

Bill Jacobson is a photographer, but his soft-focus color work opposes anything even approaching the flagrant facts of documents. He descends beneath the surface and stays there. His deliberate obfuscations are not part of photography's recurring interest in glamorizing softness that seeks beauty for its own sake. Jacobson's art is as fragile as butterfly wings. Some images recall the blurred-retina landscapes with figures by the late-nineteenth and early twentieth-century Austrian photographer Heinrich Kühn. But Kühn, in the thrall of Impressionism, idealized the splendors of broad daylight. Jacobson's devotion to twilight rejects bedazzlement and through introspection suspends thought and action. His aims are close in spirit to the ancient wisdom of Chinese painters. Rejecting explicit subjects, avoiding resemblance, they acknowledged the "visible-invisible" aspect of all things. They "interiorized the external world" by painting it, contradictorily, as a *Void* that is *Full* of smoke, fog, clouds, "invisible breaths" that respire as in a living organism.³

At the Edge of the Visible

Photography was not invented for introspection. Yet the visual debate inherent in Jacobson's refusal to gather facts is as old as photography itself. From the birth of the medium, people who were used to attentive looking sensed the basic conceptual and psychological differences between daguerreotype's cold clarity in minutely describing and fixing the world, and paper negatives' modification of pure description, which attempted to capture the air circulating around things. There was nothing particularly spiritual in any of this. Daguerreotype, reveling in the small, demanded a magnifying glass. Paper negatives attracted certain sensibilities, for whom seeing dimly felt natural. They loaded their cameras with paper negatives and traveled to forests and dark woods. They discovered trees, brush, and rocky streams cloaked in chaotic shadows and intermittent light. In these shape-shifting subjects, the photographers uncovered not picturesque effects, but something verging on the spiritual, a chance to contemplate the mysteries that lay at the edge of the visible.

Photography triumphed as a useful producer of descriptive documents; and the impressionistic mist of so-called Naturalists and Pictorialists, like Kühn, continued to enchant those who craved beautifying vagueness. By now, the contest between these two alternatives has changed into a way of seeing that absorbs them both. The wisdom of this comes from voices beyond photograph-