



# RE-FINED

Photographs by Anthony Redpath



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**ANTHONY REDPATH**



## AN UNEASY DISTANCE: ANTHONY REDPATH'S RE-FINED

By Sky Goodden

An older picture informs the work that comes to follow, in the case of Anthony Redpath's recent series. A photograph titled *One Palm Tree Hill* [2010] features a flock of beach-goers perfectly dotting a shoreline, as seen from above. They almost uniformly bow their heads, perhaps seeking something lost. The crowd's stilled action – elbows bent, knees lifting – suggests a searching. The lenticular distance from the scene reduces it to a pattern, one that repeats, as though tracing the ground for something missing. What has trespassed, here? And in its absence, what larger network has been produced?

As this figurative image leans into patterned abstraction – just slightly, just enough – we are reminded that Redpath's larger practice roots itself in a study of forms that makes them strange to themselves. Bodies are material for a more calculated detection, here, just as in his recent photographs, where the skin of a water tower, or the girding of an oil refinery, ratify *One Palm Tree Hill*'s larger existentialisms, and the patterning that results from a photographer's attention to material detachment.

Redpath's recent body of work essentializes the Vancouver School's focus, and, in a sense, returns it to its origin. In particular, as both site and citation, Redpath references Bernd and Hilla Bechers' impartial analyses of industrial architectures – their cool depiction of grain elevators, their additive research on regional keystones, their typologies. However, where the Bechers stood back from their industrial subjects, Redpath rushes in. With his lens seemingly pressed up against the cold metal, and as much detail described in these large prints as can be allowed, figurative form gives way to saturated coloration, patchwork texture, and abstracted line.

Despite this inverted distance, what remains of the Bechers's focus in Redpath's images is an attention to design in industrial form, and its ability to confuse the eye as it deteriorates into diagrammatic impressions. Photographing cooling towers, gas tanks, coal bunkers, and silos, the Bechers' attention was pulled to the symmetries and complexities of vast utilities (often poised on nimble legs), their potential for larger symmetries and abstractions. Captured on overcast days so as to be uncomplicated by shadow, these structures took on an airless quality, one attended by a deceptive lack of depth.

We've seen this exacting aesthetic inform the Düsseldorf school (think of Andreas Gursky's horizon-less dollar store printed at a scale that makes the eye spin; or Candida Höfer's vacant opera house, where the seats and aisles become so much spatial punctuation, so much depthless mazing). Through the work of Edward Burtynsky, the Bechers' influence can be felt in his wide-lens capture of industrial landscapes that push the subject to the remote edge of figurative description.

Redpath demonstrates a reflexive nod to these artists and practices – predecessors and contemporaries, both – one that can be perceived in the very prefix to his series' title, *Re-fined*. However, these latest images can be appreciated free of references, too, their painterly qualities inviting a surface reading whose reward lies in their aesthetic depth. Fish Kraft pictures the pocked and abraded skin of a tower (which, if you wanted less a reference, than, say, a lateral association, you needn't look further than Gerhard Richter and his palette-knife studies in abstract color). The royal blue mottles with a semi-opaque, sharp white, and the shading between them belies something like underpainting.

The depth produced in the tower's ribbing and slightly-vaulted roof creates an unsure topography, an uneasy volume, as the photographer has captured this in – like the Bechers did – a neutral, overcast light. A *tromp*



l'oeil is effected, where neither the tower's dimensionality, nor its distance from the tiled and rust-marked back wall, can be gauged with any surety. Losing this (as like, with one eye closed, we miss steps walking down stairs, we run into banisters), we are unmoored. Redpath has made sure of this, removing the horizon line, the sky, the ground beneath the tower. We are implicated as viewers floating before these industrial landscapes, untethered and un-affecting.

And this may be an inference bearing some greater, intended commentary. Because no matter how removed or "refined" its portrait, an industrial subject invites scrutiny, breeds mistrust (or perhaps there was a time when it bred an association with burgeoning economies). The more abstracted its subject becomes, the more distanced we are implicated for being, the more impotent and undemanding.

Unlike artists whose abstractions of industrial design are more clearly media reflections (I'm thinking of Gedi Sibony's metal paintings in the 56th Venice Biennale, or Marten Elder's "perceptual renderings" at Equinox), Redpath is bringing his viewers to the water's edge of abstraction, but no further. He still leaves the figure producing form. I think there is a reason for this: that we're being invited to consider our distance. It's an invitation apparent in that unnerving imbalance that occurs when you've lost the horizon line, in these images; a horizon line is all-important to our orientation. What happens when we don't know where we are in relation to something else? How does this unmoor us? How does a distance – or potential nearness – to a thing inflect how we feel? What defines us, what sets us apart?

It's interesting that Redpath should (be able to) disorient us through such exacting detail, his largescale prints depicting every nuance of these towers' skins, every crack and pock, every drip and brindle. Walter Benjamin wrote of the difference between nearness and farness, "The trace is appearance of a nearness, however far removed the thing that left it behind may be. The aura is appearance of a distance, however close the thing that calls it forth. In the trace, we gain possession of the thing; in the aura, it takes possession of us."<sup>1</sup> In Redpath's *Re-Fined*, we find the traces – the nearness – of a thing that unseats us, is ethically infirm, historically ruinous. The photographer, too, however, positions us at an uneasy distance – just far away enough to know it's too far to gain possession.

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<sup>1</sup>Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, 447

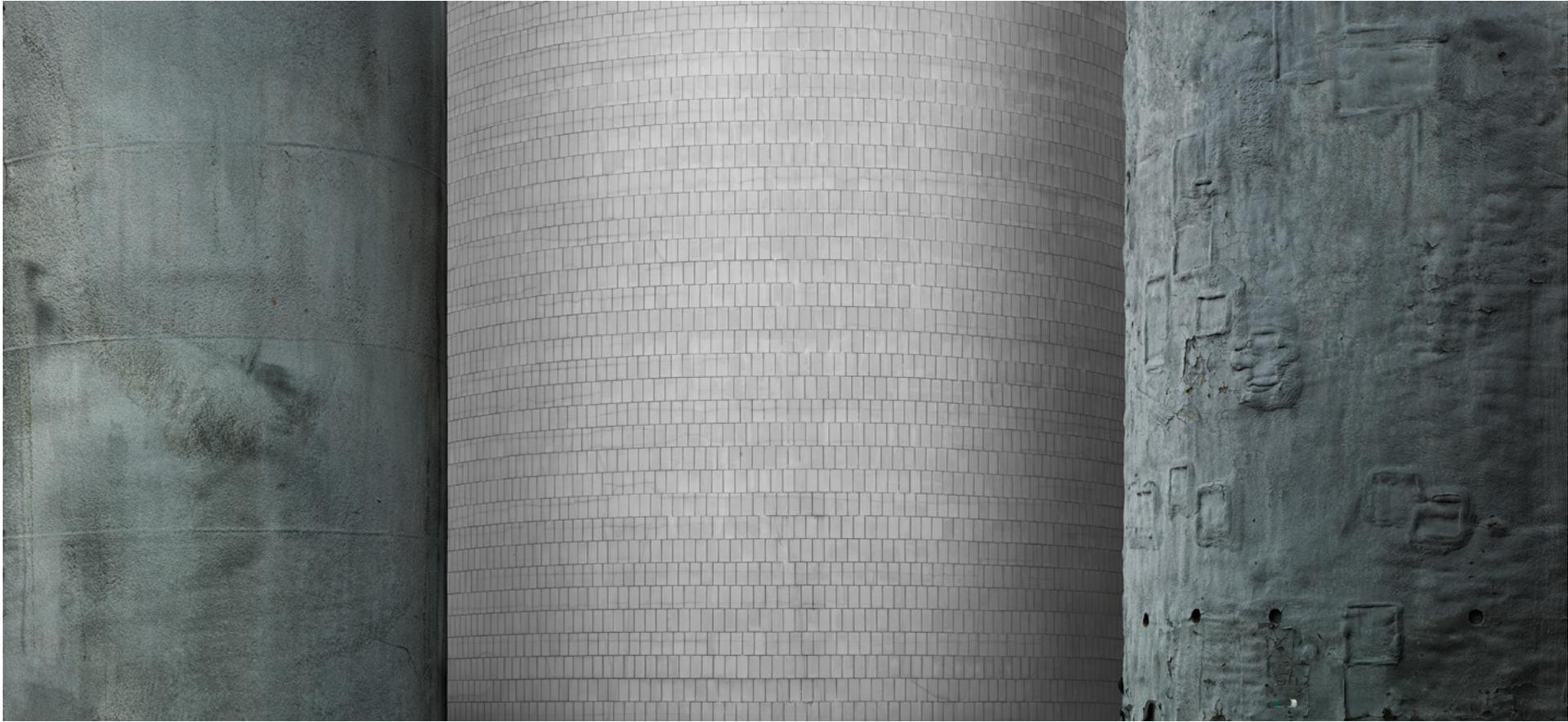


## RE·FINED\_ARTIST\_STATEMENT

Anthony Redpath both deepens and updates a photographic tradition. Drilling down into a contemporary landscape that's rooted in our industrial history, he positions his lens at an unnerving distance that disorients his viewer as it distills its subject. Redpath frames worn-down or vacant industrial buildings, speaking to the Düsseldorf and Vancouver Schools (most notably Bernd and Hilla Becher's "typologies," black-and-white photographic grids of industrial structures; but also Andreas Gursky and Candida Höfer's "depthless mazing") while pushing his subject to the brink of abstraction. However, as a critic has observed, "where the Bechers stood back from their industrial subjects, Redpath rushes in."

Photographing his sugar refineries, pulp mills, cooling towers, gas tanks, coal bunkers, and silos in neutral light, and cropping close to cut out the horizon line, Redpath reveals his subjects' complex ribbing, vaulting, and peeling skins. Seductive to the viewer at a distance, Redpath's compositions beckon the service of the mind further in.





**TILE TANK**  
44"by 96" – Edition of 7 – 2016





**SUGAR TRICKLE**  
53"by 84" – Edition of 7 – 2016





**SUGAR TOWER**  
64"by 84" – Edition of 7 – 2015









**ADDITIVE MIX**  
44"by 96" – Edition of 7 – 2016





**MINT CAST**  
50"by 96" – Edition of 7 – 2016





**FISH KRAFT**  
55" by 96" – Edition of 7 – 2015





**CEDAR STACKS**  
42"by 96" – Edition of 7 – 2015





**LIQUOR VESSELS**  
53"by 84" – Edition of 7 – 2016

