
RE-SURVEYING: Measuring Site

JAMES GEURTS

ZHULONG
GALLERY



Recent commissions include: *The Presence of Giants*, Arts Victoria Public Sculpture Commission (2014); *Magnetic Eclipse*, a solstice light sculpture on Sun Pier, TONE Festival commission Medway River, UK (2014); *Drawing: Tidal Topographies*, shown at Dalhousie Art Gallery's Place Markers exhibition in Halifax (2012); *Drawing: Horizon*, a solar light sculpture, staged on the coastline of the North Sea in The Hague (2010). His work has been presented by institutions including GEMAK Netherlands, Centre for Contemporary Art Tel Aviv Israel, La Chambre Blanche Quebec, Australian Center for Contemporary Art and White Cube London.

Introduction:

In *RE-SURVEYING: Measuring Site*, conceptual land artist James Geurts draws out the subterranean and terrestrial rhythms of the earth. His explorations take form as major permanent public art commissions, temporary site-specific installations, as well as gallery mounted works of his field research including photography, video, and sculpture. This survey exhibition also features newly created work culminating from his month-long residency in Dallas, TX.

Geurts' practice has taken him the world over. This survey exhibition is an extension of an ongoing dialogue between the director and artist, and the works on display carefully locate 'paradigms of measurement' and 'psychogeographic methods' as they have unfolded over extended periods of field research. How do we fathom a tide and axis of a rotating earth, or the phenomenon of a horizon? Through artifacts and live-feed recordings from site, the exhibition illustrates how the artist expands on artistic waves like Earthworks, New Topographics, and even landscape painting to deliver in contrast a psychic understanding of place that inverts the culture verses nature falsehood. The works throw into relief the impact of vision on our understanding of the landscape as separate and other.

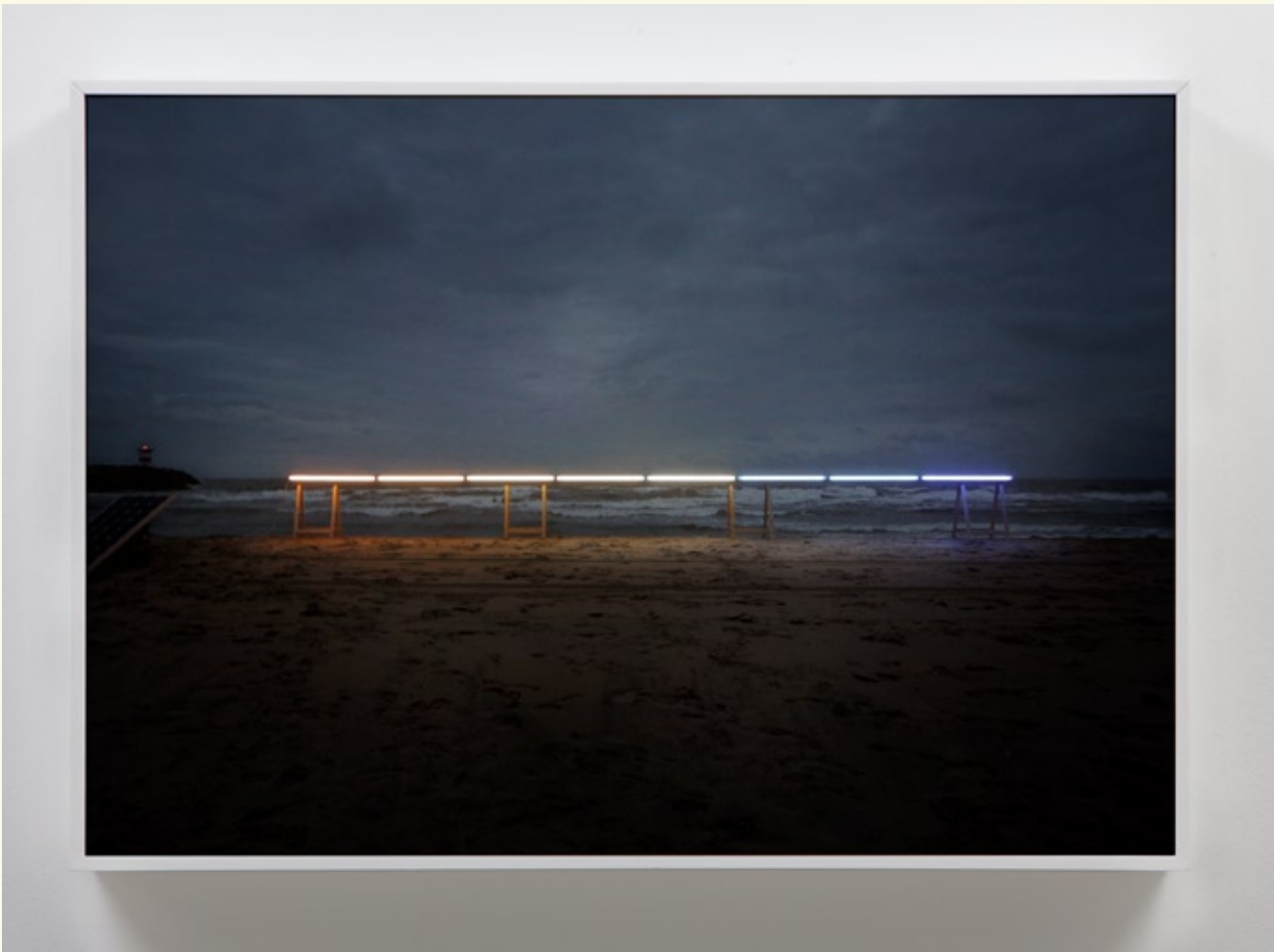
James Geurts lives and works in Melbourne and London. He has produced large-scale, site and time-specific projects and gallery works in international contexts since 2002.

Cover (front and back):
INTL Timeline, 2014.
Neon 9 ft x 11 in, solar
panel 64 1/2 x 39 1/8.
Dimensions variable.
Photo courtesy
Kevin Todora (2014).

Color plate 1:
23 1/2 ° Orbital Horizon,
2014. Resin, copper,
Plexiglas, shelf
1 1/2 x 12 5/16 x
13/16 in.
Photo courtesy
Kevin Todora (2014).

Right:
Spatial expansion #3:
Oceans Passage, 2014.
Photographic print,
mounted
16 1/4 in x 26 ft x 6 in.
Photo courtesy
Jonathan Zizzo (2014).





RE-SURVEYING: Measuring Site

In *Drawing Horizon* (2010), a single strip of fluorescent lights grade from soft peach, to white, then blue. (fig.1) The tubes follow one another from warmest in temperature to coolest mimicking the gradation of colors emanating from where the sun sets. The sculpture pretends to draw over the horizon, tracing the illusionistic line where the ocean meets the sky. In the top half of the picture, overcast skies stretch back, and below the bar of light waves ripple and curl onto the shore. Conceptual land artist James Geurts highlights the horizon on the North Sea in The Hague emphasizing the illusion, but also our urge to ‘fathom’ our surroundings. The illuminated work symbolizes our most basic mark to indicate place—the simple horizontal line drawn across a rectangle or square space. In this and other works, Geurts philosophically questions the

notions of beginning and end by extending and making perceivable the unending passage of time.

Our place within—and our visual language for perceiving—the landscape are for James Geurts utterly engaging. Durational experiences such as artist residencies, research, and fieldwork inform Geurts’ inquiries into the perception of landscape and the effects of focused landscape experiences on psychology; they are a component of the medium, as is the land. The works—from drawings, sculptures and photographic abstractions made of a range of outmoded technologies like Polaroid film, 8mm film, and other analog imaging systems—frame perception and absorb the *durée*. Turning away from new media tools, Geurts seems to have identified a slower, more historical way of looking to spite the 10,000 flickering images we

are presented with in a day’s time. Geurts engages technology of today as a means to present technology of yesterday embedded within the abstracted images he records: digitizing carefully drawn observations, creating digital video pieces that are recordings of yet older mediums recording the subject matter. (fig. 2)

fig. 1 *Drawing: Horizon*, 2010. North Sea Den Haag, Netherlands. Durotran print, lightbox. Photo courtesy Kevin Todora (2014).

fig. 2 *Tidal Black & White*, 2012. Digital video. Dimensions vary. Photo Courtesy Kevin Todora (2014).





Cameras capture and record, the results imply a frozen moment, an instant, or an encapsulated time frame. Geurts, however, is a member of a group of photographers who choose to wrestle with the medium, repurpose, destroy it, and rebuild it to create a system for abstraction. In *Drawing Psychogeography 3: Bass Straight* (2008) and *Drawing Psychogeography 9: St Lawrence River*, (2009), Geurts shoots a polaroid image of the landscape, then peels the film open exposing the inside of the photograph to the atmosphere. (figs. 3, 4) He turns an instantaneous figuration into a durational litmus that records atmospheric qualities like humidity, pollution, debris, and most significantly light as it reflects off the terrain and reacts with the emulsions of the polaroid.



fig. 3 *Drawing Psychogeography 3: Bass Straight*, 2008. Wilsons Promontory, Australia. Photographic print, 47 ¼ x 39 5/8 in. Photo courtesy Kevin Todora (2014).

fig. 4 *Drawing Psychogeography 9: St Lawrence River*, Frozen, 2009. Chicoutimi, Quebec. Photographic print, 47 ¼ x 39 5/8 in. Photo courtesy Kevin Todora (2014).

Geurts' experiments serve as chemical recordings of the atmosphere, environment, light and other less tangible qualities of place collected in various locations. This ongoing series of abstract photographs are referred to as 'psychogeographies' and speak to an alternative mapping system, though. Raw data is machined into an interpretive and contemplative imprint of a complete, almost synaesthetic

period of time. In the pairing *Drawing Psychogeography 3* and *9*, photographs of the landscape in Wilsons Promontory, Australia and Chicoutimi, Quebec, though taken a year and thousands of miles apart, appear as a pair of day and night landscape images of a potentially similar, but very distinct terrain. Digitally enlarged reproductions of the exposed films increase the impact of the works and perhaps also the amount of time spent in front of them. The eroded edges of each work bears resemblance to the color spectrum seen through light and water; the edges become permeable boundaries slowly degrading the frame that binds the image. The viewer can stand at the center of either of these works and observe their faint reflection within the landscape image, but at the same time comb through its distant details, a mound of root bound sand, or brilliant moon-light casting powerful blocks of light through passing nocturnal clouds. As the 'psychogeographies' take the form of Polaroids, the snapshot effect plays out as the viewer is framed and viewing the place simultaneously.

Of historical significance are the experiments with light and landscape features like the horizon line during the Dutch Golden age of painting. In works like *View of Haarlem, with Bleaching Fields* (c.1670) and *The Valley* (c.1631) we see how artists worked to evoke an emotional response to the landscape through perception with the horizon line as a sort of visual thermometer. (figs. 5, 6) Low horizon lines, as seen in the classical phase of Dutch painting, are sublime with their majestic looming skies that almost suffocate the viewer. As the horizon line was pushed up into the top register of the paintings, as seen in *The Valley*; a sense of never-ending land, bounty, and potential shifts the viewer down into the landscape.

Further fusing Geurts' practice with that of the Dutch school is a shared fascination with mechanical means of abstracting or reiterating visual phenomenon. Machined light played an important role in Dutch painting through use of the camera obscura. It seems that painters like Vermeer sought also to fathom the particular quality of Dutch light by mechanical means.



fig. 5 Jacob van Ruisdael, *View of Haarlem, with Bleaching Fields* (c.1670). Courtesy Kunsthaus, Zurich, Stiftung L. Ruzicka.



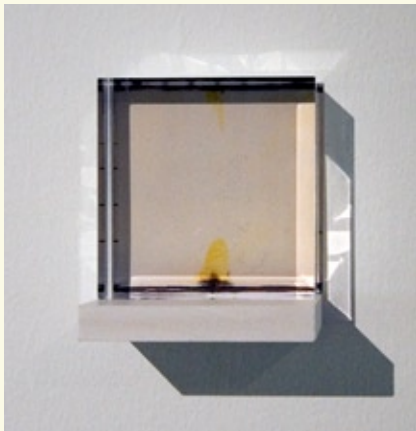
fig. 6 Cornelis Vroom, *The Valley*, (c.1631). Berlin-Dahlem, Staatliche Museen, Kupferstichkabinett.



fig. 7 Michael Heizer, *Double Negative* Mormon Mesa, Overton, NV, 1969-70. Photo courtesy University of California, San Diego.



fig. 8 *Magnetic Eclipse*, 2014. Site and time specific light installation Solstice, Medway River UK Durotran print, light box, 16 x 16 x 4 in. Photo courtesy Kevin Todora (2014).



figs. 9A, 9B Details of:
Atlas III, 2014.
Plexiglas, photographic
prints, and
shelves.
Dimensions vary.
Photo courtesy
Kevin Todora (2014).

in the 60s and 70s, Geurts' practice is more akin to light tracing (figs. 7, 8). He often uses lights and other non-permanent means to highlight earthly phenomenon, recording the large scale sculptures as additional sculptures, light boxes, and other forms.

As Zhulong Gallery's first artist-in-residence, Geurts brings his site-specific practice to Dallas where he conducted research, worked with local artists, and created studies that explore the 'psychogeography' of the downtown area and Trinity River. In the installation *Atlas III* (2014), a prominent triptych of works image the landscape surrounding the Trinity River, and over twenty other sites take their places as crystalline markers on a conceptual world map. (figs. 9A, 9B and 11). This work orients the viewer within the artist's larger practice and illustrates Geurts' tendency to abstract the already abstracted language of maps.

A survey of drawings and photographs from around the globe are re-presented in a manner that also initiates and highlights perception. The thick blocks of Plexiglas with mis-matched polished and rough facets suspend miniature reproductions of drawings, video stills, and photographic works against the wall

and behave in a manner that plays up the importance of the viewer's position, even height. Ambient light from the gallery and other works placed around the space penetrate, reflect, and alter the crystalline structures and emphasize the reflective qualities of contemplation. From straight on the small images seem magnified, and from an angle light travels through the small blocks creating vanishing points, reflections, and a temporary nullification of the image. Movement around the works heightens the experience and points back to Geurts' major focus on perception and psychology. The individual works are each significant, but the durational experience of navigating the entire installation embodies the sense of *durée* found within Geurts' entire *oeuvre*. A delicate horizontal grouping cuts across the center of the installation, at each end two works mark Kiribati. This gesture shows how *Atlas III* goes beyond the idea of time as it relates to travel. Imaging one site twice, *Atlas III* takes on the rotation of the planet. Implementing a loop, Geurts points to continuation, repetition and the almost unfathomable rotation of our planet. The ideas of beginning and end become lost in the arrangement. The almost hyphenated narrative is shifted, denying a travelogue reading and in its stead, *Atlas III* proposes abstraction, motion, and duration. These works,

(fig. 10) Installation
view of

(LEFT) *Drawing Visual Mass: Port Phillip Bay, Cumulonimbus*, 2014. Williamstown, Victoria Site-specific durational work on paper reproduced as archival pigment print on hahnemuhle paper, 39 1/2 x 23 3/4 in.

(RIGHT) *Drawing In, Drawing Out: Sydney Harbour to Pacific Ocean*, 2014. High Tide 02:60 (6.3m) - Low Tide 08:21 (.4m) - High Tide 14:27 (6.3m) Site-specific durational works on paper reproduced as archival pigment print on hahnemuhle paper, 39 1/2 x 248 1/4 in. Photos courtesy Kevin Todora (2014).

Situating Geurts' practice in more recent historical trends, the radically conceptual wave of Minimalism speaks to the artists' phenomenologic approach to the landscape especially those Minimalist works considered as Land Art or Earthworks. Specific moments in art history include Richard Irwin attempting to capture the light of a moment in the desert, or, Tony Smith's acknowledgement of having no way to express the feeling of a drive along an empty highway. These landscape works not only point to the longevity and fecundity of the landscape for artists, but also to the influence and flexibility of technology to capture and repeat the view. Land artists like Smithson, DeMaria, and Judd also provide context for the 'expanded field' of 60s art practice outlined by Rosalind Krauss and put to use throughout Geurts' career. What was Land Art in the out of doors became Minimalist work in the galleries. But, unlike the exuberant marking and putting upon of the landscape seen





and others found within this exhibition initiate a durational mapping, or form of time-map.

As a whole, this survey lays out Geurts' fluency in multi-media. The exhibition includes drawing, video, photographic abstraction, and sculpture made over the last seven years, and several works crafted while in residence in Dallas. For Geurts all media can be employed at any time during research or process. After historical geographic and geologic research that he conducts prior to arriving, Geurts' first action in a place is often observational drawing based on some phenomenon or special place. The process of situating one's self within the landscape and slipping onto a mode of seeing that is externalized through gesture is to embody the landscape in a way. Moving just past the *Atlas III* installation, examples of these drawings, like *Drawing Visual Mass: Port Phillip Bay, Cumulonimbus* demonstrate periods of drawn out observation. (fig. 10) Behind two orientating directional symbols, Geurts registers a cloudscape and the process of transpiration in the water

below. The repetition of line in dense then looser strata imply the act of meditative repetition during process and therefore, time. The detailed spacing though, tells of the sensitivity Geurts takes to each mark. The rose-colored reflection is stretched upward, toward the horizon line and the sky. A subtle register of grey bands reveal the digital processing of what was an original drawing. Geurts creates a study of the ongoing formation of clouds resulting from the absorption of water from the ocean. In its companion piece in the exhibition, *Drawing In, Drawing Out: Sydney Harbour to Pacific Ocean*, a pair of graphite drawings originally made in situ at the Sydney Harbor, *Drawing In* and *Drawing Out* (2013) were digitally scanned and stitched together, the graphite lines at the outer edges attenuated to the point that the orientation of the images is converted from portrait to landscape. What were originally two intimate graphite portraits of a tidal phenomenon take on qualities of a topographic ocean map. Again, directional indicators offer encapsulated horizons and a sort of orientation for the viewer.

Sculptural works in the exhibition including *90° Equatorial Project* (2007-14), *Atlas II* (2014), *23 ½° Orbital Horizon* (2014), and *Re-Surveying* (2014) represent an abstract toolset. (figs. 12, 13, color plate 1 and fig. 14) Geurts sees poetry in *how* we see as well as what we see. He even points out the fallacy in how we make sense of what we see, with neologisms like 'earthrise' and 'earthset.' In *Atlas II*, Geurts mounts a colorfully patterned replica of a 1950s topographic atlas key on top of a drawing of the North Texas geologic region, which has been fabricated in white acrylic. The machined edges of the acrylic, tinged a midnight blue from the equipment, point back to the graphite drawings and the interest in the machined in this exhibition.

In one of the two found objects in the exhibition, *Re-Surveying*, the artist altered an antique wooden survey tripod casting its viewfinder and plum bob in amber resin blocks. (fig. 14) A formal intervention on the still functional, but no longer used equipment, the frozen

fig. 11 *Atlas III*, 2014. Plexiglas, photographic prints, and shelves. Dimensions variable. Photo courtesy Kevin Todora (2014).



fig. 12 90° Equatorial Project, 2007-14. White and black Plexiglas, photograph, fluorescent tubes, and wire, 23 x 23 x 23 in. Photo courtesy Kevin Todora (2014).

durational drawings, and adjacent to *Drawing Psychogeography 9: St. Lawrence River*, with *Tidal Black and White* stretching across the gap between them, this moment in the exhibition is a visual metaphor for the mapping, mechanical recording, and indexes of the landscape seen in the exhibition. (fig. 15) When standing just in front of the work, most viewers can't resist the urge to peer into the viewfinder as if some view may magically reveal it-self on the other end.

Instead of a picturesque or arid landscape image, the keen observer notices the zigzags of cerulean light inside the lens, one larger and more faint. From across the gallery, the light sculpture *INTL Timeline* is captured by the lens in *Re-Surveying*.

These moves obscure the intended viewing point in the amber, and invert the view through the lens into a refracting frame.

In Geurts' larger practice, sculptural works like *INTL Timeline*, *Magnetic Eclipse* (fig. 8), and *Standing Wave: Drawing Resonance* are referred to as 'light constructs.' These powerful sculptures tell the stories of the geography like memorials to earthly and cosmic cycles. Summer solstice, the break of day, and the phenomenal quality of a standing wave are celebrated, if only even traced out for us to see, illuminated temporarily. Light figures into Geurts' practice formally and conceptually. As the core of sight and the experience of vision, James Geurts celebrates this universal principle, or energy, in a way that tells a story, an old story, an ongoing story, but through the post-modern lens, if not a few of them.

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Director | Zhulong Gallery

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September 6—October 11, 2014.



fig. 13 Atlas II, 2014. Photographic print, white Plexiglas, 23 x 6 x 1 in. Photo courtesy Kevin Todora (2014).



fig. 14 Re-Surveying: Measuring Site, 2014. Amber resin, surveying scope, antique wooden tripod, plumb, 63 x 32 3/4 x 32 3/4 in. Photo courtesy Kevin Todora (2014).

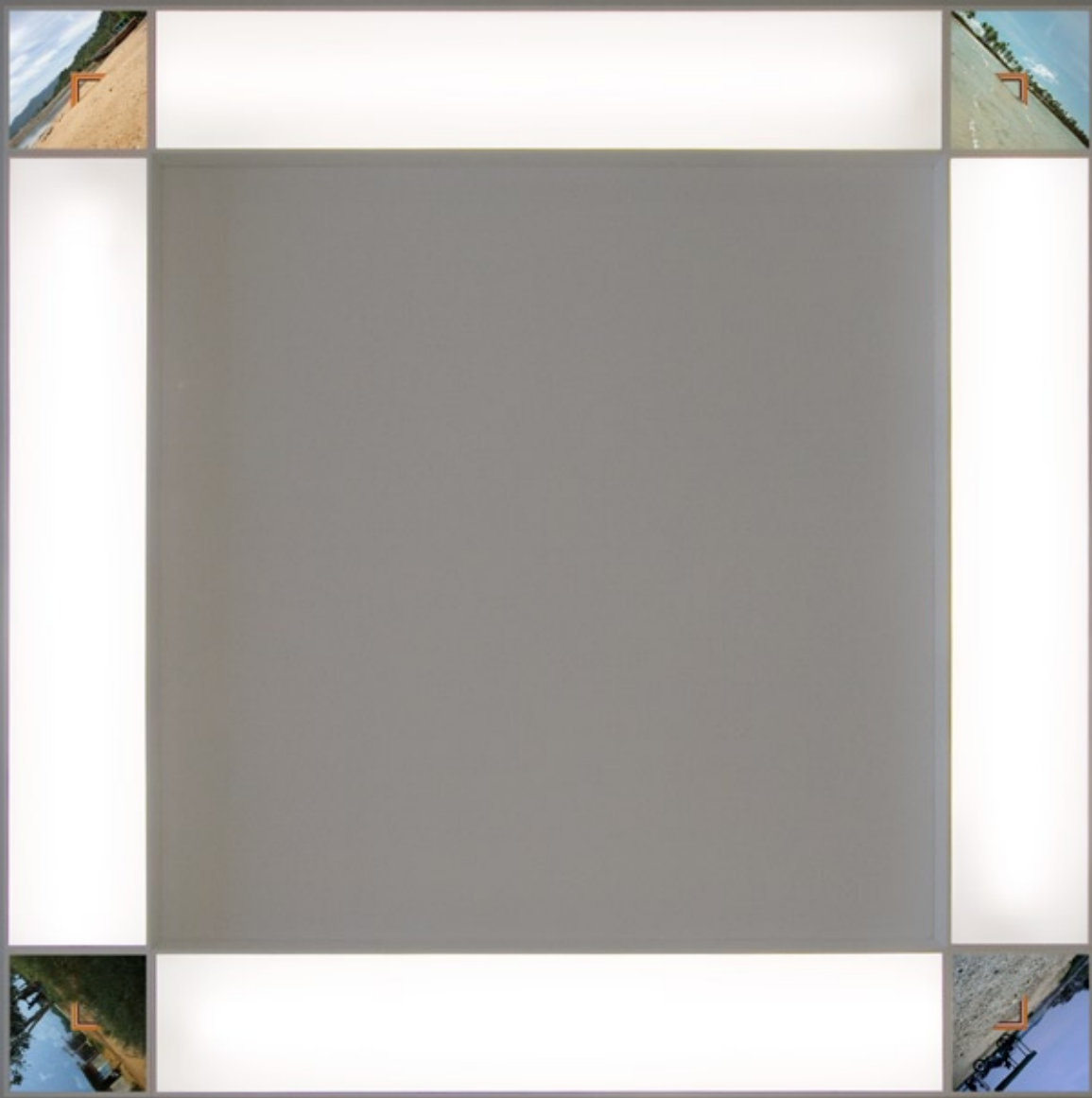
object is altered just so, into a form that references a myriad of other tools used for machining the view. Geurts freezes the implements in resin as if to enact an instantaneous fossilization. The rectangular form atop the tripod emits a sort of iconic aura around the galleries. It calls to memory a sort of beginning of image-finding, a time when the photograph was a much more formal matter during the original surveying of the American west.

Placed just in front of the

(figs. 16, cover, 17) The reflection, in its abstractness and ephemerality, formally relates to the international time line and its imaginary quality. Of course, if there were an actual time-line, it would not zig and zag according to the language of geography, it would form a shaded arc across the globe. The yellow line sits to the right of center within the bay, tethered to an electric converter, a stopping point between it and the readymade solar panel looming in the nearby corner.

fig. 15 Installation detail: Re-Surveying: Measuring Site, 2014. Photo courtesy Jonathan Zizzo (2014).





Color plate:
90° Equatorial Project,
2007-14. Durotran
prints with light box,
10ft x 10ft x 4 in.
Photo courtesy
Kevin Todora (2014).





fig. 15 Installation detail: Re-Surveying: Measuring Site, 2014. Photo courtesy Kevin Todora (2014).

