Press Pictures

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In December 2005, Mike Osborne began making photographs inside the Austin American-Statesman printing facility. Still in progress, his Press Pictures series comprises roughly a hundred images of the objects and processes contained within this industrial space. Marked by intense color and compelling geometries, Osborne’s photographs comment on the physical production of language, more specifically, they document the manufacture of mass media texts, both verbal and pictorial. Within this language factory, inked rollers, colossal spoons of paper and massive printing machines come to the fore as raw components of communication—components that have very little to do with subjects, objects or verbs.

Despite the literalness of images like 1 and 15 (all untitled), Osborne’s Press Pictures are marked by the fundamental confusion of their most basic elements: ink, motion and text. Consider image 16, a stable composition consisting of three rectangular sections: a large wash of charcoal, irregular in its intensity, a narrow band of white above it and a large wash of light grey at the top. Though there is little to observe in this image beyond the relationship of its tonalities, the photograph contains more linguistic content than any other in the series. Any pigment put on newsprint was necessitated by the presence of a word—a word that a writer was paid a few cents for and whose accuracy will determine the informational value of the page. But, photographed during its transmission from author to public, this word whirs past mutely, without communicative merit. We are accustomed to such distortions when they happen digitally—when words turn into ones and zeros—but Press Pictures demonstrates temporary oscillations between communicative states in a purely mechanical environment. It doesn’t matter whether the words move at the speed of light or at a few hundred feet per second. Once they have surpassed the speed of perception, we have lost access to them—at least in a state that depends on resemblance for recognition. Paradoxically, we return to a pre-photographic moment: a time when images could not keep pace with life.

But with what, specifically, must a photograph keep pace? Roland Barthes famously found photography a remarkable medium because it is “only perceived verbalized.”

Verbalized perception, however, depends upon the objects in a photograph being presented recognizably, which is only sometimes the case in Osborne’s work. Verbalization gets blocked by speed and scale in Press Pictures, as the images recover only their subjects’ most basic properties. At this accelerated tempo and magnified degree, there is little difference between the unstructured pigments in 11 and 6, neither of which is perceived in a state of verbalization more developed than “red” and “wet,” or “stripes” and “triangle.”

Perhaps a bit of melancholy comes with knowing that the ink in image 16 was once structurally significant, or that the ink in 2 will become meaningful—but not to us. This somber frustration is a marker of communication denied—our inability to recode a crude state. From this vantage, printed language appears to be the recovery of information through remediation. Osborne’s photographs are born as a tool of vision and a stab at recording—a hope that faster eyes (organic or otherwise) can recover reconciliability from a stream of lost meaning.

Image 1 appears on page 22; image 2 on page 24; images 3–6 on page 25 (clockwise from upper left); images 7–10 on page 26 (clockwise from upper left); image 11 on page 27; image 12–15 on page 28 (clockwise from upper left); and image 16 on page 29.