

S T E P H E N A L T H O U S E



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T O O L S A N D S H R O U D S

S E P T E M B E R 9 – N O V E M B E R 8, 2009

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S E P T E M B E R 17 – O C T O B E R 18, 2009

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This catalogue has been published in conjunction with the exhibitions

STEPHEN ALTHOUSE

TOOLS AND SHROUDS

SEPTEMBER 9 – NOVEMBER 8, 2009



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STEPHEN ALTHOUSE

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AU SILLON DE LA CHARRUE

SWORDS INTO PLOWSHARES

SEPTEMBER 17 – OCTOBER 18, 2009

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F O R E W O R D

FROM THE EARLIEST DAYS OF PHOTOGRAPHY, the pictorial documentation of the world around us has held infinite fascination as the subject for photographers. And from the beginning, the photographic image was as influential as the printed word. Even today, when we look at a photograph, we tend to “read” the image for its informational content. Stephen Althouse’s images can be read as metaphors for the interconnectedness of secular and spiritual life. His images combine the practical and symbolic, weaving a relationship between tools and textiles as venerated symbols of work and faith. Like medieval devotional relics and honorific textiles, Althouse’s tools and shrouds become symbols of power and reverence, engaging the viewer in a dialogue about history, humanity, tradition and spirituality.

Born in Washington DC in 1948, Althouse grew up in rural Bucks County, Pennsylvania, where he trained as a sculptor. The product of a Quaker education, Althouse received his MFA from Virginia Commonwealth University, Richmond, and studied sculpture at Tyler School of Art, Philadelphia. The sculptural tradition of making and manipulating subject matter is carried over in his photography, and is further explored in these enigmatic and powerful images. For 30 years, Althouse lived in Miami where he was a Professor of Fine Arts at Barry University, before returning to central Pennsylvania, where he lives and works creatively today.

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This exhibition presents Stephen Althouse’s most recent work as well as a series of powerful images which the artist created in 2003 and 2004 while serving as artist-in-residence at the Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art in Liège, Belgium, through a Fulbright Research Fellowship.

The Museum is pleased to share this exhibition and publication with a larger audience in both Canada and Germany. We feel it is important to show Stephen Althouse’s recent work and to create a scholarly catalogue that amplifies our understanding of his compelling images. For their very generous support of this publication, we thank Lawrence D. and Lucienne Lefebvre Glaubinger of The Glaubinger Foundation. We thank Dr. Eugene W. Metcalf, Jr. and Dr. Mark McPhail for their perceptive essay which constitutes a significant contribution to this publication. For their presentation of concurrent exhibitions of Stephen Althouse’s photography, we thank Jacqueline Hébert Stoneberger of Beaux-arts des Amériques in Montréal, and Werner Ruhnke of Galerie Ruhnke, Potsdam, outside Berlin, Germany. Lastly, we extend our heartfelt thanks to the Museum’s trustees and donors, who have demonstrated their commitment to the Museum in their support of the Museum’s ambitious and internationally-recognized exhibition program.

W E N D Y M. B L A Z I E R

Senior Curator, Boca Raton Museum of Art



WEANING HALTERS,¹ 2009

¹ *Weaning Halts*, 2009, pigmented digital print, 59 x 59 inches. Private Collection

SWORDS INTO PLOWSHARES

THE SPIRITUAL ECOLOGY OF STEPHEN ALTHOUSE

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DR. EUGENE W. METCALF, JR.

DR. MARK MCPHAIL

THE PHOTOGRAPHS OF STEPHEN ALTHOUSE transform familiar objects into symbols of human experience and spiritual striving. Althouse observes humanity through its artifactual leavings, creating haunting images of old and outworn things to ponder the nature of the world from which they have come. Individually posed and often shrouded in white cloth, the objects Althouse presents become monuments to the central activities of our species: the contradictory yet complementary human capacities for creation and destruction, for work and war. The ways in which these two practices are implicated in each other often escapes scrutiny, yet some photographers have successfully imagined and enacted this implicature in their work. Indeed, it was anxiety about the ways in which this complex relationship between war and work undermined human freedom that motivated the 20th century photographer Clarence John Laughlin to produce images that would “animate all things – even so called ‘inanimate’ objects – with the spirit of man.”²

² Quoted in Susan Sontag, *On Photography* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1978), 186.



AXE AND TAPESTRY, 2003

Like most of Althouse's photographs, *Axe and Tapestry*³ is a play of contrasts, both visually and in terms of the ideas it presents. The disparity between the lighted objects in the foreground and the darkened background emphasizes the singular nature of the objects, removing them from their everyday use and context, and emphasizing their iconic value. The contrast between the meaning of the two objects is equally stark. An implement of war and destruction, the hard and jagged-edged axe offers a harsh contrast to the soft and pliable tapestry, a product of some of the most significant human creations, the development of culture and art.

³ *Axe and Tapestry*, 2003, pigmented digital print, 42 x 31 inches. Collection of the Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art, Liège, Belgium; Art Museum, Miami University, Oxford, Ohio

Laughlin thought that objects held within them the potential for creativity and transformation that is at the heart of the art of photography, and believed that his need to anthropomorphize material things arose from “a profound fear and disquiet over the accelerating mechanization of man’s life; and the resulting attempts to stamp out individuality in all the sphere’s of man’s activity – this whole process being one of the dominant expressions of our military-industrial society.”⁴ Laughlin held that the creative photographer “sets free the human *contents* of objects; and imparts humanity to the inhuman world around him.”⁵ The quest to find impulses of the human spirit within the material world also motivates Stephen Althouse. His photographs of objects celebrate, in his own words, those “experiences and interactions...which are founded upon the extreme positive or negative attributes of humankind.”⁶ This emphasis on contrasts reveals itself in all aspects of Althouse’s work ranging from technique to subject matter.

Like Laughlin, Althouse sees objects as repositories of meaning, symbolic containers of the complexities and contradictions of the changing human experience. Althouse is a recycler of artifactual meanings, a semiotic broker who reassembles the outworn material fragments of culture by reconstructing the significance of old objects. In our contemporary world, where identity has become a fleeting consumable product and objects are valued more for their symbolic function than their use, the practice of recycling has become a crucial activity in the process of defining ourselves. We are what we acquire and display around us at any given time. It is not only identity, established and reestablished with each exchange, which is no longer fixed and stable, it is also the meaning of the objects which give identity its physical form. In this new and expanded mode of consumption, said to be the hallmark of postmodern society, all objects become commodities whose meanings are susceptible to multiple uses and meanings. Consequently, there can be no autonomous self or meaning, and recycling – the process of dismantling, reconnecting, and reassembling objects, images and ideas – is the best metaphor for the way in which identity and meaning can be constructed and understood.

The power of Althouse’s images begins with his discovery of old objects that, for him, seem to embody some special sense of memory or mystery. Presenting these objects in ways that often juxtapose their original everyday use and significance with other, more obscure, possibilities, the artist induces a dialogue between disparate meanings and the diverse identities they represent. Althouse enables this conversation by enshrining his found objects in large-scale, minimalist compositions that transcend the ordinary and turn the everyday into the epic. The drama of Althouse’s images also arises from the unique photographic

⁴ Quoted in Susan Sontag, *On Photography* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1978), 187.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Stephen Althouse, interview by authors, 2 January 2006. All quotations contained within this essay are referenced herein.

method that he has developed to produce his black and white inkjet prints. Combining both traditional and digital photographic technologies, he creates an interplay of light, shadow and contrast to render his subjects in mesmerizing detail against a palette of glowing whites and velvety black shadows. In *Rake I*,⁷ for example, Althouse's image of a sheet tied to the tines of an old wooden rake is presented in minute detail with dramatically contrasting light and shadow. Transposed into a transcendent signifier, the two mundane objects become emblems of crucifixion and assume mythical and sacred meanings that compound their secular antecedents.



RAKE I, 2003

⁷ *Rake I*, 2003, pigmented digital print, 42 x 31 inches. Collection of the Museum of Contemporary Photography, Chicago, Illinois; Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art, Liège, Belgium

RAISED IN RURAL PENNSYLVANIA, Althouse developed an experiential appreciation for the relationship between the people who worked the land and the equipment they used, as well as an understanding of human livelihood that focuses more on intrinsic rewards than material gain. Watching people make things fascinated him, and he came to feel that each object told a special tale. Like the worn wooden stairs in the old stone farmhouse where he grew up, each artifact spoke of the history and humanity of the people who had made and used it. He was especially enamored of things made by hand, of the careful and laborious process of their manufacture. In his youth, he often visited the Mercer Museum in nearby Doylestown where he studied hundreds of early hand-made tools, the implements of a life before mechanization. Yet even in these early years, Althouse began to have a sense that the products of human labor might not always be sanguine. Being Quaker educated and registered as a conscientious objector during the Viet Nam War, he was deeply disturbed by the casualties and deaths caused in this conflict by the tools of warfare.

Althouse's infatuation with the work of the hands was also encouraged when, as a young adult, he began to travel to Mexico and South America. Intrigued with the handicrafts, the ancient architecture and the artisans that he encountered in these places, Althouse became even more interested in the emotional and cultural history encoded in hand-made objects. He also became fascinated with the image and idea of hands themselves as metaphors of human creativity. On one particular trip to Mexico, Althouse had an experience with his own hands which would forever mark his life. Standing on a sidewalk in a small village, Althouse remembers hearing someone pleading in Spanish "Help me...I'm stuck." Looking down he saw a ragged beggar who, having no legs, propelled himself on a wheeled wooden platform by pushing with his hands. The platform was stuck in the gutter and, not being able to lift himself onto the curb, the man reached up his hands to the artist. Instinctively, Althouse grabbed the heavy work gloves which the man wore and hoisted him out of the gutter. "Is there anything else I can do?" Althouse then murmured nervously, suddenly frightened by his vulnerability in this intimate contact with the disheveled man. "My hands...they hurt," pleaded the man, now taking off his gloves to expose his gnarled, twisted, and crippled hands, wrecked by pounding the pavement. "I can't move my fingers. Would you crack the joints for me?" Hesitating, and then choking down a wave of revulsion, Althouse massaged the man's deformed hands slowly becoming less fearful in the process. "His eyes calmed me," says Althouse. "He watched my face the whole time I worked on his hands. His eyes told me when I got in a good crack and when it was time to move onto another joint. Although we exchanged few words, our silent dialogue was lengthy and profound." When Althouse was done, the beggar thanked him and scuttled off down the sidewalk, turning once to wave before disappearing around a corner. The event was, for Althouse, a moving and epiphanal spiritual experience – a laying on of hands. It symbolized for him the generative potential of humanity expressed through the greatest of human implements, the hands. From that point on, many of the artist's series of works would include hands in one form or another. Yet

increasingly, as he grew older, Althouse was consumed with the knowledge that the results of human labor could be harmful as well as generative. While hands can be used to build and create, they also wield the sword, and in Althouse's art they would come to represent both possibilities. Consequently, while hands are often portrayed in quiet, reverential gestures,⁸ they are also represented as gauntlets, heavy metal gloves made to shield and protect their wearers in times of warfare.⁹

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SILVER HANDS, 1988

⁸ *Silver Hands*, 1988, gelatin silver print, 19 x 15 inches. Collection of Harvard University Photography Archives, Cambridge, Massachusetts; New York University, Tisch School of the Arts, New York; Boca Raton Museum of Art Permanent Collection 1989.057. Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Horace Shuman

⁹ *Gauntlets*, 1994, silver gelatin print, 23 x 19 inches. Collection of The Royal Photographic Society, Bath, England



GAUNTLETS, 1994

Stephen Althouse did not begin his artistic career as a photographer. Originally trained as a sculptor, he created large found object assemblages that in some ways resembled the farm implements he had seen growing up. Then, in the midst of earning an MFA in sculpture at Virginia Commonwealth University, he took a course in photography. Up to that point, Althouse had only used a camera to document his works, yet increasingly his photographs seemed more intriguing to him than the sculptural works themselves. Consequently, by the time he graduated from VCU with a degree in sculpture, Althouse had sat in on virtually all the courses offered by the department of photography as well, and he felt that his best and most interesting work was not his sculptural assemblages but the pictures he took of them.

Upon first glance, one is tempted to interpret Althouse's photographs primarily in terms of their aesthetic qualities, as what critic Terry Barrett has called "aesthetically evaluative." Yet, they are

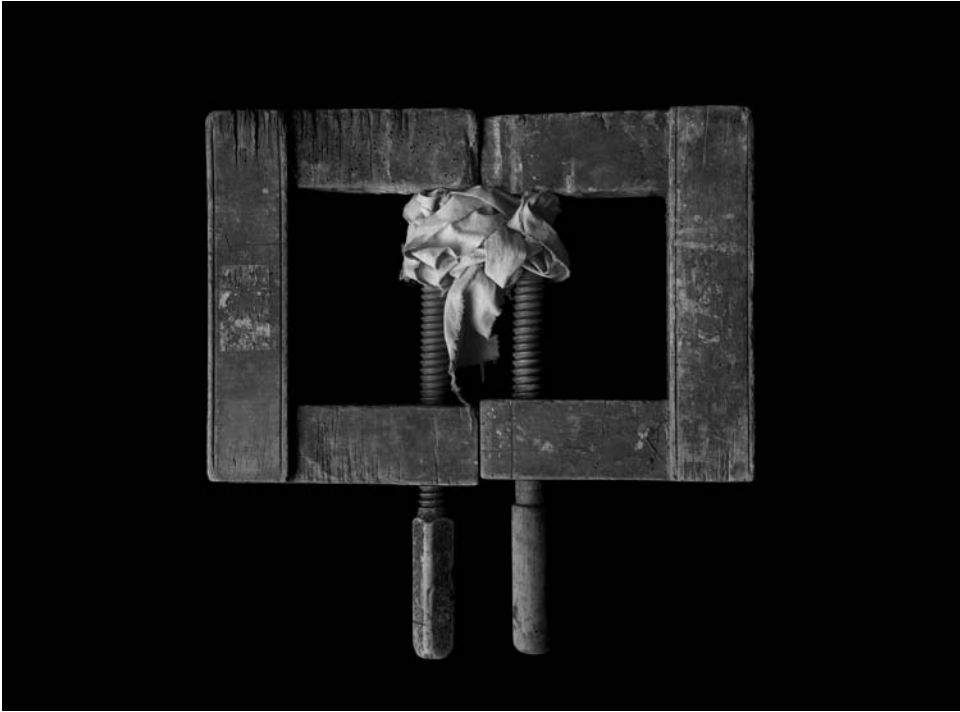
also highly interpretive and theoretical. While the images are undoubtedly beautiful as representations of objects in and of themselves, Althouse's photographs call for more than aesthetic appreciation and fall squarely within the critical framework of what Barrett describes as interpretive: "Interpretive photographs" he writes, "are self expressive and reveal...the worldviews of the photographers who make them. They are exploratory and not necessarily logical, and sometimes they overtly defy logic. They are usually dramatic rather than subtle and are generally concerned with formal excellence and good print quality."¹⁰ Barrett's description is particularly useful for reading Althouse's photographs because his work is so intimately connected to Althouse's own sense of personal history and identity, and his ongoing struggle to find balance between seemingly opposing conditions: between lightness and darkness, destruction and creation, and even the contrasting technologies of silver and digital photography.

12 This focus on finding balance further suggests that Althouse's photographs might also be considered in terms of their theoretical impulses. As Barrett explains, theoretical photographs "comment on issues about art and art making, about the politics of art, about modes of representations, and other theoretical issues about photography and photographing."¹¹ For Althouse, photographing things is as much about blindness as it is about seeing, as much about the surface of the image as the textures of hidden meanings beneath these surfaces, as much about the abstracted objects as the embodied experiences of their makers and users. There is, for Althouse, no such thing *as the thing in and of itself*: it is always connected to contexts of human action and activity, to the lived experiences of himself and others. Instead of separating us from these experiences, Althouse's photographs invite us to explore their mysteries, and to contemplate the stories and histories of the people that created them, and ultimately to see some part of ourselves in the lives of others.

Althouse's search for balance can be seen in two series of photographs, separated by a decade but sharing common stylistic conventions and technical imperatives, that contribute to the evolution of his search for a reconciliation of extreme contrasts. The first series, consisting primarily of images of the weapons of war, was produced during the late 1990s, and reflects a tension between Althouse's pacifism and his fascination with the aesthetic beauty of these objects. The second series, consisting of farm tools which Althouse acquired and photographed while living in Belgium in 2003-2004, expresses his anxieties about the ways in which mechanization has undermined human toil and the dignity of work, even as the images themselves embody the powerful possibilities of technical innovation. Connecting the two separate series is not only an emphasis on attention to detail that is brought out by the use of light and shadow, but also a key symbol, *the shroud*, a device that moves Althouse's photographs beyond the expression of aesthetic beauty and toward the beauty of interpretive and theoretical complexity.

¹⁰ Terry Barrett, *Criticizing Photographs: An Introduction to Understanding Images* (New York: McGraw Hill, 2006), 78.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 100.



CLAMPS, 2003

Comprised primarily of objects representative of Althouse's past, *Clamps*¹² represents the artist's view that the mysteries of the human spirit can be discovered within the artifacts of the material world. Interpreting two old woodworking tools and a balled strip of sheeting as metaphors for the intangible essence of humanity clenched within the artifacts of human labor, Althouse utilizes contrasting shades of light and dark, the magnification of detail, and the massive size of his image to turn the photograph of two old tools into a dramatic comment on the capacity of art to capture and encompass the deep and significant meaning beneath the worn and battered surface of things.

IN HER CRITICALLY ACCLAIMED WORK *On Photography*, Susan Sontag observes: "The powers of photography have in effect dePlatonized our understanding of reality, making it less and less plausible to reflect upon our experience according to the distinction between images and things, between copies and originals."¹³ Sontag's critique of photography

¹³ Sontag, op. cit., 179.

¹² *Clamps*, 2003, pigmented digital print, 59 x 87 inches. Collection of the Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art, Liège, Belgium

as an ideological practice constrained by the materialism of capitalism and the dehumanizing forces of industrialism revealed many of the same anxieties experienced earlier in the century by Clarence John Laughlin, and anticipated the interpretive and theoretical impulses that have emerged in the works of Stephen Althouse. Sontag contends that “the force of photographic images comes from their being material realities in their own right, richly informative deposits left in the wake of whatever emitted them, potent meanings for turning the tables on reality – for turning *it* into a shadow.”¹⁴ Largely concerned with the ways in which photography sanitizes human atrocities and suffering by abstracting these experiences from their concreteness in the “real world,” Sontag concludes, “If there can be a better way for the real world to include the one of images, it will require an ecology not only of real things but of images as well.”¹⁵

Stephen Althouse’s photographs bring us closer to such an ecology. Like Sontag, Althouse was deeply troubled by the depersonalizing powers of industrial society, as well as the dehumanizing impact of war, its capacity to abstract and disassociate the terror and trauma of human conflict. While his interest in objects of work is rooted in his upbringing, his preoccupation with objects of warfare dates back to the 1960s and early 1970s, and his resistance to the war in Viet Nam. Yet it was also during this period that Althouse began to develop an important visual technique and metaphorical device which would not only help him confront and explicate the machinery of war, but also eventually suggest the mystery of the deep and complex meanings he discovered in the everyday artifacts of human use.

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In 1970, while in the Prado Museum in Spain, Althouse came across a painting of Saint Veronica holding the veil with which she had wiped the anguished face of Jesus who was on his way to Calvary. The image had a profound impact on Althouse, who would effectively, and increasingly, invoke its central icon – the shroud – in many of his later works. Representing to the artist the mystery of human life and possibility, the shroud particularly attracted Althouse because of its mysterious qualities, its subtle textures and juxtapositions of extreme light and shadow which signified the sense of contrast and contradiction he so deeply experienced. “I felt that the cloth might add a degree of spirituality in my work and help to imply the mystery that I feel,” he explains.

Although he created a number of images utilizing cloth in the 1970s, Althouse’s first major photograph which focused on the shroud was *Bedscape*,¹⁶ completed in 1984. In this photograph the artist uses cloth to embody a sense of mystery and hidden meaning, as it transforms an everyday object into a haunting interplay of light and shadow that

¹⁴ Ibid., 180.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ *Bedscape*, 1984, gelatin silver print, 15 x 15 inches. Collection of the Museum of Fine Arts of Ixelles, Brussels, Belgium; Boca Raton Museum of Art Permanent Collection 1989.058. Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Horace Shuman



BEDSCAPE, 1984

encompasses an entire spectrum of blacks, whites, and grays. In *Bedscape*, the folds of a sheet draped over an unmade bed transform into an almost human form – perhaps someone crucified, perhaps scarecrow, perhaps angel – a twisted body flowing from an enlarged pillow, its arms and legs haphazardly stretched to each side on a bed framed by darkness, illuminated only by the light of a wicker shaded window. Throughout the image, the dynamic range of contrasts between lightness and darkness enabled by the cloth give texture and significance to mundane objects of everyday life, inspiring them with new possibilities of meaning. A metaphor for work unfinished, the unmade bed may also signify a labor commenced by whoever has left this pallet to go off to work in the world. Yet there is a hint of disquietude here as well. Twisted and bundled, the cloth gives a sense not of a serene and untroubled repose, but of a respite marked by anguish and anxiety. Much like the landscape of our experience, the territory of Althouse's *Bedscape* offers no unambiguous and safe sanctuary, no quiet and undisturbed haven from dark fears. *Bedscape* anticipates Althouse's use of objects to signify human presence through absence: "Even though you don't see people in my images, they all relate to people," he explains.

As an early example of Althouse's obsession with textured objects, *Bedscape* foreshadows the search for technical innovations which began to preoccupy the artist in these same years as an attempt to find a way to create images whose minute details, high contrast, and larger size could even more effectively reveal and encompass their symbolic meaning. His first breakthrough, resulting in a highly detailed, high contrast darkroom print, came as the result of a mistake. According to Althouse:

In the 1980s I photographed a straight image of Santa Lucia, the patron saint of the blind, holding a plate of eye balls, that I felt reflected my own sense of being able to see and create. The image was badly overexposed and I tried to compensate through underdevelopment of the film. Regardless of my efforts, the resulting negatives were super dense and flat – too dense to print with standard equipment. About a year later I enlarged the negative with a point-light source enlarger, and it printed beautifully and differently. It was very crisp, and the grain was so sharp and plentiful that it almost lacked any smooth continuous gray tones. It roughly looked like a pointillist drawing in a microscopic way. It had the quality of an aquatint etching.

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Although satisfied with the print, Althouse regarded it as an anomaly, and his attempts to print his normal negatives with the point-light source enlarger resulted in failure, so he returned to the conventional darkroom printing of his images. In the late 1990s, however, spurred by his continuing desire to produce large, sharply defined images, Althouse systematically revisited the processes that had created the Santa Lucia print by purposefully overexposing his film before underdeveloping it in special developers, and then printing the resulting negatives on the point-light source enlarger, a device sometimes used for aerial photography to exaggerate sharpness but seldom for normal printing due to its inherent difficulties. "The effect was astonishing," Althouse recounts. "The prints were so extremely sharp, and the large acute grain of the film added an unusually wonderful texture." They were also larger, in some cases as big as 30 by 55 inches. Excited by his success, in 1999 the artist began shooting a remarkable series of photographs which represent his interest in the relationship between his use of new darkroom technology and his ability to more fully express the ideas that he was struggling to represent. I was "technologically and metaphorically working with new ideas," he says, "and the technology enabled the metaphor."

Most of the images in Althouse's 1999 series have three things in common. Featuring the implements of war – swords, helmets, gas masks, gauntlets, and even a stealth bomber – they employ not only the artist's newly developed photographic techniques, but also the metaphorical device of the shroud to suggest a deepening concern with, and increasing ability to represent, metaphorical meanings. For in these pictures, the weapons are generally completely covered and

shrouded. Indeed, the series of images reveals a use of shrouds that signifies Althouse's ambivalence about the ways in which the objects of war can both reveal and conceal tensions between the positive and negative aspects of human creativity and conflict. As hand-made objects, Althouse finds artifacts like swords and axes intriguing and beautiful, yet he also recognizes their potential as tools of destruction. Because of this, his shrouds serve to (re)cover their aesthetic beauty by masking and softening their literal and figurative hardness.

In *Shrouded Gauntlet*,¹⁷ Althouse blurs the boundaries between the weapon and the material that enfolds it, softening the hardened steel of the glove so that its contours become almost unrecognizable. The folds of cloth cling to the hand sensuously, figuratively tying up and

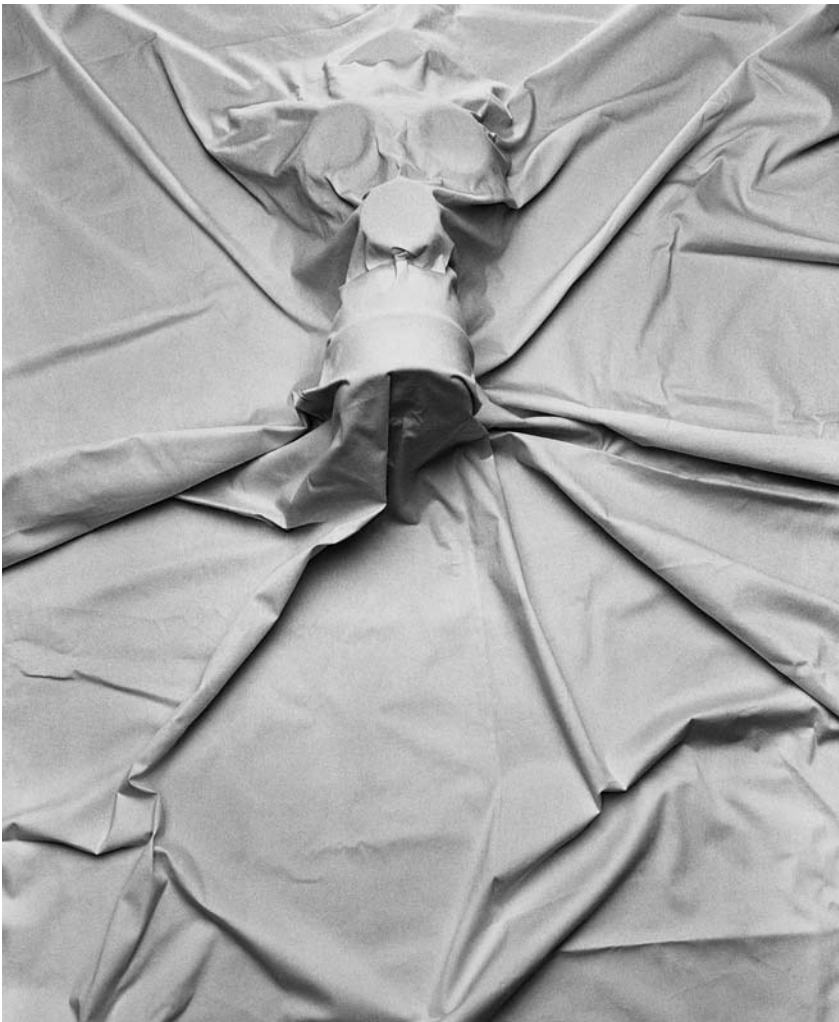


SHROUDED GAUNTLET, 1999

¹⁷ *Shrouded Gauntlet*, 1999, gelatin silver print, 30 x 23 inches. Private Collection

concealing this tool of warfare, and transforming it into an object almost indistinguishable from the softer cloth that contains it. The extreme contrasts of hardened steel and silken thread are resolved through the contrasting interplay of light and shadow, and emerge out of the darkened background as a new and transformed singularity.

Of the images Althouse created in his 1999 series, none are more striking than those of gas masks. As in many of his photographs of the tools of war, the power of Althouse's images of gas masks is due, in no small part, to his aesthetic fascination and appreciation for the objects



MASK VI, 1999

he (re)produces which conflicts with his understanding of their social and moral consequences. According to Althouse, "As a pacifist, I first saw the gas mask as a symbol of what was going on in Viet Nam, but even as I experienced aesthetic pleasure from the masks, I was also terrified of the implications of their use." In *Mask VI*,¹⁸ Althouse uses cloth as if it were itself a gas, delicately shrouding the mask completely as it struggles to present its hideous visage through the folded cloth. The cloth cover spiders out from the captured gas mask's gas canister toward the edges of the frame, exploding outward in wrinkled grayscale tendrils. In this image the gas mask, a grim symbol of warfare, takes on an enlarged meaning as it comes to signify also the inevitability of human demise, the death that sits waiting at the center of a web which will ultimately trap us all.

While Althouse is well aware of the destructive potential of the objects he presented, his (re)covering of them also searched for some positive potential. His own views on war motivated his attempts to metaphorically transform the objects in his photographs, to somehow change weapons of war into larger signifiers of human meaning: According to Althouse, "I think that in this series I was trying, in some way, to lay those weapons to rest, to find in them some positive meaning." In this sense, Althouse has conceived an ecology of the image that contests Sontag's early critique of photography, and more closely approximates her more recent reading of the possibility of photographs to bring us closer to our own humanity and the humanity of others. In *On Photography*, she expressed a deep concern with the ways in which photography produced a saturation of imagery that numbed the viewer to the realities of human struggle and suffering. Aestheticized and abstracted from the immediacy of experience, the image became little more than a fragment divorced from concrete moral and ethical concerns. Althouse attempts to reconnect us to those concerns through metaphorical and technical artistry, establishing a middle ground between the aesthetics and politics of human agency and action. Like the later Sontag, he forces us to think "not only about the uses and meanings of images, but about the nature of war, the limits of sympathy, and the obligations of conscience."¹⁹ But unlike Sontag, Althouse refuses to cast these aspects of our humanity in black and white, even as he depicts them within the representative space of these extreme visual contrasts. Althouse's ecology of the image opens up new ways of both being and knowing, of seeing and understanding, and reconciles if only in their interpretive and theoretical possibilities, the opposing forces of the human capacities for creation and destruction.

¹⁸ *Mask VI*, 1999, gelatin silver print, 30 x 23 inches. Private Collection

¹⁹ Review of Susan Sontag's *Regarding the Pain of Others* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2004) available from <http://www.macmillanacademic.com/Academic/search/SearchBookDisplay.asp?BookKey=1336170>; Internet; accessed 8 July 2009.

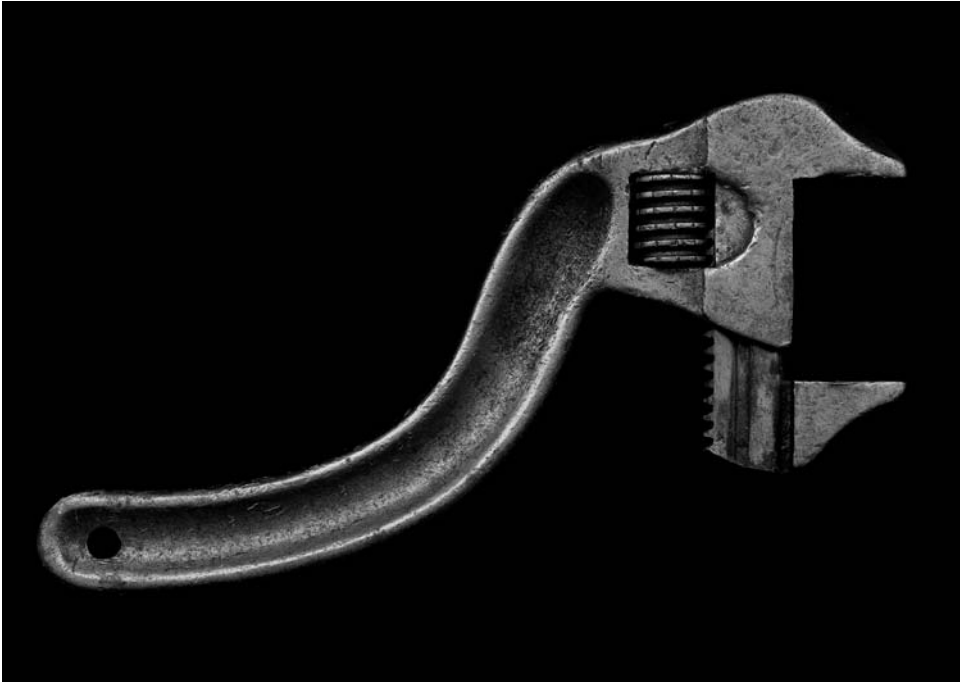
DESPITE THE FACT THAT THE IMAGES in Althouse's 1999 series achieved the highly detailed rendering of contrasts and textures that he desired, they were not able to sustain the same level of quality when printed in larger sizes, and in order to make his photographs as materially and symbolically powerful as possible, Althouse wanted to print to a larger scale. However the technical difficulties he encountered trying to do this in the darkroom were substantial. Although his point-light source enlarger was able to create large images, it was still limited in terms of the size it could produce, and, even more important, it was extremely labor intensive. Due to these difficulties, Althouse continued to search for a technical process which would enable his vision, and he finally found it in the new techniques enabled by digital processing. Shifting from traditional darkroom printing techniques to the use of scanners, emerging large format black and white inkjet printing technology, and computerized manipulations of exposure, Althouse was able to achieve the intricate detail, subtle contrast and enormous size he sought in his images, some of which could now be as large as 42 by 60 inches.

This technical breakthrough occurred between 2000 and 2003, and it was accompanied by another change in his work as well. Reflecting a shift in the ways Althouse viewed the objects of human making, his photographs now moved away from a focus on the objects of war and toward an emphasis on the implements of work. These new images would be produced in 2003-2004, during a remarkably creative period Althouse spent living in Belgium.

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In his work done in Belgium, Althouse turned, almost exclusively, to examining tools reminiscent of his agrarian youth, to old farm implements and tools like horse bridles, rakes, wrenches, axes, saws, and clamps. This new focus was occasioned particularly by the artist's response to the new circumstances in which he found himself. Living and working in a rural setting much like that of his youth and surrounded by people who seemed, to him, to be less influenced by mass consumer culture, Althouse rediscovered the memories, activities and artifacts of his early life. However, now painfully aware of the dual nature of human industry and the uses of the objects it produces, he presents an equivocal view of the meaning and consequences of labor and its relationship to our sense of humanity.

With this rediscovery of his early life, Althouse approached the objects he photographed in Belgium with the sensibilities of a sculptor. Finding objects in flea markets and the surrounding countryside, he took them to his studio where he could ponder at length and then carefully arrange them. He photographed his assemblages against a black background with large format film to produce hyper-detail before being scanned and digitalized. Imbued with a sensual materiality, the resulting images revel in the physicality of the objects they capture, in their scale, patina and texture. But the images in these photographs are conceptual as well. By geographically and visually removing the artifacts he



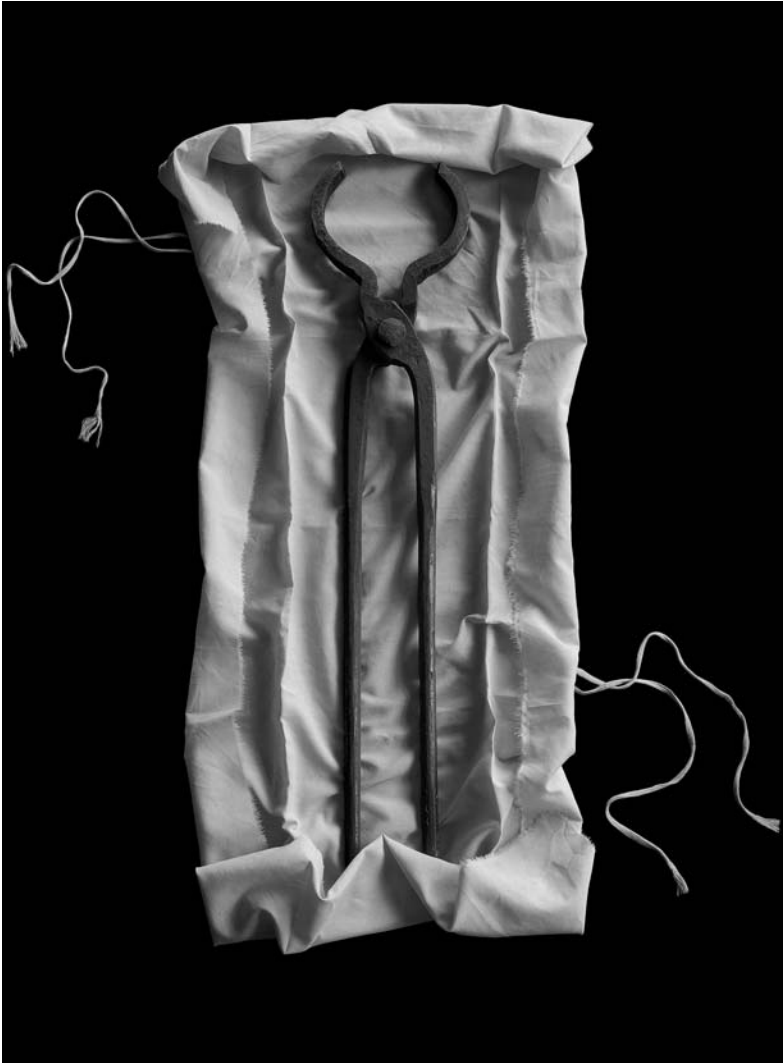
ADJUSTABLE WRENCH, 2003

One of the photographs created by Althouse in Belgium, *Adjustable Wrench*²⁰ recaptures the feeling of the artifacts of Althouse's youth and signals a turning away from creating images of war to a concern with representing the implements of honorable toil and labor.

photographed from their original cultural and vocational worlds, Althouse transforms these objects of use into abstract, iconic images. They are powerful metaphors which point beyond their corporality to reify the ideas which have always been at the center of Althouse's creative world.

This metaphorical significance is powerfully expressed in a pair of photographs entitled *Sacred Tongs* and *Closed Tongs*. Made around the same time and featuring similar objects, the two pieces represent the opposing poles of Althouse's feelings about the meaning of human labor and its tools. The photographs were inspired by the artist's meeting with a metal worker. "He was laboring in a cold dark metal shop," says Althouse, "and although it was winter, he was dripping with sweat and soot as he used his tongs to handle glowing hot metal. As I watched and talked with him, I began reminiscing about my younger years when I did

²⁰ *Adjustable Wrench*, 2003, pigmented digital print, 42 x 62 inches. Collection of the Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art, Liège, Belgium

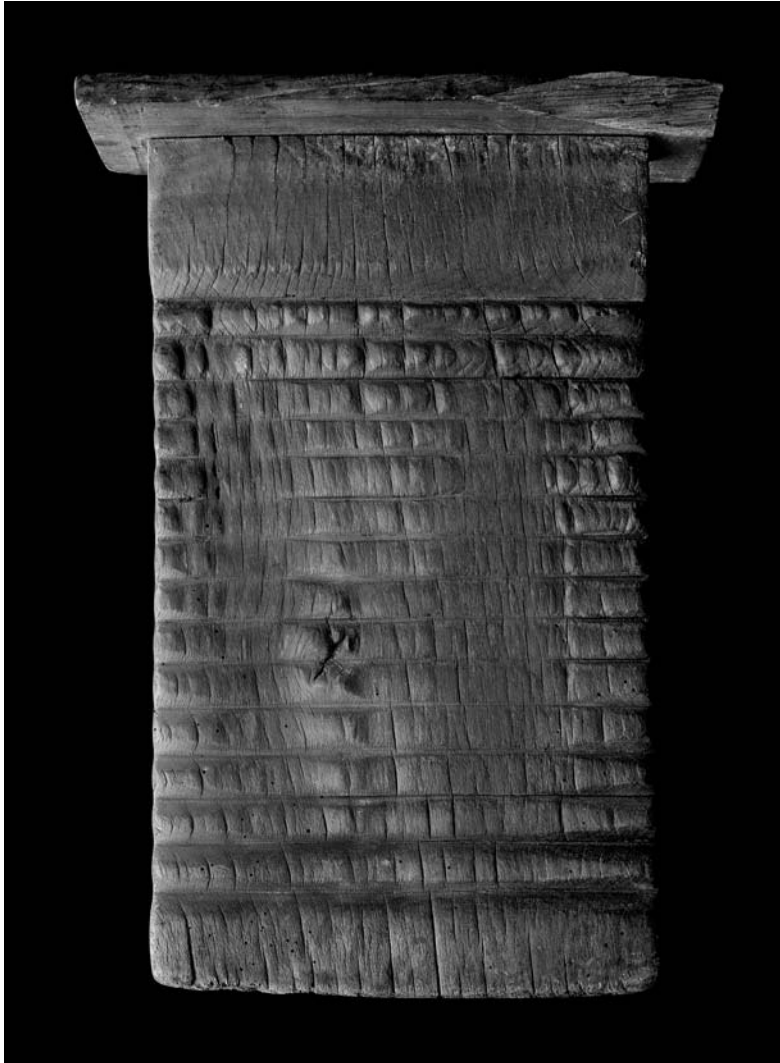


SACRED TONGS, 2004

similar labor with my late grandfather working at the stone quarry. It opened a floodgate of memories and emotions. The laborer saw me staring at his tools. He carefully presented them to me in a gesture of a sacred offering."

In *Sacred Tongs*²¹ Althouse swaddles and presents one of the tools he was given in a pristine, white wrapping. As the title suggests, this binding mysteriously transforms a common and outworn artifact into a magical, ritual talisman. No longer simply an old tool, the tongs

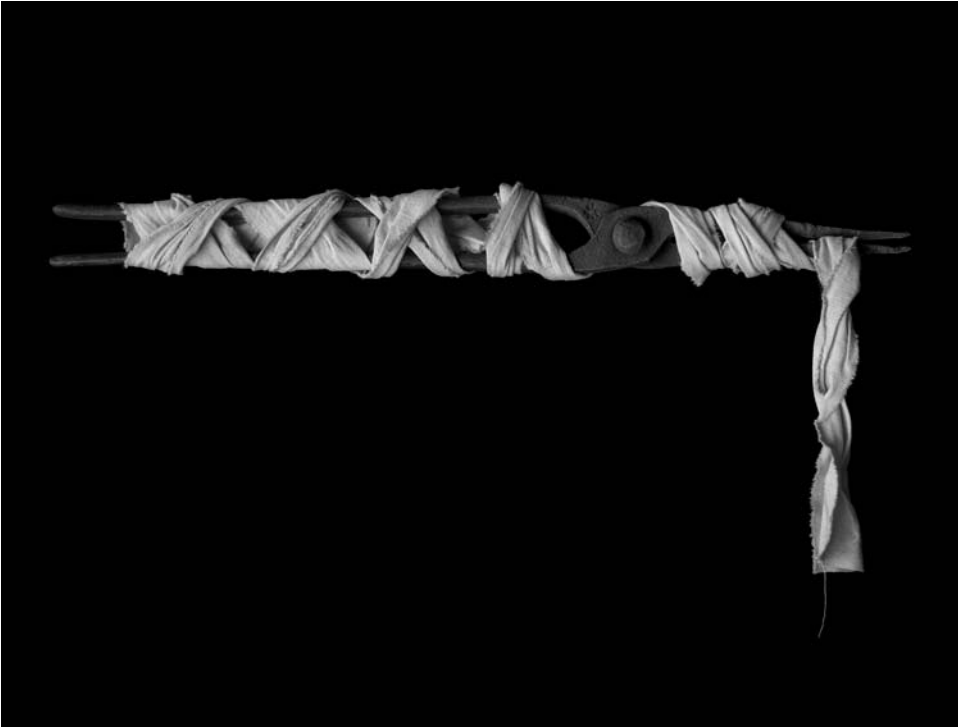
²¹ *Sacred Tongs*, 2004, pigmented digital print, 42 x 31 inches. Collection of the Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art, Liège, Belgium, Art Museum, Miami University, Oxford, Ohio



WASHBOARD, 2003

become an amulet which represents the dignity and humanity of the worker whose life flows through the implement. This theme is presented in a number of other works done by Althouse in the same period. In a photograph entitled *Washboard*,²² for example, the artist documents the human meaning of an old oak washboard given to him by an elderly neighbor. Pictured in high relief, the once sharp ridges of the implement have been worn almost flat by the generations of women whose hard and necessary labor has rubbed and scrubbed its ridged surface to near-smoothness.

²² *Washboard*, 2003, pigmented digital print, 42 x 31 inches. Collection of the Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art, Liège, Belgium



CLOSED TONGS, 2004

In *Closed Tongs*²³ Althouse offers a darker metaphor for human work and identity. Securely trussed and gagged with a binding of dirty cloth strips, the tongs in this photograph are depicted as immobilized and mute. Rendered useless, they may represent thwarted human endeavor. Unlike the other tongs given to Althouse by the metal worker, this tool seems to signify how securely we can be bound by limiting conceptions – of work, of life and of human possibility – and how difficult it is to break free.

To help interpret the meaning of everyday objects, Althouse has left clues. Believing that we are blinded by our propensity to mistake surface appearance for the true state of things, the artist has encrypted enigmatic phrases and digitally placed them on many of his images. Remnants of what Althouse was contemplating when he created the image, they represent signs which point to a possible reading of his representation. For example, in the photograph entitled *Hammer with Braille*,²⁴ Althouse has inscribed the Latin phrase “Dona nobis,” or “give us,” in Braille on the head of the hammer. Utilizing the language of the blind, a language

²³ *Closed Tongs*, 2004, pigmented digital print, 59 x 87 inches. Collection of the Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art, Liège, Belgium; Art Museum, Miami University, Oxford, Ohio

²⁴ *Hammer with Braille*, 2003, pigmented digital print, 42 x 31 inches. Collection of the Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art, Liège, Belgium; Art Galleries of Lehigh University, Bethlehem, Pennsylvania

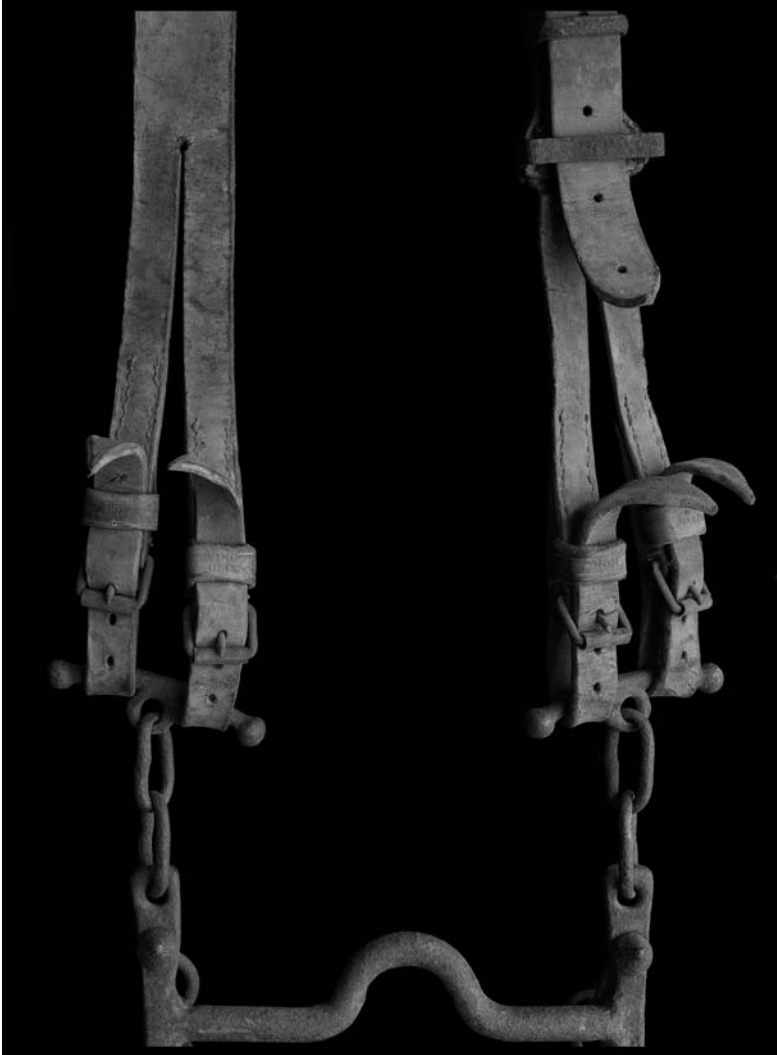


HAMMER WITH BRAILLE, 2003

communicated through the hands, the artist literally turns his text into a part of the artifact. Appearing to be an element of the hammer's texture, the Braille message is something to be felt and not read. The meaning of the message is much like a fragmentary prayer, an inchoate plea made by the user of the tool for all of us.

The practice of leaving meaningful hints is continued by Althouse on many other objects in his Belgian series. In *Bridle*²⁵ the artist has inscribed "In Vinculis Non Valeo" or "In chains I

²⁵ *Bridle*, 2003, pigmented digital print, 42 x 31 inches. Collection of the Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art, Liège, Belgium



BRIDLE, 2003

an Unable" on the cracked leather pieces of this ancient tool. Echoing the theme of *Closed Tongs*, this work uses a bridle as a metaphor for the powerful forces that often overwhelm and control our lives. Like beasts of burden, we often engage in work that is not our own which mires us in illusion and slavery.

While in *Sacred Tongs* and *Washboard*, Althouse presents a positive and optimistic view of the nature and consequences of labor, his negative vision of work expressed in *Closed Tongs*, *Hammer with Braille* and *Bridle* suggests the other side of the artist's double consciousness. Yet, like the objects he uses in his photographs, Althouse's dualistic view of human labor is itself an artifact he dismantles and reconstructs.

A dominant Western way of conceptualizing the nature of things, the idea of dualism suggests that reality consists of two basic principles or categories that work in opposition to each other. Articulated theologically in terms of good and evil and philosophically as the dichotomy between mind and body, this view is popularly expressed by the general tendency to organize experience in terms of two opposing and separate categories, an "either/or" way of thinking. Despite the fact that this reductionist view can limit experience and blind us to a more open and creative perception of life's possibilities, it is a dominant epistemology underlying what we understand as the normal "common sense" or "logical" way of understanding the world.

Indeed, Susan Sontag's early exploration of photography, which so cogently critiqued the ways in which images can undermine our humanity, may have fallen prey to rendering photography's potential for human transformation in unnecessarily dualistic terms. Focusing only on the aesthetics and ideology of images of war, Sontag's critique failed to look beneath their dark and troubling contours to seek some possible symbolic beauty in their material ugliness. However Althouse's view has not been so limited. Taking Sontag's call for an ecology of the image in new and provocative directions, he has literally and figuratively reframed the objects of struggle and conflict, and transformed the ideologically sterile aesthetics of art for art's sake into a fertile environment of spiritually and morally rich possibilities. He has done this by recycling, an activity which alters the organization of everyday experience and transgresses the assumptions of logic and common sense.

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Recycling is a potentially revolutionary activity; for, as folklorist Susan Stewart argues in her study of nonsense, it disrupts the usual order of the world and transforms the commonplace into a new reality. According to Stewart, nonsense is that activity "by which the world is disorganized and reorganized."²⁶ A product of the relationship between the reasonable world from which it draws its materials and the nonsensical world created by their unexpected recombination, the recycled object, like the nonsense phrase, decontextualizes and recontextualizes – and thus remakes – meaning. Consequently, as a form of nonsense, Althouse's work creates "a model for interpretation, for arranging perception, which at its profoundest point does not so much make its members 'see into the life of things' as it enables them to remake the life of things."²⁷ In Althouse's art, the possibility of "remaking things" is signified by his use of shrouds and their transformative power.

In one of his most enigmatic and nonsensical works, *Clamps and Shroud*,²⁸ Althouse creates, in Stewart's words, a "model for...arranging perception." It is a paradigm which

²⁶ Susan Stewart. *Nonsense: Aspects of Intertextuality in Folklore and Literature* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins Press, 1980), vii.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 22.

²⁸ *Clamps and Shroud*, 2003, pigmented digital print, 59 x 87 inches. Collection of the Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art, Liège, Belgium; Art Museum, Miami University, Oxford, Ohio



CLAMPS AND SHROUD, 2003

transgresses dualistic conceptions to reconceive the artifacts and ideas that define our lives. Composing two old woodworking clamps and a swatch of white muslin against a black background, Althouse creates a photograph that is as powerful metaphorically as it is visually, a play of contrasts which collide and collude, both visually and intellectually.

At the heart of the composition is the shroud, luminous and bright against a saturated, inky black. Like the wings of an angel ascending, the cloth strains upward. In contrast are the clamps. Dark and stolid, they flank and capture the sagging fabric in heavy, immovable claws. Yet the clamps also uphold the shroud, its form enabled by their unyielding support. Do the clamps shackle and constrain the shroud or do they give birth to its ethereal form? Strangely ambiguous, Althouse's stark and beautiful concatenation is mysterious and spiritual. Crucifixion and ascension, it evokes contradictory and deeply significant dialogues between freedom and constraint, flight and imprisonment, death and resurrection. Moving from the mundane to the miraculous, this photograph presents a model for interpreting experience that goes beyond the usual order of things, beyond sense and the logic of the everyday to merge and mix ideas that are usually considered antithetical.

The photographs of Stephen Althouse rearrange our perceptions of some of the most profound ideas that give form to our experience, and provide tools for remaking the most fundamental aspects of our individual and collective existence. They offer an ecology of the image that invokes some of the most basic oppositions of our lives in order to reconcile them. They invite us to recognize the ways in which the things and meanings of our making are implicated in each other in profound ways, in ways that cannot be reduced to good or evil, freedom or struggle, toil or turmoil. They teach us that through careful discernment of the world around us we might be able to see sacred possibilities in even the most mundane and ordinary objects, and thus reconstitute our perceptions and our lives.

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W O R K S I N E X H I B I T I O N

Adjustable Wrench, 2003, pigmented digital print, 38 x 55 inches
Axe and Tapestry, 2003, pigmented digital print, 42 x 31 inches
Axe, Wood, and Shroud, 2003, pigmented digital print, 59 x 87 inches
Belgian Ribbon, 2003, pigmented digital print, 42 x 31 inches
Belgian Shears, 2003, pigmented digital print, 42 x 31 inches
Bit and Reins, 2003, pigmented digital print, 42 x 31 inches
Blinder Bridle, 2003, pigmented digital print, 42 x 31 inches
Brick and Ivy, 2003, pigmented digital print, 38 x 55 inches
Bridle, 2003, pigmented digital print, 42 x 31 inches
Clamps, 2003, pigmented digital print, 59 x 87 inches
Clamps and Shroud, 2003, pigmented digital print, 59 x 87 inches
Fall Plant, 2003, pigmented digital print, 42 x 31 inches
Hammer with Braille, 2003, pigmented digital print, 42 x 31 inches
Inlay, 2003, pigmented digital print, 42 x 31 inches
Massacre Ardenais, 2003, pigmented digital print, 42 x 31 inches
Rake I, 2003, pigmented digital print, 42 x 31 inches
Royal Spindle, 2003, pigmented digital print, 42 x 31 inches
Saw I, 2003, pigmented digital print, 42 x 31 inches
String and Nail, 2003, pigmented digital print, 42 x 31 inches
Washboard, 2003, pigmented digital print, 42 x 31 inches
Closed Tongs, 2004, pigmented digital print, 59 x 87 inches
Iron Roses, 2004, pigmented digital print, 42 x 31 inches
Sacred Tongs, 2004, pigmented digital print, 42 x 31 inches
Broken Cello, 2005, pigmented digital print, 59 x 87 inches
Mallet with Braille, 2006, pigmented digital print, 42 x 31 inches
Pick with Braille I, 2006, pigmented digital print, 42 x 31 inches
Rake II, 2006, pigmented digital print, 42 x 62 inches
Shoe, 2006, pigmented digital print, 42 x 31 inches
Mesa con Tricornos, 2008, pigmented digital print, 59 x 101 inches
Pick with Braille II, 2008, pigmented digital print, 42 x 31 inches
Sleeve Ribbon, 2008, pigmented digital print, 42 x 31 inches
Wheel I, 2008, pigmented digital print, 59 x 101 inches
Book, 2009, pigmented digital print, 59 x 59 inches
Saw II, 2009, pigmented digital print, 59 x 101 inches
Weaning Halters, 2009, pigmented digital print, 59 x 59 inches

S E L E C T E D M U S E U M C O L L E C T I O N S

Art Museum, Miami University, Oxford, Ohio
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 Boca Raton Museum of Art, Boca Raton, Florida
 Boston Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, Massachusetts
 Center for Photography, Woodstock, New York
 Centre d'Art et de Culture Georges-Pompidou, Paris, France
 Centro Cultural de Arte Contemporáneo, Mexico City, Mexico
 Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington, DC
 Detroit Institute of Arts, Detroit, Michigan
 Flint Institute of Arts, Flint, Michigan
 Gallery of Contemporary Art, Winston-Salem, North Carolina
 Harvard University Photography Archives, Cambridge, Massachusetts
 Huntington Museum, Huntington, West Virginia
 Kresge Art Museum, East Lansing, Michigan
 Montgomery Museum of Fine Art, Montgomery, Alabama
 Münchner Stadtmuseum - Museum of Photography, Munich, Germany
 Musée d'Art moderne et d'Art contemporain, Liège, Belgium
 Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris, France
 Musée de Beaux-Arts d'Ixelles, Brussels, Belgium
 Musée des Beaux-Arts, Lille, France
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 Museo de Arte Contemporaneo - Museo de Santa Cruz, Toledo, Spain
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 Museo de Arte Moderno - Casa de Cultura Quito, Ecuador
 Museo de Arte Moderno, Medellín, Colombia
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 Museo Nacional de Bellas Artes, Buenos Aires, Argentina
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 Museum Ludwig, Cologne, Germany
 Museum of Art, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, Michigan
 Museum of Contemporary Photography, Chicago, Illinois
 Museum of Photography, Antwerp, Belgium
 Museum of Fine Arts, St. Petersburg, Florida
 Museum of Modern Art, Vienna, Austria
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 Oklahoma City Museum of Art, Oklahoma City, Oklahoma
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 Southeast Museum of Photography, Daytona Beach, Florida
 Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Germany
 Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam, Netherlands
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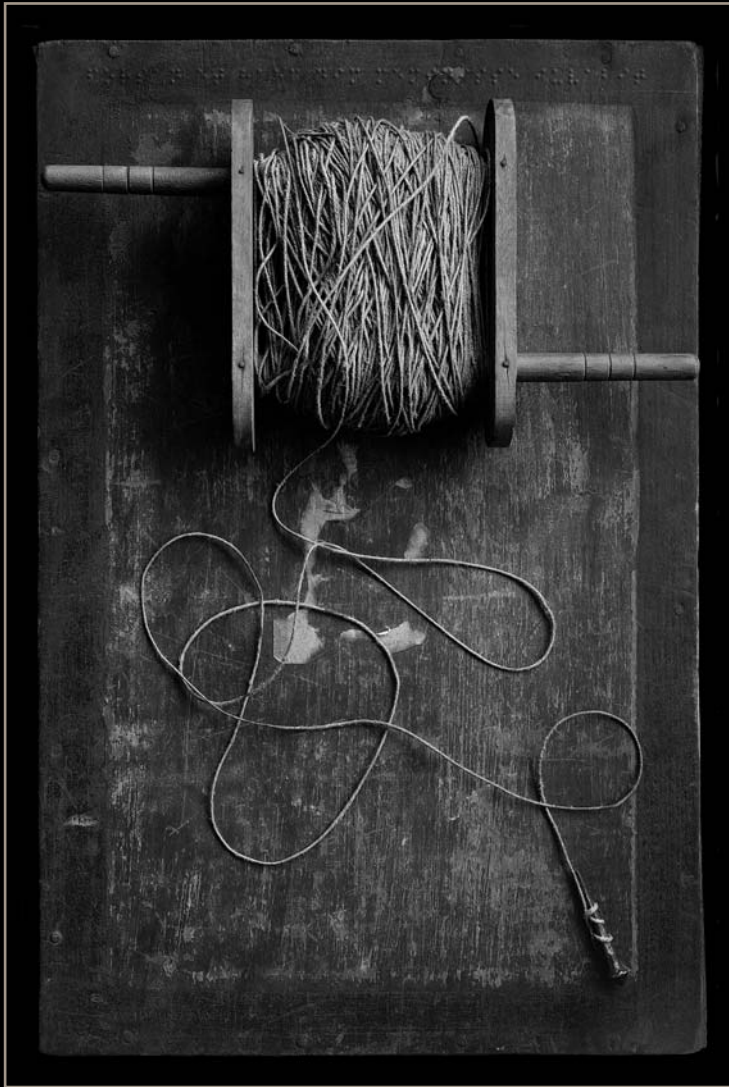
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