

# RISE AND FALL

Nicholas Pye

## The Trouble With Sincerity and All Our Fraught Desire

*Sky Goodden*

Nicholas Pye presents a troubling beauty, a beauty we've come to distrust. Despite knowing it innately, we lost this at first speech, we shelled it with self-awareness, we shirked it in our mimicry. We learned irony before sincerity, and fatalism before light. And it's true, we may have inherited this resistance, though it's one we didn't choose. Pye's is a troubling beauty for what it does to our interior, unsettling formative memory, and producing in us a double: the one who keens for its symmetry; and the one who slaps the want.

The attraction to Nicholas Pye's new series, *Rise and Fall*, distinguishes our generations. Depending on our age, we receive it with variation. Do we pitch ourselves against it, or do we lean into its bucolic searching? And when we do one or the other, how much awareness do we bring to the act? Are we being self-indulgent to want it, or are we self-righteous in pushing it away? This is a series that, despite its seeming containment, provokes a call-and-response.

What makes this easier, though, is Pye's repeated evocation of referent, and the slight warp of the absurd. Whether hailing noir film stills (a reference we can relax into, if only to avoid the hot glare of Pye's seeming sincerity), or the chimeric qualities of baroque theater, Pye eases the demands on our gaze, redirecting us, if only distantly (and without surety) to something near, but far.

Further confusing Pye's reach for earnestness is his choice of medium, one that, from the moment of its inception, has endured terrific tumult. Photography's been both manipulated and dismissed; used exclusively for documentary purposes; narrowly allowed for

fashion. It was only very recently deemed credible in the arts — but then, not long after, it was made pedestrian. As such — and resulting from technological advancement that makes nearly indistinguishable the good from the bad, the analogue from the digital, the true from the “filtered” — the medium is undergoing yet another crisis of credibility. I’m not sure we know how to regard photography anymore; I’m not sure we ever have.

But Pye has been savvy and purposeful in articulating his ambivalence — about beauty, about portraiture, existential drift, and the possibility of sincerity in the image itself — through a medium so fraught. This lens appropriately communicates a self-reflexivity that reads like doubling and self-doubt.

This discord is one Pye knowingly provokes. What does it mean to be an artist who strives — through such a complicit medium, no less — to capture himself in soft light, in checkered rooms in lonely mansions, their French landscapes rolling out behind? How can this be taken at its surface, given all the skepticism we now embody, all the hard forgetting we’ve accomplished, of veracity and grace?

Poring over these light-pooled studies that finger at dull anxiety (Pye lying prostrate on a darkened staircase; Pye with his head against a wall; Pye doing a handstand), I think of Walter Benjamin, who, through reams of inchoate notes on the arcades, on a singular man’s experience of a mirrored and fractured state, not only worked to return the monumental to the singular, but also understood — long before our postmodern knowing — the trouble in reading these singular forms as such.

Benjamin wrote about this in terms of allegory, citing its earliest appearance in baroque plays of mourning. But he pressed for its continued relevance in modern historiography, positioning the model as the protagonist for an irrevocably broken history.

A structure of reflection (and, as such, distance), allegory pronounces its subjects as dialectical, impermanent, and the result of an arbitrary assignment of meaning. “Any person, any object, any relationship can mean absolutely anything else. With this possibility, a destructive but just verdict is passed on the profane world.” In its brokenness, allegory provided for Benjamin the most responsible form for a “history that is a permanent catastrophe.” Importantly, regarding Pye, its “disharmony between the image and the object” beckons its audience to observe the distance between the ‘notes’.

As with its central tenets of ruin and fragment, allegory’s discord demands reflection and correspondence — but only so long as its underlying subjects of destruction and arbitrariness do not dissuade one from seeking better meaning.

It’s this very effort that troubles Pye’s beauty — and he doesn’t make it easy. His rooms are bare, his props are pointed, his clothes are plain and timeless. He is a cipher awaiting our appointment, beckoning us to fill him up and make him active. As such, his beauty is complicit in producing an emptying-out, a blank state that demands we give him content.

Benjamin is in vogue, lately — indeed, now more than ever — and so I invoke his referent self-consciously. But it does feel wholly fitting. Benjamin goes credited for etching a proto-postmodernism — for understanding the rabbit hole of our interior, and our descent down its chute when the mirroring of our environment becomes too fractious, its glint like an annihilating glare. It wasn’t postmodernism he was anticipating, however, but the truer thing that followed — a metamodernism, where (like his favorite painting, the *Angel of History*, by Paul Klee), we can be at once wide-eyed from the horrors we’ve seen, our eyebrows singed, our knuckles white, and yet we’re flying — we’re fleeing, we’re *flinging* — our bodies forward.

This is where we find Pye, performing his sincerity, his ankles bound to doubt, but his fingers stretched at hope.

In a film produced by *Frieze*, Dutch philosophers Timotheus Vermeulen and Robin van der Akker describe metamodernism as something that’s both cynical and self-aware, and yet fully capable of sincerity; they term it “informed naivety.” “Metamodernism is not some utopian story, this is not a manifesto; it’s a description of a structure of feeling,” explains Vermeulen. It’s “choosing” even though you know “you can’t choose.”

“To be sincere becomes a performance,” Vermeulen says, though I don’t think it’s quite so simple. We perform our sincerity in the hope that we might trick ourselves into assuming it directly. And in that act of self-denial, in making that ludic pact with ourselves, therein lies the joy.

I love the contrast of Pye standing on his head — or his body absurdly prone across three chairs — with the photos bearing greater gravity. But even in these (Pye at a table, looking out through storied windows, the light forming a reverse-cloisonné of his profile,

all darkness against the light), there is something almost amusing about its burdened symbol of plaintive searching. This is where Pye calls on our self-inspection, asking us to assess the sheer measure of our cynicism. Is it really so unlikely, he asks? Is it absurd to assume a posture of lush and earnest seeking? What's *happened* to us, that this should be a reach?

Jean Baudrillard wrote on this personal crisis as it manifests in art. "One has the impression that some portion of contemporary art is engaged in a work of deterrence, mourning the image and the imagination, mourning aesthetics. This mostly failed attempt has left to general melancholy in the artistic sphere, which seems to perpetuate itself by recycling its history and its relics (but neither art nor aesthetics are the only ones doomed to the melancholy fate of living less above their means than beyond their own ends.)" He termed the art that recycles other art with the unconvincing caveat of irony, one that "is like a worn weft of fabric, it only results from the disillusion of things."

While there are references that can be sought and found in Pye's work (from the portent of the aforementioned film noir to the interiors of Vermeer; from Jeff Wall's stilly constructions to the lonely emoting of Boucher), it's the emptying-out of these pictures that invites our closer looking. What would nullity look like in figurative portraiture, would it look like this? How should potency and wanting go pictured, and what expression should it take? (Importantly, we almost never see Pye's face, aside from a distant side-profile, one almost bleached in light.) For an artist who has repeatedly engraved his own image (his self-portraits state his age, too, like a growing boy's height notched near the kitchen door), Pye is clearly moving away from previous forms of figuration, and, while not leaving the stage entirely, he's positioned himself on it like a signifier, less a man.

There is a wonderful reveal that happens near the conclusion of Albert Camus's *The Fall*:

Yes, I am moving about. How could I remain in bed like a good patient? I must be higher than you, and my thoughts lift me up. Such nights, or such mornings rather (for the fall occurs at dawn), I go out and walk briskly along the canals. In the livid sky the layers of feathers become thinner, the doves move a little higher, and above the roofs a rosy light announces a new day of my creation. On the Damrak the first streetcar sounds its bell in

the damp air and marks the awakening of life at the extremity of this Europe where, at the same moment, hundreds of millions of men, my subjects, painfully slip out of bed, a bitter taste in their mouths, to go to a joyless work. Then, soaring over this whole continent which is under my sway without knowing it, drinking in the absinthe-colored light of breaking day, intoxicated with evil words, I am happy — I am happy, I tell you, I won't let you think I'm not happy, I am happy unto death! Oh, sun, beaches, and the islands in the path of the trade winds, youth whose memory drives one to despair! [...] What can one do to become another? Impossible. One would have to cease being anyone, forget oneself for someone else, at least once. But how? Don't bear down too hard on me. I'm like that old beggar who wouldn't let go of my hand one day on a café terrace: "oh, sir," he said, "it's not just that I'm no good, but you lose track of the light." Yes, we have lost track of the light, the mornings, the holy innocence of those who forgive themselves.

At the center of this tale of self-nihilism and tragic undoing, our unmoored protagonist directs us — as Pye does; as Klee's angel, too — straight at the light. These authors verily fling themselves forward, against all evidence that suggests they're stuck. Something awaits them, surely, a blankness, a possibility for beauty and renewed form. It's a place where light and forgetting embrace the weight of too much knowing.

Pye presents a troubling beauty that's made baroque, saccharine, even grotesque, in all its symmetry and framing. And for many of us, an important reflexivity is provoked in this presentation, one that distinguishes its very trouble. For we are both desirous of this empty state, its promise of simple truths, and yet we feel betrayed by our very wanting — for it's too dumb and too profound. We rise and fall, then, swinging from doubt to desire, but then we reach a little — despite our ourselves — for the possibility of something sincere.



Candle



Soporific Form



Hushed, at a Standstill



Halcyon



Hopefulness, Inexperienced, Unfamiliar



To Weather the Storm



The Fleeting I



The Fleeting II



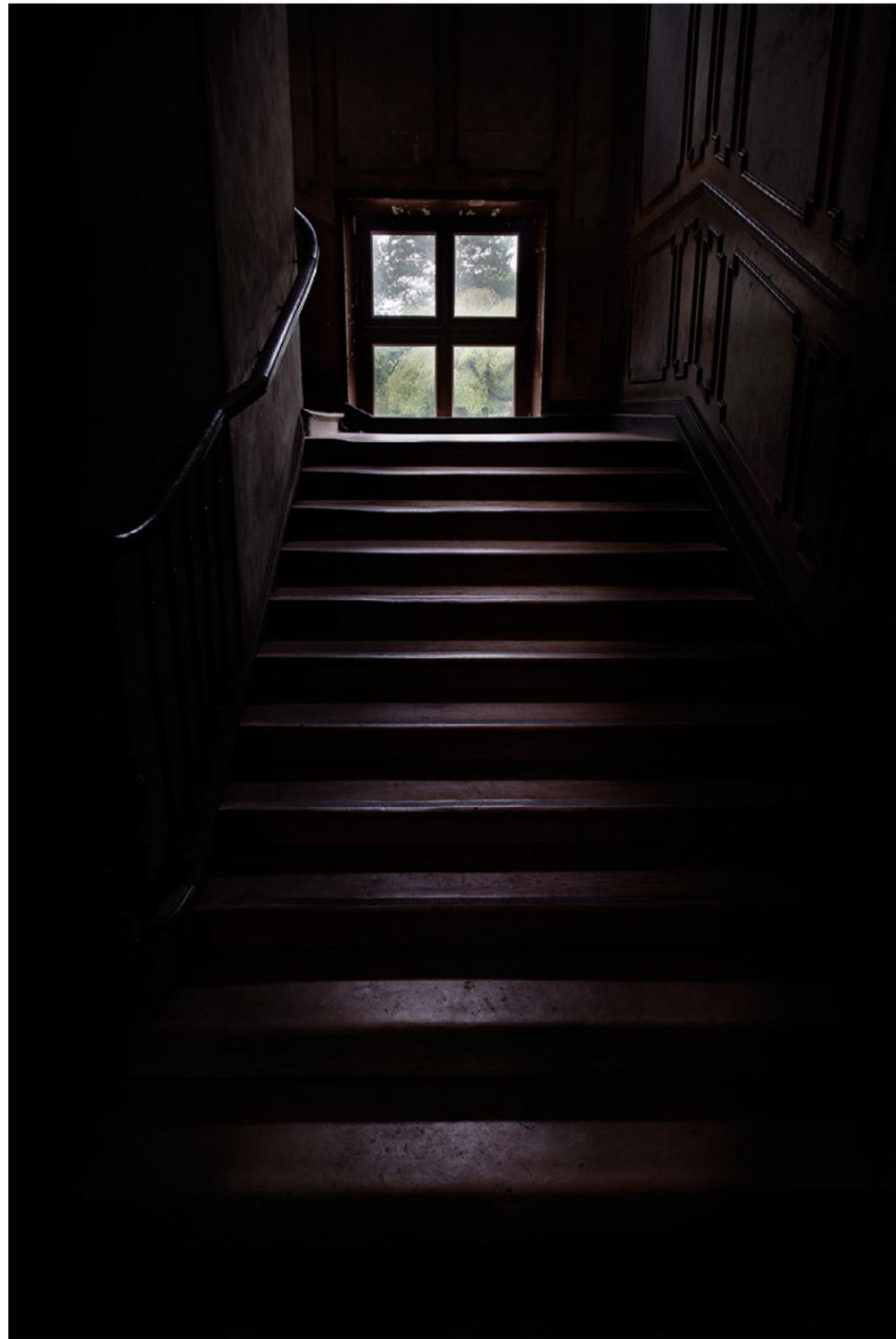
Lingering Tempo



Rise and Fall



Silken Web



Nepenthe



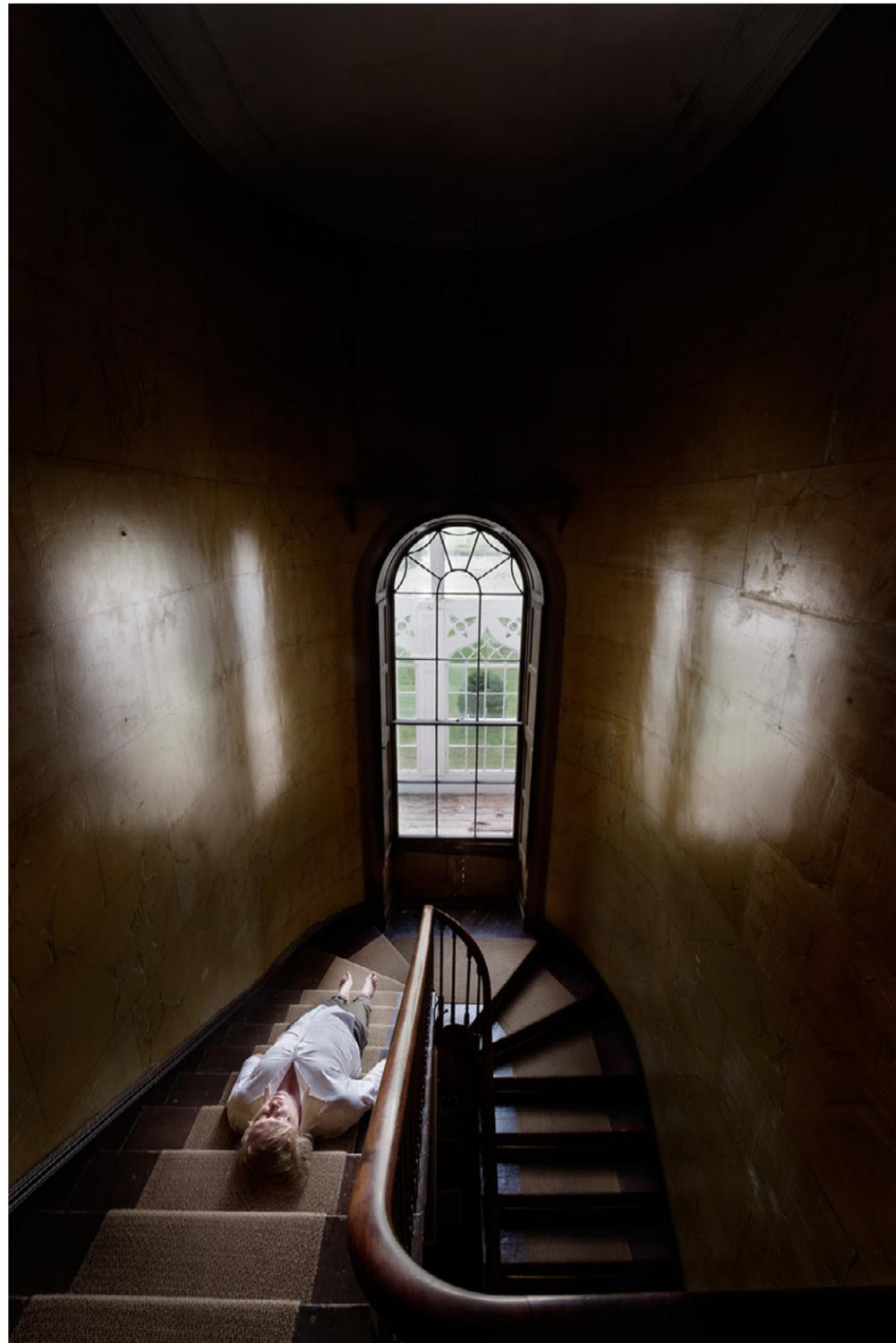
Pastoral Expectation



A Misstep, an ocean.



Measurements and Rhythms



The Arrival, Motionless



All Things Considered



The Shadow Theater, anticipation



The Shadow Theater, bare

## Found Light in the Works of Nicholas Pye

*Faye Mullen*

We begin by filling bodies while simultaneously draining out of those same such bodies. A perpetual ooze, a swelling, inseparable from all else. We are multiple. Oscillating between our internal selves and the environment that surrounds us, we understand the threshold between the in and outside as vast. We are not internal; there is no inside.

Eventually, the contour of our cavity is drawn. Some draw the silhouette sooner than others, others later. We graze the skin that holds us within and recognize the singularity of our being: I am one. Loss is experienced first hand. Our multiplicity is suddenly walled in a vessel, and the limitation of that one such body is announced. Separate. Distinct. Our envelope is sealed. The threshold is now a thin layer of skin and we continue to exist in fear of a puncture, of a piercing. Sentenced by the limitation of our own, now acknowledged body, we anxiously wait to bear the next amputation.

The figure repeated in the series *Rise and Fall* has no solid form. Neither portrait nor landscape, the works bleed between these terms. Nicholas Pye bleeds through his contour. His form is less clear and yet *figure* he remains, waiting.

Where does figure meet ground?

The morning light rests on the line that follows the fold of his collar in *Pastoral Expectation*; the deep shadow sinks in the cave of his spine in *The Fleeting II*. These distinctions between light and shadow, although sharp, remain ambiguous. Such are Pye's meditations with light — carving out a space where you and I can both sit, slump, stand along his side.

The photographs in *Rise and Fall* are detached from their ground, are cut through by a saturated pane pulling us deeper into the image. Pye's smooth photographic surface identifies the one-dimensional through depth, carving out a receding space in which the ground of the image is buried. The background becomes an entry, thus drawing it closer to the viewer, resulting in it becoming a foreground. This restless oscillation between *fond* and *fore* is witnessed repeatedly in painting; brought to mind are the reflected surfaces in Velázquez's *Las Meninas* (1656). Pye distinguishes these planes of various perspectives by a practice committed to a frame residing within the frame. Referencing here Hopper's practice of landscapes consistently framed by a windowpane of an interior space — *Sun in an Empty Room* (1963), his last work, being a notable example. Depth in painting is translated through accumulation. Aerial perspective is a layering of paint giving us the illusion of distance and decaying sharpness. Pye makes no attempt at illusion. His far-off landscapes thrust forward through his inestimable accumulation of multiple exposures. And yet, technique — is it not a path towards illusion?

Denounced as groundless, illusory and deceptive, images — photographs in particular — are nonetheless privileged with their attributed suggestion of truth. Images: composed, censored, disseminated, embraced, mistrusted, proliferated. The image never ceases to be accompanied and burdened by its intrinsic paradox. Originally, the photograph was evidence of fact and relinquished this role to embrace its association with fiction. Contemporarily, it has re-surfaced as *fact* through immediate and wide circulation proving one's existence through social media's language of instantaneous online self-portraiture.

At times, the photographs in *Rise and Fall* recall the language of self-portraiture. Though what makes a photograph of this photographer a portrait?

Once every two years, Nicholas Pye commits himself to a self-portrait. For instance, *Self-Portrait at 35* is a video work in which Pye spews milk at the camera, thereby veiling the face of the artist. In *Self-Portrait at 37*, it is a saturated film denying us visual recognition as his image disappears behind a cloudy viscous coating of the lens. Behind these murky filters are the portraits of Nicholas Pye. Self-portraiture, in his practice, is durational, silent, echoic, and ritualistic. Contrarily, in *Rise and Fall* we are shown still photographs of the

photographer, without the indication of such images as self-portraits. If Pye melts away in his self-portraits, then the photographs in *Rise and Fall* are not portraits of him alone. Light is an equal figure to the presence of the artist-subject.

Our eyes' sensory register to light expands and contracts to accommodate the varying degrees of iris growth. Pye *makes strange* by granting a multiplicity of exposures all at once. The effect is an accumulation of light. Or is it darkness? He pries the wide lens open, allowing the light to pour through; sequentially, he closes it tighter and tighter, surrendering to the darkness that composes the image. Curving, billowing light thaws into shadow; illusion never surfaces. Though suspicion may register as deception, Pye toys with dissemblance. Dissemblance is rooted in the semantic character of representation braided with the *real*. An acknowledgement that representation is not repetition. This work retains a sense of dissemblance, honoring the deceptive quality within visual representation.

There is a precedent in *Rise and Fall* that is not grounded in familiar perceptive conventions but rather a way of seeing that sustains duration. We witness not a moment in time but rather continuous time through the language of stillness; we sit with the artist, observing the light hugging the contour of such shapes and figures.

In the case of light for Pye, it is not just any light. Light is sought after, it is specific. Light is found. The source remains the same — solely natural light though climate, geography, time, positioning, duration are variable. Pye invites chance and choice to coexist in his practice. This process of searching for light evokes Tarkovsky's Polaroids, in which light is the predominant subject. And yet again, leaning towards painting — the material, tool, and subject of Vermeer's practice is light as it is in this series of photographs. Pye traveled extensively through France and Ireland over an eight-month period in his search for these particular qualities of light, and when they were found, inhaled.

In each sentence of *Rise and Fall*, Nicholas Pye's *found light* is the sole source of illumination bringing every form into distinction. In turn each form, architectural or figural, becomes distinct in response to the swelling source. The definition between light and shadow stresses the washed light that combs the walls behind his dark body. We pose in solidarity with this body recognizing our collective distinctiveness; we pause on the ground that sinks deeper into the field of representation where an entire gravity is suspended.

Candle

Digital c-print, 2014  
60 by 40 inches, Edition of 5, 2 ap  
36 by 24 inches, Edition of 5, 2 ap

Soporific Form

Digital c-print, 2014  
60 by 40 inches, Edition of 5, 2 ap  
36 by 24 inches, Edition of 5, 2 ap

Hushed, at a Standstill

Digital c-print, 2014  
60 by 40 inches, Edition of 5, 2 ap  
36 by 24 inches, Edition of 5, 2 ap

Halcyon

Digital c-print, 2014  
60 by 40 inches, Edition of 5, 2 ap  
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Hopefulness, Inexperienced, Unfamiliar

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To Weather the Storm

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The Fleeting II

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60 by 40 inches, Edition of 5, 2 ap  
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Lingering Tempo

Digital c-print, 2014  
48 by 48 inches, Edition of 5, 2 ap  
24 by 24 inches, Edition of 5, 2 ap

Rise and Fall

Digital c-print, 2014  
60 by 40 inches, Edition of 5, 2 ap  
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Silken Web

Digital c-print, 2014  
60 by 40 inches, Edition of 5, 2 ap  
36 by 24 inches, Edition of 5, 2 ap

Nepenthe

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Measurements and Rhythms

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36 by 24 inches, Edition of 5, 2 ap

The Arrival, Motionless

Digital c-print, 2014  
60 by 40 inches, Edition of 5, 2 ap  
36 by 24 inches, Edition of 5, 2 ap

All Things Considered

Digital c-print, 2014  
60 by 40 inches, Edition of 5, 2 ap  
36 by 24 inches, Edition of 5, 2 ap

The Shadow Theater, anticipation

Digital c-print, 2014  
84 by 42 inches, Edition of 5, 2 ap  
42 by 21 inches, Edition of 5, 2 ap

The Shadow Theater, bare

Digital c-print, 2014  
60 by 40 inches, Edition of 5, 2 ap  
36 by 24 inches, Edition of 5, 2 ap

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