

PAUL HART

RECLAIMED | Dewi Lewis Publishing



The concluding part of the Fenland series with an essay by Isabelle Bonnet **DENATURED LANDSCAPE**

Paul Hart's new book RECLAIMED concludes his three-part series on The Fens in the UK. The first two books FARMED (*Dewi Lewis 2016*) and DRAINED (*Dewi Lewis 2018*) have won a number of international awards and received considerable critical acclaim. In 2018 work from the series was awarded the inaugural Wolf Suschitzky Photography Prize (*Austria/UK*) and in 2019 shortlisted for the Hariban Award (*Japan*).

The Fens, originally a region of low-lying marshland in the east of England, has been artificially drained over centuries to provide some of Britain's most fertile agricultural land. It is a landscape of agribusiness with monoculture at its core, defined by human migration and long-term reclamation from the sea.

Paul Hart has photographed the area for over ten years. His narrative examines the complex interrelation between humanity and nature and raises important questions about human-altered topography and our occupation and stewardship of this land. By focusing on the often-overlooked elements in familiar vistas Hart's aesthetics carry a documentary sensibility that allow the landscapes to define themselves. He works solely with the analogue process employing traditional darkroom practice to convey something of the soulful in a landscape that is rarely considered of aesthetic merit.

As the respected French curator and writer Isabelle Bonnet states in her insightful introductory essay ; "Hart's landscapes create a dialogue between art and document, lyricism and storytelling, the sublime and the ordinary. Almost everywhere, rectilinear and regular shapes unfold, impeccably drawn furrows responding to rows of trees, industrial constructions and metal structures... No movement animates this *nature morte*, no bird awakens these low and heavy skies and endless horizons... Unlike the sort of landscape photography that long incarnated the collective and historical body of the nation, Hart's images take on a universal value : the battered and exhausted Fens resonate like a subtle metaphor for what humanity engenders and inflicts on itself."

## PAUL HART

**Paul Hart** has exhibited internationally at galleries including ; The Austrian Cultural Forum London, The Royal Academy of Art, The Photographers' Gallery, The Royal Photographic Society and The Cultural Foundation ARCADE (*Dijon, France*), and at major art fairs including Paris Photo, Photo London and AIPAD New York. His work resides in important collections including the V&A Museum, the Ivor Braka Collection, and the MoMA Library (*USA*).

**Isabelle Bonnet** is a photography art historian, writer and curator based in Paris. She holds an MA in Art History from Paris 1 Sorbonne, where she is currently studying for a PhD. Before resuming her studies she worked for 25 years in fashion photography in Paris and New York. In 2019, she curated the exhibition *Home Sweet Home* for the Rencontres d'Arles and the Institut pour la Photographie of Lille, and is the author of the eponymous book published by Textuel.

---

# PAUL HART

## REVIEWS | FARMED & DRAINED

“Paul Hart is a photographer interested in the slow harvesting of hidden truth from the ordinary places that most of us pass by. He works in an unfashionable idiom with slow cumbersome equipment (not just old-fashioned analogue photography, but medium format analogue photography, slower still) in an unfashionable place. He seeks to find the bits of the land that speak their stories, and to transmit their importance in views which, typically, the absolute lack of melodrama demands slow looking and brings slow revelation. Hart’s placid, formally peaceful landscape is pregnant with stories that lurk in the mud or the mist. His magic lies in soliciting from his viewers the same half historical, half romantic reaction to ploughed fields and straight drainage ditches as he gets from them himself.”

*Francis Hodgson | Picturing the Polder - DRAINED*

“Hart’s first book in his series, *Farmed*, to some extent shows what is now left behind... we are shown a land once used and then discarded by human progress. *Drained* doesn’t just extend this narrative, it deepens it by leading us further into the Fens along the waterways and roads we know to be man-made, and yet which feel so far from the modern world we now inhabit... Together the images in *Drained* say something to me about ideas of space and time in relation to human history. In *Drained*... I feel compelled to pause and look into each image - I feel I recognise it, but I don’t know it. The longer I look, the deeper I am drawn in. I am left with more questions than answers.”

*Tim Butcher | fLIP Magazine | London Independent Photography*

“Among many other resonant lines in *Walden*, Thoreau wrote, “*It’s not what you look at that matters, it’s what you see.*” These words find fulfilment in the dedicated, delicate vision of Paul Hart. While other photographers dash to the corners of the earth to “*discover*” something new, Hart has realised that the challenge of seeing is great enough on its own and can be realised by simply opening your door and taking a fresh look at the world which is waiting, right in front of you.”

*Alexander Strecker | LensCulture*

“When photographer Paul Hart set out to photograph the Fens his aim was not only to describe the physical place but to comment on man’s effect on it. The work sits between documentary and landscape and slips seamlessly into fine art.”

*Elizabeth Roberts | B&W Photography Magazine*

## PAUL HART

“The landscapes in Paul Hart’s latest book, *Farmed*, are at once beautiful and beleaguered, full and empty, alive and dead. The disappearances between these conditions are the true subjects. One feels their presence in every photograph.”

*Steven Collier Brown | OD Review v1.7*

“In these gently challenging pictures, it’s as if the land is in quiet conflict with the roads and the tracks, the power lines and the telegraph poles, the trenches cut into it and the invisible machines which have ploughed it. Buildings are slowly swallowed by trees, derelict caravans are abandoned to the land, and pylons disappear into the fog. A quiet tussle between humans and nature is being fought. How long will our mastery over these flatscapes last before nature takes them back? The pictures pose such questions without declaring a victor, or even taking sides...”

Classic, but neither modernist nor pictorial, *Farmed* evokes photographic history without over-relying on any of it. Sagely ambivalent, it looks simple and obvious, but is complicated and weighty. And it is – in its own quiet way – extraordinarily beautiful. Can we ask any more of art than that?”

*Simon Bowcock | Photomonitor*

“What makes *FARMED* stand out from other such analogue landscape series is how these pictures do not insist on remaining stuck in the past. Of course, any thoughtful gaze at deteriorating rural buildings and emptied agricultural tracts runs the risk of feeling nostalgic, romantic or even elegiac. But Hart manages to balance his lovingly attentive regard for the past with an ambiguous eye towards the present and future that confront us, if we care to look.

The most obvious example of this tension greets us in the middle of the book. We open to two facing photographs—*Fontaine Le Dun I* and *II*—which reveal a pair of wind turbines, whirring amidst great and overwhelming stillness. A ruinous encroachment of man on the environment, or new potentialities for the seemingly fallow land? Just like that, a book of black-and-white photographs shifts from sentimental to prescient. The carefully composed farmhouses, solitary trees on the horizon, criss-crossing telephone lines and bounded canals are not simply one man’s reflections on the changing local landscape—instead, they are an important meditation on all of humanity’s relationship to the environment... In this respect, the book’s final three images are memorable. Two of them, side-by-side, reveal perfectly parallel power lines vanishing into the misty horizons of the distance. Where will our control over the land lead? Impossible to say, but Hart’s magnificent images help us look and trace the question as far as our vision can carry. On the last page, a tiny stream draws us toward the centre of the frame before petering out of sight. Above, a neutral, uncaring sky. What comes next is really up to us.”

*Alexander Strecker | LensCulture*