



## Miles Coolidge

at ACME., 8 September–3 October

The “fat of the land” is a phrase that refers to the abundance of sustenance that’s reaped from the earth in the form of fertile crops, but Miles Coolidge gives a twist to this term. His new series of photographs, titled “Central Valley,” continues his exploration of strangely scaled social spaces, from “Safetyville” and “Moundbuilders Golf Course” to an untitled series depicting institutional elevator interiors. Using a panoramic format, Coolidge’s new works highlight the breadth and flatness of the immense agricultural region of central California. Ten-inches high by eleven-feet long, each image’s extended horizontality accentuates its subject: fecund, industrial-scale farmland.

There is something to be said about skimming the fat, especially in art. What Coolidge presents are extremely lean, spare vignettes of vast tracts of cropland. Instead of buildings and people, he focuses on less monumental effects of human activity. The formats of his prints are remarkably similar: a horizon line divides the pictures into one-third green ground and two-thirds gray sky. Some superficial similarities to Dutch landscape painting are apparent, namely, the dike-and-polder formula and the bare bones, “just the facts, ma’am” aesthetic of the Protestant work ethic. But on close inspection, Coolidge’s photographs are cut from a wholly different cloth. He flattens everything out to a semifocused, low-contrast haze. The fuzziness of the views is reiterated in the vagueness of their titles; each one refers to a nearby city, or sometimes just crossroads not far from the location depicted: *Near Stockton*, *Near El Portvenir*, *Near Alpaugh 2* (all works, 1998). Trees, water tanks, machinery, mobile homes, or a stretch of phone poles lend occasional detail. The dense atmosphere pervading the photos is the only consistent evidence of the still earth’s potential—the fertile soil releasing its life-generating moisture.

*Near Tulare Lake* is the leanest, most minimal, and most successful image, a refined scan of silage punctuated intermittently by sculptural objects: a pallet, two portable outhouses, some white boxes (for bee-keeping?), and a shed. Each of these things is fixed to the plane of the earth as if it just grew there, an organic entity that attests to the effect of gravity and delineates foreshortened space. Coolidge’s photograph is a study of making something out of nothing. Perspective is indicated not by converging lines or overlapping shapes, but by the perception of adjacent geometric forms. It’s hard to tell whether the work’s implementation of good old-fashioned picture-making skills is intended or accidental. A group of cows grazing in *Near Alpaugh 3* throws a discombobulating pastoral monkey wrench into the otherwise consistently reductive works. Its overly obvious imprint of “countryside” is at odds with the spare tabletop aesthetic so deftly deployed in the artist’s other pictures.

The stretches of pancake landscape have the minimal tension inherent in sedimentary topography—if it could be seen through a speeding car’s window. Because the scenes Coolidge records contain nary a hint of dramatic vistas, romanticized peaks, breathtaking valleys, or gushing waterfalls, his images have the presence of anti-landscapes. His is the view of the Bureau of Land Management—a surveyor’s ordinance scan of the scenery. One of the subjects of this exhibition is all that is *not* seen, including the transport, regulation, and subsequent erosion that makes farming possi-

ble and occurs as its consequence. Workers laboring in the fields and shifting tectonic plates beneath the earth’s surface are only implied by Coolidge’s dispassionate dissection of the Central Valley. As an artist, he has a sense for the fringe, an interest in and ability to discover significant bits of meaning in the quotidian spaces “out there.” Could things be boiled down even further? Perhaps the show would be stronger had it been pared down from six pictures to four.

When Coolidge’s photographs focus on such essentials as arrested bits of generic land punctuated by the clues of industry, they nearly pull off a tricky feat—unsentimental landscape art. This is difficult, since almost every desert rock and ocean swell is accompanied by overtones of history or fantasy. The “Central Valley” is an odd record of a place that does not yet belong to these sentimental categories, existing for most people in the present as breadbasket and source of employment. While Coolidge’s photographs also make little side trips, masquerading as pure geometric abstraction, or indirectly commenting on contemporary land-use policies, the core of their expansive view is the minute, often-arbitrary attention to infinitesimal detail.

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Gordon Haines is an artist living near Los Angeles.

Miles Coolidge  
*Near Stratford*, 1998  
C-print  
10 7/8" x 137"