



Like bodies of water, the work of Alexis Auréoline is more than what it first appears to be. The three major charcoal canvases presented here—alongside one photographic print and one cyanotype—are frottages. The artist dragged charcoal down a canvas in a straight line; underneath was a piece of plywood, which he also uses as a studio table. After each line, Auréoline repeated the gesture, his hand moving directly to the right where he started the next line from the top, mimicking how a printer produces an image. Instead of a picture appearing, however, the lines leave trace rubbings of that studio table, which Auréoline has told me, “has been weathered throughout the years. The surface,” he added, “holds a lot of wood grain, knots and age.” Each canvas becomes a sort of copy, an index of the grains of the plywood beneath it, creating a visual representation of his studio table. And yet, the effect also suggests brushstrokes. The colour varies due to the inconsistencies in the charcoal; as each piece of charcoal wears down, the colours change from grey to brown.

Informed by artists like Ian Wallace, who presents a conceptual dialectic between monochromes and photographic representation, and Gunther Forg, who makes both abstract paintings and documentary photographs, Auréoline’s process mimics printing techniques and applies it to charcoal and frottage. While the artist began in lens-based practices—and more recently cyanotypes and 16mm film—these apply the language of photographic image-making to pieces that more closely resemble abstract painting. The lines even bring to mind the brush strokes of Clifford Still. Much like Auréoline’s cyanotype titled *Photography Painting*, Auréoline furthers the analogy by entitling these works *Charcoal Painting*. Their naming insists on resemblance: these canvases seem to be painting without properly being painting. As such, they achieve something understatedly profound.

If it ended there, though, his work might feel cold. Instead, it has a quiet warmth. It achieves something more than its conceptual and formal sophistication by creating a rich and subtle depiction of a landscape. Wood, it turns out, is central here, because it resonates both as material and subject matter. Among the prairie, lakes and waterways of Manitoba are various trees: maple, black spruce, white oak, birch. The charcoal Auréoline used came from kindling of Manitoba maple that he gathered in the woodlands around Winnipeg, the ancestral lands of the Shore Lake 40 First Nation and the Red River Métis, the city where he grew up in a French-speaking Métis family, and where he now lives after years in New York. The charcoal was fired by a friend on a nearby farm, which connects the canvases to the landscape where they were produced, another form of indexing the thing they represent.

Woodlands and waterways: his work suggests that these two things share something intrinsic, even elemental. The thematic and conceptual play that happens between painting and photography, between wood and water, is further enriched here by displaying the *Charcoal Paintings* near two other pieces produced by more traditionally photochemical means: a cyanotype and a c-print. The deep blue of the cyanotype *Painting Photography* suggests the depths of water, while the print, *Waves/River*, depicts rough waves that seem to echo the lines of wood indexed on the canvas (Auréoline has even said that the lines of the *Charcoal Paintings* remind him of rain or snow). Again, there is even more personal resonance. Against the deep hues of *Painting Photography* and the charcoal of the canvases, *Waves/River* is the documentary image of a body of water—in this case, the Red River, the spiritual heartland of the Métis. Instead of the horizontal line dominated by so many representations of the prairie landscape, Auréoline here gives us vertical lines, suggestive of the trees, of the bois, of the currents of the river, central to those who have a legitimate claim to these territories.

I come back to the work’s unexpected warmth. Its intelligence centers on the way its meanings shift. Like the waterways it depicts, there is a fluidity between what it seems to be and what it becomes. At first, Auréoline presents formal explorations of the connections between different visual mediums, which, on one level, it is—and convincingly so. But then, on another, it represents a landscape to which the artist and his family have personal connections. It was always there, if only you learn how to look at it. In these ways, he addresses a relationship to the landscape, but lets his interest in material speak for him, his love of painting, of wood, of photography. It deepens the more its meanings become evident. It doesn’t demand you engage with it, though if you choose to, like the landscape it indexes, there is much to explore. It is patient, and its patience is warmth.

—Aaron Peck

Alexis Auréoline

Charcoal Paintings, Painting Photography
& Waves/River

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Images:

Painting Photography & Waves/River
detail Charcoal Painting #1

Alexis Auréoline is originally from southeastern Manitoba, Treaty 1 Territory, the traditional lands of the Anishinaabe, Cree, Oji-Cree, Dakota and Dene, and the homeland of the Red River Métis. In 2015, his solo exhibition was presented in two locations; *Peeks of Present* at AIR Antwerp and at Diesel Project space in Liège (Belgium). In 2017 Auréoline presented *Through The Looking Glass Darkly* at Four Seasons NY, Brooklyn. Several times supported by the Manitoba Arts Council, the Canada Council for the Arts, and in 2018 he was awarded the Keith Evans Prize from the Banff Center for Arts and Creativity. Auréoline holds a BFA from the University of Nova Scotia College of Art and Design (NSCAD) and attended the Cooper Union School of Art in New York.

Aaron Peck is the author of *Jeff Wall: North & West*, *Letters to the Pacific*, and *The Bewilderments of Bernard Willis*. Over the years, he has been a regular contributor to several contemporary art magazines, including *Artforum* and *Frieze*, and a speaker at museums, such as *Dia: Beacon* and the *Serpentine Galleries*. In 2012, he was a writer in residence at *dOCUMENTA 13*. He currently writes for *Aperture* and the *Times Literary Supplement*.

