River

River #1

A Rigor Runs Through It

Beth Venn

To view the photographs of Janelle Lynch is to witness a world where calm seems to prevail. Neither ornate nor entirely minimal, the images project restraint while intimating that something restless lies just below the surface. Where is everything and everyone? The series’ simple one word title provides no clues.

The river of Lynch’s obsession is the Hudson, a short walk from the artist’s long-time
home in Manhattan’s West Village, and a subject already laden with history and significance. By the nineteenth century, the Hudson River and the dramatic scenery along its banks—the Palisades, the Hudson Highlands, the Catskills—became a popular subject for artists and writers, awed by its beauty and eager for a landscape that might serve as a symbol of all that was powerful and promising about America. Washington Irving and James Fenimore Cooper created a distinctly American literature, grounded in the folklore and history of the Hudson valley. Painters, led by Thomas Cole, founded the Hudson River School, widely recognized as the first truly national style of art.

Today the Hudson River that separates Manhattan from its New Jersey neighbors to the west serves as a churning thoroughfare of commuter ferry fleets and commercial
tugboats. In the warm months, private sailboats, yachts and the occasional intrepid kayak can be found plying its waters. But Lynch’s images of the river, all but empty of signifiers of its modern life or a past century’s symbolic grandeur, still convey a narrative urgency.

In her photographs, the sky looms large. It glows with a silvery sheen that is neither particularly glorious nor somber. Her aim was to capture not just the quality of light but “the piers, the pylons, the vestiges of what once was. These were important as part of the shipping industry, but I was drawn to what was left.” In these remnants Lynch finds a sense of loss, absence and abandonment where what is missing matters as much as what is visible. “I had read Roland Barthes’ Camera Lucida in graduate school and his notion of photography being a sign of absence, not presence, resonated and reinforced my attraction to the medium. According to Barthes, the represented form refers to someone or something real that no longer exists in the images, which makes the photograph a kind
of presence of absence.”

River #4

In some pictures (River #2 and #8), aged and weathered wood pylons stand like sentinels in rows, still and steadfast in the moving water. In another (River #7) they seem adrift at sea, an unmoored flock about to be swallowed up by the river’s ebbs and flows. Some years after her work on River, Lynch became drawn to the watercolors of the American painter, Charles Burchfield, best known for romantic, often fantastic depictions of nature, in which she recognized a kindred desire to imbue the land (and in this case, the river) with its own internal life force. “I reflected on when I started to see anthropomorphically (and, therefore, to photograph that way). Those piles that stood in the riverbed, but no longer held the pier that they once supported, have great metaphorical significance. Some days they would be visible. Other times they would disappear under water when the
tide was high. Knowing that Burchfield anthropomorphized the landscape gave me a kind of a creative license.”

The pace of change can be swift in New York City and its environs. Neighborhoods evolve and skylines are altered at a sometimes alarming pace. Perhaps this is nowhere more evident than on the Hudson’s west bank, where New Jersey towns and cities have undergone rapacious development. In River #6, the urban cycle of presence, gradual dilapidation, loss and regeneration is captured simply and succinctly. The black, aging pylons in the foreground are echoed by sparkling new glass and steel buildings in the background. The lyrical juxtaposition of old and new, past and present, dark and light evokes the intention of earlier artists whose Hudson valley landscapes were often subtle visual parables of hope, and of history and rebirth.

Lynch’s photographs possess a formal balance and calm that belie an underlying turbulence. Horizon lines cut straight across a picture’s center, vanishing points neatly recede, even clouds—when present—hang in an organized billowing. The surface of the river is still. Yet all is not as peaceful as it appears. Look carefully at the slight shimmer across the water’s surface that hints at the roiling beneath. Notice the jagged tops of the decaying pylons. Loss and change lurk just beneath the surface, reminding the viewer that the passage of time is anything but benign.
Beth Venn is a Manhattan-based freelance art historian. In her position as senior curator of American art at the Newark Museum (2005–2012) she acquired Lynch’s River series for the museum’s collection.