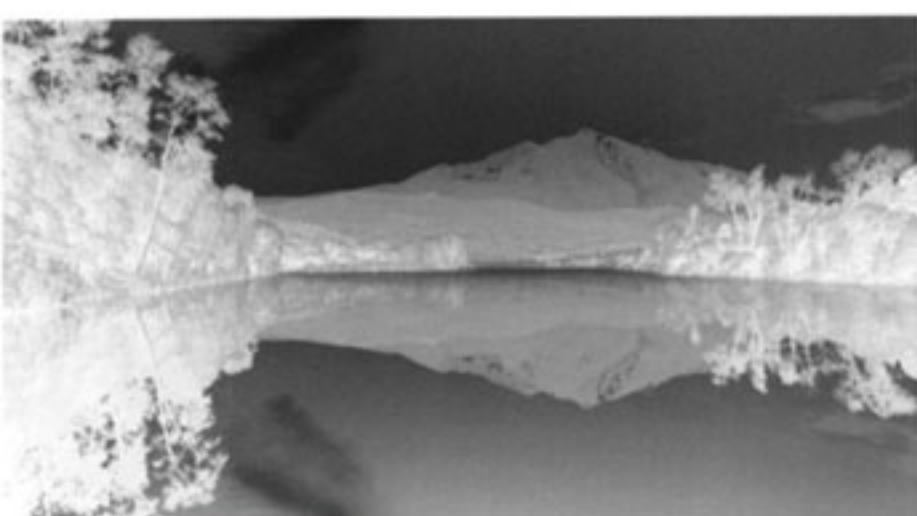




Top: **Clifford Ross, Mountain XIII, 2006,** Chromogenic color print, Photo by Clifford Ross.

Bottom: **Clifford Ross, Mountain Redux I, 2008,** Archival pigment print, Photo by Clifford Ross.



CLIFFORD ROSS MOVES MOUNTAINS

BY PHOEBE HOBAN

This spring's Tribeca Film Festival included in its "All You Can Eat" short-film program the first computer-generated video by Clifford Ross. Among the seven films—most of which were dark, narrative works by directors under 40 years old—*Harmonium Mountain*, by Ross, 58, stood out. The 5.26 minute-long abstract color animation unfurls from a single minuscule detail of a high-resolution mountain scene into a brilliant cascade of kaleidoscopic permutations, set to an original score by Philip Glass.

Harmonium Mountain is the latest—and perhaps most innovative—phase in Ross' decade-long, multi-faceted ode to a majestic Colorado peak, which began with his hyper-realistic *Mountain* photographs and evolved into the complex abstract imagery of his *Mountain Redux* prints. The film, along with a selection of the work from which it originated, is included in a solo exhibition, *Landscape to Imagination*, at the Sonnabend Gallery (through July 29). Ross' large-scale mountain and wave photographs also are being shown at Guild Hall in East Hampton, Long Island, from June 25 to July 31.

Some artists become obsessed with a certain model (also often a lover); think of Picasso's multiple depictions of Dora Maar or Marie-Therese. For Clifford Ross, it was a mountain—Mount Sopris in Colorado, to be exact. On a casual visit, Ross took color snapshots of

the snow-capped crest, realizing when he got home that conventional photography didn't come close to capturing it. In his quest to replicate the magnitude of his mountain experience, Ross actually ended up inventing a brand new camera, the R-1, patented in 2002.

Ross, a handsome bearded man, sticks his head under the old fashioned drop-cloth on the back of the camera, which dominates one corner of the three-story studio in his West Village carriage house and looks, as he puts it, like something from Dr. Seuss. Although the R-1 remains capable of some of the highest-resolution single-shot images ever made—it can pick out a barn shingle two miles away—the unique device is in fact an erector-set-like amalgam of odd parts.

"Basically the back is an old World War II Fairchild aerial camera that I essentially turned into a 19th century view camera. If you take the back off the camera, you see an upside-down and backwards image," he says, resurfacing. The back of the camera, made of non-refracting, etched ground glass, was custom-designed by Ross and fabricated by a company that also makes glass for pizza parlors. Ross found a 25X handheld microscope in Edmund Scientific, and adapted it as a focusing device. "It took a lot of little steps to arrive at the patent," he says.

Ross is not so much an inventor as someone who has an "attitude towards problem-solving. You have to solve a lot of problems in order to deliver an experience. The big irony was that the camera got fussed over a lot, because it was fun. It took more work to figure out how to make the print than it did to make the camera. I am trying to make something that gives people a certain experience: essentially, I want to give an overdose of detail that mimics nature."

Obsession with the beauty of nature is not new to Ross, who, in 1998, began braving hurricane-force winds to photograph ocean waves at their wildest. Tethered to Bill Schick, a member of the tight-knit team in his high-tech studio, Ross challenges the waves, creating beautiful "conundrums:" large-scale black-and-white still lifes of violently churning ocean foam during peak hurricane season. "I'd solved many of the problems that the hurricane waves had posed to me as a subject. Then the mountain suddenly appeared, and I fell in love with the mountain the way I fell in love with the ocean. So once the love affair started, it was like having a fabulous new lover and you learn all the new moves," he says.

By far the most dramatic move was literal: the shift from still images to animation. Like much of Ross' work, *Harmonium Moun-*

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tain was the result of excruciating patience coupled with serendipity. "Sometimes you are on a path to do something and as they say, 'shit happens,' and you better pay attention to it. We get more good things done because of the mistakes we make," he says. "The recognition of something unexpected is I think what bonds artists to scientists. You need to be looking for the unexpected to find what is new."

Harmonium Mountain is a case in point. The artist works closely with a small team, including Schick, Liron Unreich and Danny Kreisberg. They man a powerful arsenal of computers on the lowest level of the studio, where the digital alchemy, from masking—an advanced form of photographic burning and dodging—to radically subverting animation software—takes place. Inspired by a 19th century paper negative of the Taj Mahal, Ross asked them first to drain one of his large-scale mountain photographs of all color, then turn it into a negative. Next, a single tiny element was extracted from the high-resolution image. This modular component, the so-called "harmonium," became, as Ross puts it "the touchstone, the key in the lock."

The harmonium is like a tile, a miniature canvas, which the studio now deploys in a multitude of ways, from the colorful abstract prints of the *Mountain Redux* series—beautiful, digitally-rendered Cubist patterns printed on handmade Japanese paper—to the sophisticated computer-animation of *Harmonium Mountain*.

"The desire to make complex prints preceded my desire to make moving images," Ross explains. "The working method to make the complex prints led to an obsession with the method, which led to making a video. We began to fall in love with the process, and it gave me a freedom to make a whole other thing. I went as far as I could in that vocabulary: Let me take another bite of the apple. Let me try to give you the mountain another way."

The nephew of artist Helen Frankenthaler, Ross originally started out as an abstract painter. Two years after graduating from Yale in 1974, he was showing color-field work at Tibor de Nagy. He also was under the influence of the legendary critic, Clement Greenberg, an avid supporter of his aunt.

"When I graduated from college, I very quickly and naturally slipped into what was known as the Greenberg circle," he says. "But ultimately I found that a trap. I am still proud of the pictures I painted then, but my generation of so-called color-field painters was abstracting abstraction. To me, the finest abstraction has always been birthed out of a reaction to the real world. I was very much indebted to that circle, but I now look at it as a ghetto that I had to get out of. It was ruled over by Clem, who was very much alive, but I don't think his ideas were. The juice of the orange had already been squeezed out. 1979 was sort of a turning point."

Ross broke ranks with the Greenberg circle by showing realistic work at Salander O'Reilly, including a sculpted self-portrait, which was "anathema to them...I realized I needed not just to find an orange but to start an orchard, which was to go back to the beginning. I needed to go back to nature and go back to school." He studied at the National Academy of Design for a year or so, focusing on realism.

While the rest of his peers—Julian Schnabel, David Salle and the youngest of that generation, Jean-Michel Basquiat, became art world sensations with the advent of Neo-Expressionism, Ross didn't resurface until the mid-'80s, first showing realistic work at Salander O'Reilly, then making large, abstract-inflected landscape paintings.

Ross' leap from canvas to photography, and from realism to abstraction (and then back again), first came about as a result of the postage-stamped size images he was using as studies for his landscape paintings. "As a way of taking notes, I was painting oil sketch-

Clifford Ross, Harmonium I, 2008, Archival pigment print, Photo by Clifford Ross.



Clifford Ross, Harmonium VI, 2008, Archival pigment print, Photo by Clifford Ross.



es from nature as fuel for my half-abstract paintings, and I began dropping a camera in my pocket."

Before long, his studio was littered with tiny black-and-white photographs. His then dealer, Lawrence Salander, suggested that he include three of the small images in one of his painting shows. They were, in a sense, primitive "harmoniums"—the building blocks for bigger works. Soon afterwards, Ross traded his brush for a camera, starting out with moody black-and-white landscape photographs and then making the leap into large-scale works.

For Ross, the art is in the details. "Ironically, the goal of big is to get intimate," he says. "When people see my big photographs they think I am after big things. I'm after big feelings, but my real desire is not to see somebody staring at my photographs with their jaw open from 40 feet away because they are big and grand. My joy is to see them with their nose pressed to the glass, looking lovingly at a detail. And if they've done that then I've succeeded. Then they will have experienced something that is akin to the way I relate to nature." □

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