

Eirik Johnson

APERTURE GALLERY

547 West 27th Street, 4th Floor

April 16–June 10

Wandering, Pac-Man-like, along Manhattan's street grid on a sunny afternoon, it's easy to romanticize the Pacific Northwest: air heavy with moisture, smeary gray sky, carpet of deep green foliage on every nearby hillside. Such pastoral imaginings are obviously deficient, not least because human traces so rarely intrude upon them. A recent spate of creative work, however, emphasizes more complex negotiations between people and this corner of the national landscape. There is, for example, the dreary, anonymous Portland depicted in Kelly Reichardt's 2008 film *Wendy and Lucy*, or musician Phil Elverum's emotionally freighted relationship with Mt. Erie in rural Washington State. Photographer Eirik Johnson's series "Sawdust Mountain," 2005–2009, the subject of this exhibition and a related book, depicts sites located somewhere between a colorless urban fringe and a mystical rural retreat: Nature predominates, but it is heavily worked. Shot over four years in Washington, Oregon, and northern California, the series concentrates on logging and fishing. Johnson's lucidness about environmental despoliation and economic finitude manifests itself most clearly in pictures taken from elevated vantage points, which allow viewers to see how landscape is constructed. This distance is nicely counterbalanced by the intimacy of Johnson's portraits, which betray sympathy both for his human subjects—hatchery employees, ecologists doing fieldwork, independent shopkeepers—and for the region in which he was raised.



Eirik Johnson, *Below the Glines Canyon Dam on the Upper Elwah River, Washington, 2008*, color photograph, 50 x 40".

The overall narrative is of decline and germinating hope for renewal. This point is made explicit in Johnson's juxtaposition of photographs depicting a stack of logs in a multinational company's sort yard and a nursery of western larch seedlings. It's visible as well in the rust-stained, dilapidated former Masonic lodge now rehabilitated as *The Sweater Store, South Bend, Washington, 2005*. It may not be much, this picture seems to say, but it's a living. The building itself is centered in the frame and depicted frontally, echoing Walker Evans's churches and storefronts. Other images play with reflections in windows; stagger objects from foreground to background; or present pictures within pictures. The influence of older photographers, from Carleton Watkins to Robert Adams to Joel Sternfeld, can be detected in these works. But no forebear dominates, and Johnson's vision of a Pacific Northwest resilient in the face of difficulty is clearly articulated and entirely his own.

— Brian Sholis