

Simon van Til

b. 1985, Doesburg, The Netherlands
Lives and works in Amsterdam

'I took a walk along the seashore one night, on the deserted beach. It wasn't cheerful, but not sad either, it was – beautiful.

The sky, a deep blue, was flecked with clouds of a deeper blue than primary blue, an intense cobalt, and with others that were a lighter blue – like the blue whiteness of milky ways. Against the blue background stars twinkled, bright, greenish, white, light pink – brighter, more glittering, more like precious stones than at home – even in Paris. So it seems fair to talk about opals, emeralds, lapis, rubies, sapphires. The sea a very deep ultramarine – the beach a mauvish and pale reddish shade, it seemed to me – with bushes.'

Vincent van Gogh to his brother Theo, Les Saintes-Maries-de-la-Mer, on or about Sunday, 3 or Monday, 4 June 1888 (letter 619)

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Moonlight fascinated Vincent. One reason for that, other than the delightfully untameable quality of darkness, was that moonlight does the same thing he was striving for in his paintings: it makes the world, the colours we see, more intense and mysterious. Looking at Simon van Til's photos, we immediately sense that mystery. Van Til tends to explain this in technical terms. As a photographer, he's interested in the effects of light, the way photographic images change over time, and methods of capturing light and time in a photo. That explains why Van Til likes to explore the technical possibilities of his analogue camera. The resulting images often seem to come from another era or another world – in this case, from the moon.

To create this picture, Van Til combined two of his experiments. First of all, he took the photograph outdoors, under a full moon; the light we see is pure, unadulterated, deeply romantic moonlight. That alone gives the photograph an elusive, mysterious atmosphere. Van Til reinforces this effect with

another 'trick'. He took two photos on the same negative; in other words, the image is actually made up of two moments. And he takes this familiarisation still further by using an exotic, nineteenth-century vase – in other words, a vase from Van Gogh's time. Through this combination of factors, Van Til undermines what we normally regard as the essence of photography: one picture, taken at one moment. But what's the significance of that? In any case, the viewer is subtly misled. The soft lighting and moon-like background put you in a dreamy mood at first, but the perfect duplication of the vase is a rude awakening. What am I looking at? Is it real? Is one object at two different times still the same object? Or is it the mystery of the moon that brings about miraculous transformations like this one? That's the most intriguing thing about Van Til's work; although it arises from his interest in technique, light, and the roots of photography, the result lifts you out of the mundane world, into vistas far beyond the limits of technical laws.

Untitled, 2015

10.2 x 12.7 cm
Silver gelatin print on baryta paper



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