

**On Alexis Auréoline, Part Two**

By: Aaron Peck

*'The echo of water in photography evokes its prehistory.'* – Jeff Wall

In his new series, Alexis Auréoline brings to mind elemental, transformative things. These cyanotypes and photographs, for example, often depict a chevron, either in the forms revealed through chemical process, or from the shape made by stacks of open books. One of the oldest known proto-linguistic signs, it first appeared carved onto objects made by Vinça craftspeople in the neo-lithic era, as well as other unrelated cultures later across the world. There is no clear sense of what it meant: whether it was decorative, spiritual, or had a specific linguistic meaning. It has since been used in a variety of ways, from indicating direction to assigning hierarchical rank. There is, of course, also the inescapable association with the multinational oil company – a choice on Auréoline's part that cannot help but appear to refer to painters, like Jasper Johns, who defamiliarized their own loaded images. In Auréoline's hands, though, his work holds the reference without feeling overwhelmed by it. This reappropriation instead has a cleansing effect — it washes the symbol via the photographic processes. In the context of some of Auréoline's previous works, which explored the relationship between wood and water – as seen in the frottages also on display here – it is hard not to imagine these chevrons as indicating direction through waterways, the ones coureur des bois used to traverse and colonize the North American continent. But, on the streets of Paris where I am writing this essay, I cannot help but notice them painted on the pavement to indicate direction for cyclists. For me, Auréoline's work has transformed these quotidian markings into something that calls to mind the water coursing below the city, its buried rivers, its sewers, its river-water flushing clean the curbs each day. It transforms Paris into the ancient waterway it actually is.

But water, particularly when reflecting on photography, is not the only element here to evoke photography's prehistory. The photographs on display here are very much about light, the light that flickers off the surface of a river, lake, or ocean, or even a photographic print. These black and white photographs of books – none of whose spines or covers are visible (are we looking at *Moby-Dick*, the memoirs of Lahontan, a political history of Louis Riel, or the writings of Gaston Bachelard?) – the books, in their piles, form shapes that again resemble chevrons. Here, as traditional photographic prints, instead of meditating on their 'liquid intelligence', they reflect on that 'dry' element that transforms liquid chemicals into an image. The subject of the photographs is thus not so much the books themselves but the way light falls on them, the way their pages catch it, like the wings of a bird.

Auréoline then takes this another step further: he intends these pictures to be displayed in direct sunlight. Knowing full well that prints displayed like this will fade, he has included in each work a secondary print, hidden in an envelope in the backing of the frame. This gesture opens the light/liquid dichotomy into a third term: material. On the back of the frame, the inclusion of an envelope – inside of which is a secondary print – highlights the way each photograph is more than the picture contained in it. It is also the material – that is, print, frame, as well as image, all of which carry information that produce the work's meaning. This small gesture – this hidden envelope – transforms what seems to be a rather elegantly simple picture into a rather elegantly complicated artwork. It is water, it is light, but it is also the intelligence embodied in things.

**Alexis Auréoline** is an artist based in Treaty One Territory and the heartland of the Métis people. Alexis's recent exhibitions include *Au (Chevron)* at L'Université de Saint-Boniface (2022), *Lune/Lumière/Photo/Paysage* at the Théâtre Cercle Molière (2021), *Waves/River* at La Maison des artistes visuels francophones (2021), *Hunkey Dorey* at La Maison des artistes visuels francophones with Jen Funk (2020), *Through A Glass Darkly* at Four Seasons NY (2018) and *Peeks of Past Sheets of Present* at Air Antwerp (2018). Residencies include; *Territoire visuels, territoires transformés* in Saskatoon, the Banff Centre for the Arts and Air Antwerp in Belgium. Alexis holds a BFA from the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design and attended the Cooper Union School of Art and Architecture as well as Hunter College in New York.

**Aaron Peck** is the author of *Jeff Wall: North & West*, *Letters to the Pacific*, and *The Bewilderments of Bernard Willis*. Over the years, he has been a regular contributor to several contemporary art magazines, including Artforum and Frieze, and a speaker at museums, such as Dia: Beacon and the Serpentine Galleries. In 2012, he was a writer in residence at dOCUMENTA 13. He currently writes for Aperture and the Times Literary Supplement.