

Gretchen Hupfel

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In Gretchen Hupfel's recent black-and-white photographs, horrifying things are happening to airplanes: One plows into the side of a building; another crash-lands on a factory roof; still another is about to collide with an enormous needlelike structure. The photographs' laconic titles evoke an expert's shorthand evaluations of the black-box tapes from these accidents: Spatial Disorientation (pilot error, induced); Touchdown (premature); Wind Shear (unforeseeable) (all works 2000). But the events in the photographs turn out to be fictional. With broad (if somewhat dark) humor, Hupfel photographs perfectly functioning, normally flying airplanes from angles that make disaster seem imminent. The joke is so obvious it's almost undetectable: We know so well that photographs can lie that we immediately assume we're not seeing what we're seeing, that such an image is simply an optical illusion. Which it is. But then we notice the titles, which suggest that perhaps it isn't; after all, such accidents do happen. Hupfel plays on our anxieties about technology--our will nor to believe that people and machines can malfunction; our knowledge that they always can--and makes them the objects of cathartic humor.

In Spatial Disorientation, the plane and the modernist monolith that it seems to be crashing into are the only objects in the frame. Shot from a low angle against the sky, they constitute an imposing, high-contrast tonal abstraction. Except for the implied disaster (and the sleek plane itself), the photograph looks as though it could have been published soon after World War II to celebrate modern industrial and architectural design--a relic from a time when it was possible simply to enjoy the machinery and marvel of flight alongside the other wonders of modern life. In Lift (insufficient), which shows an airplane apparently having trouble clearing a light tower, the shape of the plane mirrors the triangle of the tower. The jokey illusion in both photographs serves to strengthen the images as modernist abstractions. Here the modernist celebration of technology joins hands with contemporary techno-anxiety.

Two photographs single out an air traffic control tower and a set of runway lights respectively, implying, in the spirit of the Precisionists, that these built structures are worthy of close scrutiny in their own right. In each image, the object occupies the lower portion of the frame, dwarfed by a vast expanse of gray sky. The control center of Tower seems vaguely anthropomorphic or robotlike; in Runway, two rows of light poles converge on a vanishing point in the distance. These images partake of a technological sublime: Alone against the unforgiving sky, the tower and lights represent the putative heroism and attendant risk of the attempt to conquer the natural world.

Most of the prints in this show are tiny--the smallest is two and a quarter inches square--but surrounded by wide mats. The effect is to make the images seem like precious, carefully preserved documents, perhaps excerpts from an album--products of a vanished sensibility to be examined closely and appreciated. Evoking the not-so-distant past when we still saw aviation as a technological miracle and technology as something to be celebrated in art, they simultaneously remind us, often with an endearingly macabre sense of humor, that we no longer think that way.

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