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Trace

Cameraless Records
of Radioactive Contamination

Shimpei Takeda



Trace #3, Former Kasumigaura Naval Air Force (Ami, Ibaraki), 2012.

A photograph can be more than a mere record of light visible to the human eye. High-energy electromagnetic waves can expose photographic material as well, allowing a photograph to quite literally—but also, metaphysically—expand our sight. For his ongoing project *Trace: Cameraless Records of Radioactive Contamination*, Shimpei Takeda unites art, science, and an activist impulse to unearth the secrets buried in his family’s backyard, to create work that elicits both a sense of awe and a sense of urgency. As the title of the series suggests, Takeda exposes film and photographic printing paper to trace radiation emitted from soil contaminated by the Fukushima Daiichi Nuclear Power Plant disaster. The resulting images resemble primordial starscapes and, borrowing this visual language, underscore photography’s paradoxical ability to address but also transcend the invisible.

Following the Tōhoku earthquake and tsunami on March 11, 2011, the Fukushima Daiichi Nuclear Power Plant experi-

enced a nuclear meltdown and released radioactive materials into the surrounding air, soil, and sea, in what has been called the largest nuclear disaster since the Chernobyl catastrophe of 1986. Radiation may still, in fact, be seeping into the Fukushima prefecture, where Brooklyn-based artist Takeda was born and where his family continues to live.

Takeda, who moved to New York in 2002, has long been interested in exploring the invisible through a variety of macro-photography, extended-exposure, and experimental photograph techniques. This artistic background and technical skillset, along with the socio-political ramifications of the Fukushima disaster, led Takeda to experiment with autoradiography, in which an image is created by exposing photographic material to radioactive emissions emerging, in this case, from the Fukushima soil. The rigorous and disciplined regimen of darkroom experimentation necessary to create these stellar images may remind us of some of the methods instituted by



Trace #7, Nihonmatsu Castle (Nihonmatsu, Fukushima), 2012.

photographic pioneers such as William Henry Fox Talbot and Louis-Jacques-Mandé Daguerre. Takeda’s work, however, is decidedly less optimistic, carrying with it a lingering darkness. The images share a kinship with Hiroshi Sugimoto’s enigmatic *Lightning Fields*, Cai Guo Qiang’s primordial chaotic *Gunpowder Drawings*, and Lisa Oppenheim’s illuminating *Heliograms*.

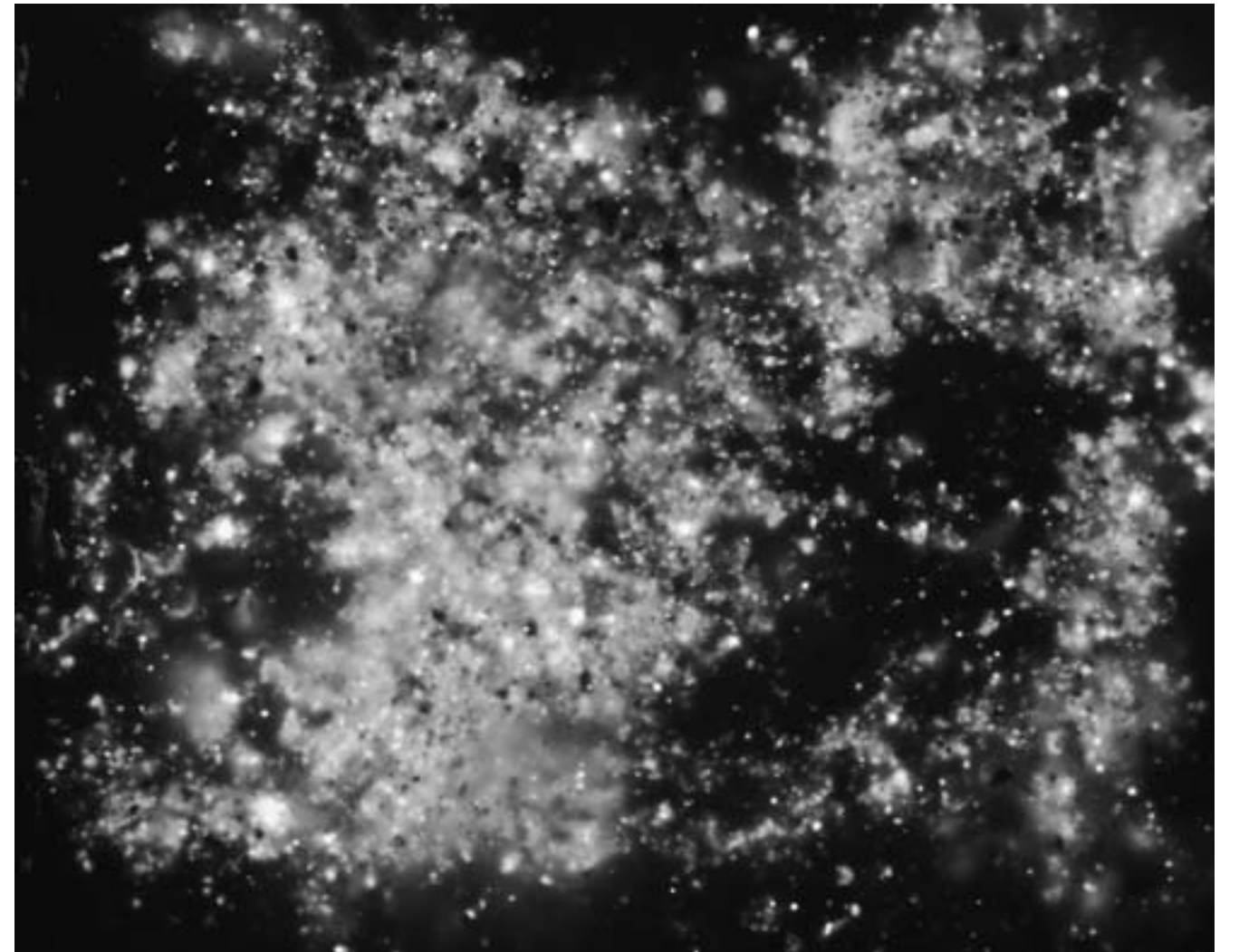
In January 2012, Takeda began working on-site in Fukushima, a practice that he still pursues as the series continues to evolve. He collects soil samples in the area surrounding the Fukushima Power Plant, in locations of both specific historical and personal significance, selecting each location for what he has called its “strong memory of life and death.” His toxic samples come from temples, shrines, battle sites, and ruins, in addition to the hospital in Sukagawa City where he was born. Once collected, he brings these samples to a darkroom where they slowly begin to create his ethereal and haunting images.

In his modestly sized, softbound account of *Trace* to date, published by SHIKA Inc. in July 2012, Takeda describes the process of collecting his soil samples as “an odd and terrifying experience ...like gathering somebody’s ashes.” Reframing, in this way, Roland Barthes’ notion of the trace, the series embodies photography’s distinctive ability to provide an often deeply needed pathway from the immaterial to the physical world. Takeda reminds us that invisible forces can often bear the heaviest of consequences.

Previous Page:
Trace #9, Asaka Kuni-tsuko Shrine (Koriyama, Fukushima), 2012.



Trace #12, Nakano Fudoson, buddhist temple (Fukushima, Fukushima), 2012.



Trace #16, Lake Hayama / Mano Dam (Iitate, Fukushima), 2012.