



Todd Hido

Road

*Divided*

portfolio text

## Where the Image Breaks Down

by Katya Tylevich

At his house in Oakland – defined by thick art books and the thin smell of old cigarette smoke – Todd Hido is impatient. Looking out the window of his second-story home studio, a watchtower of sorts, he says, ‘It’s sunny. There’s nothing we can do.’ Not until several hours later, after dark clouds roll over the Bay Area and fog obscures the city’s form, does Hido finally pronounce the view outside his window ‘perfect.’ He grabs a Pentax he hasn’t used in a long time (kissing it for effect, ‘I’ve missed you’) and we drive off in search of another ‘perfect’ view – this one outside a car’s windshield, and this one also in quotation marks.

There’s gridlock, honking and swearing, and then Hido abruptly drives off the highway onto unpaved road, bordered by water on one side and giant bags of trash on the other. ‘If you ever have to kill somebody, this is a good place to dump the body,’ he jokes. We’re by the Bay Bridge Toll Plaza, on the other side of the Port of Oakland. Nature always highlights the post-apocalyptic look of its city, doesn’t it? Yeah, but this is exactly the world that we live in, says Hido. He maneuvers the car to set up the shot he wants, then leaves it running in park. ‘Why do I love this place?’ he asks me, waiting for the windshield to fog a bit. ›



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I thought I was supposed to be asking the questions. 'But it's a shitty place. What makes it interesting?' And then he says, to no one in particular: 'The telephone poles, the electric wires, the bridge, the fact that the tide comes up here and always leaves water on the ground.' This could be the view from the driver's seat in almost any small town in the US, it could be anybody's car running under any bridge. The ambiguity of that implied story is rooted in the ambiguity of the environment in which it takes place.

Todd Hido's landscapes are suggestive of narrative and event, but mostly they're just suggestive. His photographs give body to the otherwise intangible elements of mood, impulse, and emotion. Rather than treating nature as 'still life,' Hido's images instead bring the viewer's attention to movement: the running of a motor, the tapping of raindrops on a car roof, the urgency of a moving vehicle over wet roads – what is it moving away from, or what is it driving into, anyway? Not unlike his portrait work or even his photographs of suburban homes at night, Hido's landscapes evoke the banality and tragedy of

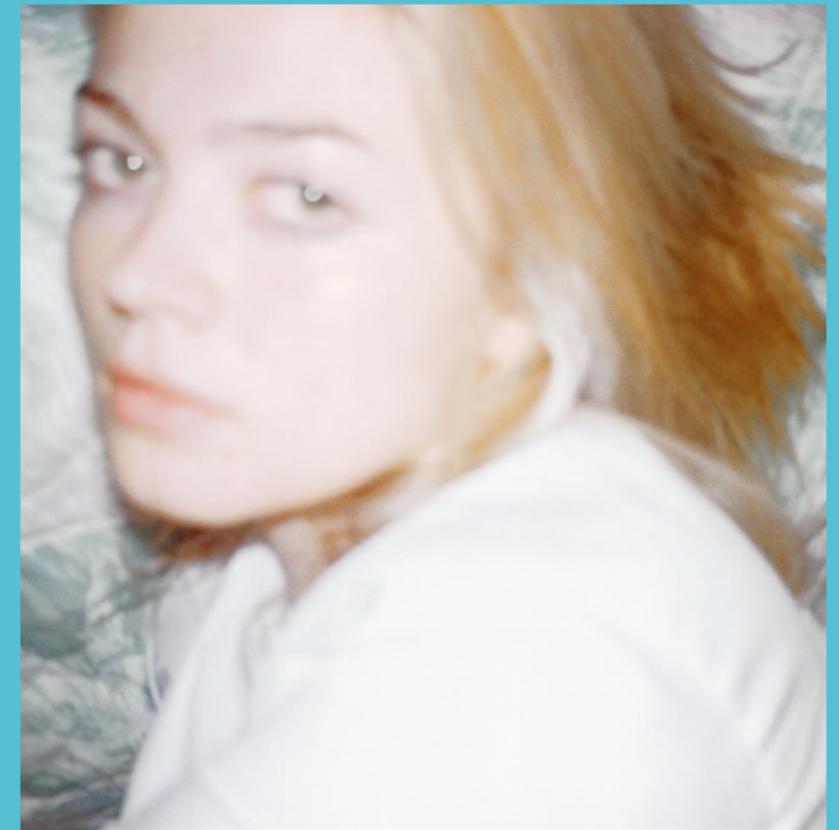
confinement (in space, in situation, in a body, in the calendar year), and the fantasy of escape.

But I often think concept is over-rated,' says Hido. 'I want to *feel* when I see a photograph; I don't necessarily have to think. I've seen concept cripple photographers.'

It was while working on his book, *Between The Two* (published by Nazraeli Press in 2006) that Hido made the conscious decision to start taking photographs of people. At the time, he was perhaps best known for his landscapes and photographs of houses at night – 'sharp and exact views of the suburbs from a distance,' says Hido. 'A lamentation of the loss of love.' The portrait work nudged the focal point of Hido's work from the uncertainty of human situation to the uncertainty of human expression, but to call it a 'departure' from his earlier work would be to disregard the questions and dispositions that they have in common. Hido's seemingly disparate works are united by a palpable uneasiness, the sort of desperation that mundane territory breeds. They hint at the claustrophobia of small towns and closed

↶ #1952 © Todd Hido  
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↷ #9485-a © Todd Hido  
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bedrooms. There's a reason Hido says that having his photographs published as covers of seven Raymond Carver books (published by Vintage in 2009) was one of the most significant moments of his life as a photographer. But even in his portrait books, Hido includes landscapes to create setting, build association, and craft his nebulous fictions.

'I don't just work for my projects. I work because I need to take a picture when I see it in front of me,' Hido tells me. So when he was concentrating on portraits in 2006, he was still taking landscape photographs – driving on the highway in a downpour, for example. At the time he took them, these landscape shots weren't for an upcoming book or show, and Hido felt they were for his eyes only. 'That's why I didn't have a voice in my head telling me: "Don't make this too beautiful, it's going to get rejected if it's too beautiful."' The truth is, I want beauty.' The result was an unexpected and accumulating body of work, which later became the bulk of *A Road Divided* (published by Nazraeli in 2010), a collection of photographs that he calls 'unafraid and more mature than my previous landscapes.' He tells me that

*A Road Divided* is a collection made without regard for a deadline or an art market; most importantly, 'it was made by a photographer who wasn't timid.'

Although free of human figures, Hido's landscapes in *A Road Divided* are rarely free of human presence. Electricity poles, empty roads, condos in the distance, and the recurring barrier of a windshield, often smeared with raindrops or the condensation of fog – all these things signal the heat of human breath, the pulse of a single heartbeat, the inclusion of electricity and cement among a landscape's indigenous plants. 'I don't like pure nature,' says Hido. It's neither the reality in which he finds himself now, nor the backdrop of his memories. He recalls a Dorothea Lange quote, once cited by photographer Robert Adams, which strikes him as entirely relevant today: 'She said that a photographer should go out and photograph "what exists and prevails," and that's exactly what I want to do,' says Hido. 'I want to photograph what exists and prevails in modern America.'

Hido clarifies that, of course, while his works capture 'what exists' exactly as he

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knows it, they are also a ‘complete fabrication.’ He takes one of three water bottles in his car and sprays the windshield. ‘I’ve learned from sheer disappointment that sometimes I need to take pictures, but it isn’t raining outside.’ Sometimes he sprays glycerin on the windshield, for a different kind of effect. He compares the technique to changing brushes. The size, direction and position of the drops of water on the car window inform the photograph that results. ‘There’s a difference between this and the real thing,’ he laughs. ‘You can’t get all Gerhard Richter without real rain.’ Still, within these fabricated raindrops, Hido says he can ‘compose’ the picture that he wants to see, to the best of his ability. ‘But a crucial part of photography is the moment that you hold your breath and say, “I hope it turns out.” I have a little bit of control over these images, but if I knew exactly what was going to happen each time I took a photograph, I would stop taking photographs.’ Sometimes people ask him questions like, ‘What filter do you use in *Photoshop*?’ ‘Lady, I don’t even know how to use *Photoshop*,’ is his answer, give or take a degree of politeness. ‘I don’t do anything digitally that I wouldn’t do in the darkroom.’

Hido often finds himself in small town hotels, traveling across the US for a shoot, a show-opening or a lecture. He can’t stay in those rooms, he tells me. If he wants to work on a new book, for example, he takes his materials with him in a car, parks somewhere, turns the music up and smokes a cigarette, because there’s nobody around to complain. Being in a car is a step closer to being in the world, even if a car has a door to slam shut. In those moments, his work-desk becomes the dashboard, his soundtrack comes out grainy from the car speakers, and he finds himself surrounded by the same kinetic, unclear landscapes that he so often takes back with him in a camera. Why is the view eerie from a car window? Why is there a danger inherent in the open, empty American roadside, and a sadness embedded in those monuments of network and communication (telephone wires, cross-country highways) designed to connect people, entirely isolated as they are? Hido’s works can make a viewer feel lost and at home, in tandem. One can be familiar with discomfort, after all, cozy in the warm textures and thick vapors of a depression. Hido’s landscapes have both the soft shadow of paintbrush on canvas and the blunt rawness of an interrogation light.

Now Hido drives his car some two meters to the right, puts it in park, and starts spraying water from a different bottle onto its roof, trying to angle the raindrops in a different direction. Hearing the tap, tap above us is like hearing the existing present chiseled by a fictitious one. The difference is a matter of driving two meters to the right. It’s slight, and it’s also tremendous. But Hido’s technique has its own built-in metaphor, I don’t have to create one. ‘Part of what you see in these photographs is crystal clear, despite the patches and holes in the rest of the view,’ he tells me. ‘And, really, that makes it exactly like a memory, doesn’t it?’ ●

All images 1996-2011 © Todd Hido, courtesy Stephen Wirtz Gallery

**Todd Hido** (b. 1968, USA) is an American contemporary artist and photographer. Currently based in San Francisco, much of Hido’s work involves urban and suburban housing across the U.S., of which the artist produces large, highly detailed and luminous color photographs. Hido’s work has been featured in *Artforum*, *The New York Times Magazine*, *Eyemazing*, *Wired*, *Elephant*, *I-D*, and *Vanity Fair*. His photographs are in the permanent collections of the Whitney Museum of Art, the Guggenheim Museum, New York, San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, and the Los Angeles County Museum of Art amongst others. He has over a dozen published books; his upcoming monograph titled *Excerpts from Silver Meadows* will be released in Spring 2013.

**Katya Tylevich** (Belarus) is an editor for the arts journal *Elephant*, a contributing editor for architecture publication *Mark*, and frequent contributor to journals like *Domus*, *Frame*, and *Pin-Up*, among others. As a fan of absurdist short stories, she often looks for them in art and architecture. She lives and works in Los Angeles.