

Art in America

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Clifford Ross Sonnabend

Without straining the eye, one can make out tiny footpaths seven miles away in Clifford Ross's 2005 "Mountain" series—the highest resolution landscape photographs ever created. Ross made these large-scale prints of Mount Sopris in Colorado using his "R1" system, which consists of a still camera (constructed out of 60-year-old camera parts, mirrors, a microscope and other elements—none digital), film used by the military for aerial photography and a digital post-production process of his own design. In a new series, "Mountain Redux," Ross revisits those images, approaching his subject through tiny details, either blown up or fractured into bits, that are digitally repeated and arranged in various patterns overlaying the main scene.

Displayed in the first room at Sonnabend were *Mountain XII* and *Mountain XIII* (both 75½ by 135 inches, 2005), photographs from the original series not included in its earlier exhibition. There followed in subsequent rooms increasingly deconstructed and abstracted works. Ross made one group of images, titled "Harmonium" (2007), by taking a detail (a cluster of shrubs and trees), enlarging it to 49½ by 41¼ inches, draining the color and then printing it on handmade Japanese paper—a process inspired by John Murray's 19th-century paper-negative panorama of the Taj Mahal.

In other works, this shrub-and-tree detail is shrunk into tiled thumbnails reiterated across a giant negative print of the mountain. They intersect to create false perspectives and bending space, dimensional Y-shapes and fanned-out curves like a deck of cards. While it is difficult to discern a method behind their arrangements (are they completely random, or is there some underlying system?), they suggest a tension between the photo-

graph's simulacrum of reality and its status as a flat material object.

The works in the last few rooms, *Harmonium Blizzard*, *Waterfall I* and *Waterfall II*, depart completely from the source image of the mountain, as the colored tiles overwhelm the picture plane in a jumbled and chaotic cascade. Ross seems to be challenging Sontag's claim that, unlike painting, a photograph, by its nature, can never entirely transcend its subject. Of course, the tree-and-shrub image is still contained in each thumbnail (which the viewer knows, having followed its trajectory from the start of the exhibition), but, tiny and nearly unrecognizable now, each thumbnail is subsumed in the all-over abstract pattern created by hyper-dense accumulations. The result is one of profound vitality and pleasure, perhaps even to the point of exhaustion.

—Debora Kuan



Clifford Ross: *Waterfall I*, 2007, ink on Japanese paper, 82¼ by 50½ inches; at Sonnabend.