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## **Art Review: Nadav Kander's "Dark Line-The Thames Estuary"**

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By Elliott Eglash

How do you memorialize something that hasn’t died yet? The question sounds philosophical, but any newspaper editor (if there are any left alive) could tell you that the answer is actually quite simple: you write the obituary first, and then when the death in question does occur, you’re ready to publish and/or grieve—whichever the situation requires.

Nadav Kander’s “Dark Line—The Thames Estuary,” currently showing at the Flowers Gallery, feels like an unpublished obituary for a not-yet-dead ecosystem. Across nine vertical images of the point where the River Thames meets the sea, Kander captures an ecosystem in subtle flux. The tide comes in and goes back out; in one image, the waves bubble and surge, while in another the water lies flat as glass; over the course of the series, the color of the sky grades from a chemical yellow to matte graphite, then darkens to a blue so deep you could drown in it.

Indeed, Kander’s show lives and breathes (or doesn’t) by its colors. The show is dark in every sense of the word: lightless images of an industrially blighted landscape, apt to produce in the viewer thoughts and affects that are similarly gloomy and morose. But more than that, his images feel almost like photographic Rothkos: two large swaths of color, vertically stacked. But unlike Rothko, who eschewed all traces of representation in order to achieve a purer mode of abstraction, Kander abstracts real life. He captures a familiar setting in a light that obscures all detail, reducing the sky and the sea almost to geometric forms, colored rectangles bisected by a horizontal line—that is, the horizon. This lighting makes his landscapes feel ghostly, hollow, uninhabited, an effect enhanced by the barely discernible presence of small aberrations on the horizon, which only a closer inspection reveals for what they are: buildings, glistening and nearly disappearing in the fog.

Closer inspection tends to reveal a wealth of hidden, darkened detail: reeds swaying in the breeze, ripples slinking away from an unseen source, the suggestion of some wrecks sunk beneath the surface. Moreover, the images seem to invite literally closer contemplation, both in their framing and in their content. The pictures are roughly human-sized, and sited low to the ground, giving them the unexpected appearance of doorways, portals to a distant land. And when the viewer approaches one of these doorways, she might find that the dark line of the horizon seems to shimmer and sway, as if floating. (I stared so long that the horizon seemed in danger of opening, like a mouth, and swallowing me whole—but perhaps that was just me.)

The most striking element of the show, however, was the set of three objects recovered by Kander from the Thames—a rock, a tangle of fishing line, and the like, floating in a basin of murky blue water. He encountered these pieces of detritus, these artifacts, in the course of photographing his subject—he actually trawled them himself—and brought them back to include in his exhibition. Viewers are invited to submerge their hands in the basins and get a good feel of the detritus, to approximate the experience that Kander had encountering this wreckageon location. The objects feel a bit gimmicky, like an aquatic petting zoo, though I suspect that this is the point, for Kander records not a pristine marine ecosystem, but a river that has been dirtied, abused, and diminished by centuries of industrial, human activity. He preserves the Thames not in its original, Edenic splendor, but in its currently polluted, postlapsarian state, when waders are more likely to encounter washed-up bits of plastic tubing than anything still living. Kander’s bleakly beautiful photographs do this same memorializing, only better. They make you grieve for a landscape that is not yet gone, but is, like a river, headed only in one direction.

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