalls the panorama, which predated the photograph: as an early manifestation of spectacle culture, the images were viewed by a large audience in a forthright spirit of titillation and thrill. Indeed, many of the earliest panoramas were vistas rendered from great heights that offered viewers an expansive horizon. According

to Stephan Oettermann in his eccentric compendium *The Panorama: History of a Mass Medium* (1997), the panorama helped shape a bourgeois vision of the world as, on the one hand, limitless, and on the other, bounded by the dual forces of perspectival vision and capitalism. The European craze for horizons, Oettermann suggests, was linked to naval voyages of discovery and colonial expansion. Panoramic horizons became a metaphor for a specifically bourgeois experience of the world.

Coolidge's technically masterful pictures of California's Central Valley offer nothing but horizon. Low and flat, they uncannily evoke the hazy warm-air distortions of vision that occur on Highway 5, that banal behemoth of a freeway that cuts through the centre of the state. His work captures the prismatic sulphuric light that falls endlessly on a perpetual cornucopia of summer foods – strawberries, asparagus, garlic, artichokes, lettuce, and citrus fruits – supplied nation-wide by this mammoth irrigated valley

Helen Molesworth on Miles Coolidge

NOWHERESVILLE



Denny's, Industrial Building, Capitol 1994
C-Print 76 x 102 cm
Courtesy: Casey Kaplan, New York and Acmo, Los Angeles

that cavernous box, appears camera-like; a cumbersome camera obscura, an enormous eye: the open door that the shutter will eventually close.

All of Coolidge's work is marked by a definitive lack of movement, an overwhelming sense of immobility: no snapshot aesthetic here, no blur to indicate the passage of time or movement through space. And yet this stillness is paradoxical, for the immobile images always have a relation to movement. Elevators go up and down, garages house cars – Safetyville is the archetypal suburban town, designed around and dependent upon the automobile, and the photographs of Central Valley all appear to have been taken from the roadside. The locations, too, are marked by their transitory nature. Most people move through the Central Valley on their way to and from somewhere else (including the migrant workers whose exploited labour keeps America knee-deep in cheap produce). What could be more transitional than an elevator? Or garages, that as well as cars, hold the stuff that can't quite make its



Central Valley (Near Stratford) 1998

C-Print 26 x 348 cm

Courtesy: Casey Kaplan, New York and Acme, Los Angeles

(remember *Chinatown*?). Unlike their panoramic predecessors, these horizons are shot from level ground, not from a high peak: in the end, their dusty-footed point of origin may betray their class aspirations, just as the craze for height betrayed those of the 19th-century bourgeoisie.

These photographs bring us back to the beginning of the medium, either by flagging its pre-history – as in the panorama and the printing of images on metal – or by reproducing the medium's first subjects: still lifes and landscapes. The desolate streets of Coolidge's 'Safetyville' series and the attenuated flat landscapes of the Central Valley mime the drab photographs of the static buildings that posed for the long exposures demanded by the early Daguerreotype. And the elevator,

way to the trash but is not granted the permanent status of residency inside the house? Starkly immobile, Coolidge's photographs resonate perversely with the hum of America's car culture. The effect is similar to Catherine Opie's photographs of freeways and strip malls, in which she presents a double vision – an archaic past and apocalyptic future – of a de-populated Los Angeles, void of cars. But whereas Opie's works strike an uncanny note of emptiness, Coolidge's have the quietude of stilled movement, suspended mobility.

One of the structuring ideological promises of American life is that of unfettered movement. Both literal and metaphorical, this promise is offered by the car, and more thoroughly, in the proliferation of 'choices' of career, neighbourhood, wardrobe, 'lifestyle', or cuisine. These are all stand-ins, however, for the real promise of class mobility, particularly middle-class mobility – that path of incremental progression marked by such seemingly benign passages as the move from 'spaghetti' to 'pasta'. The history of photography, bound to this class by virtue of its mass nature, has historically helped create a vision of American identity that is bound up with movement. It was in large part the dramatic photographs of the great western expansion, which documented the laying down of the railroads and the landscape west of the Rockies, that gave rise to the myth and promise of a literalised class mobility. It tracked and imaged a historical moment of unbounded colonial aspiration that culminated in the very Central Valley that Coolidge offers again as a panoramic vista.

Yet in Coolidge's photographs we are continually confronted with absolutely bounded aspirations. Class mobility (the corporate logic of an ever upward moving elevator) is here offered as stilled, suspended in the moment before the shutter falls: in fact, its spaces and metaphors are exposed as formulaic, deserted – Safetyville as a middle-class ghost town. The opportunities promised by westward expansion were all but extinct by the middle of the century. Now

Courtesy: Casey Kaplan, New York and Acme, Los Angeles



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From the Home of Mr and Mrs Cronkite, left wall 1992
C-Print 157 x 107 cm



Courtesy: Casey Kaplan, New York and Acme, Los Angeles



metaphors of horizons and vistas have been supplanted by the dreams of unfettered movement and infinite possibility offered by the World Wide Web and information superhighways, and, ironically enough, it is computer technology that is currently threatening the demise of photography. Yet it is actual highways, populated, on close inspection, by trucks, that appear in the Central Valley series; old-fashioned photographs of old-fashioned roads. Technology may offer new metaphors for our aspirations, but these still photographs seem to suggest that class mobility remains incremental and bounded – perhaps now more than ever. In the age of unchallenged global capitalism, the information superhighway has yet to figure out how to deliver food.

UCLA Research Library 1993
C-Print 74 x 99 cm