Eileen Neff, *Almost (November 21, 2000)*, 2001, color ink-jet print, 57 x 42¼".

PHILADELPHIA

EILEEN NEFF

LOCKS GALLERY

Ostensibly shot from a moving train, Eileen Neff's blurry, digitally altered photographs are less about the passing landscape than about the blur itself. They concern the inadequacy of perception to its object, which can never be brought into lasting focus. It's the old lesson of Impressionism, made an absolute by Cézanne and now a cliché. But in bespeaking the object's ephemerality, the blur also acknowledges the transience of perception, pointing to what has been called the specious present—exactly what photography is uniquely equipped to reify. The blur, which Neff always juxtaposes with in-focus sections of landscape, confirms the speciousness of the present that the medium engages and subverts the fleeting presence it establishes. Thus Neff restores to photography the dimension that is missing from the traditional photograph: time.

But Neff's counter-photographs, as they might be called, are not simply object lessons in epistemology. They are in fact rather beautiful images that challenge painting, particularly abstract painting, suggesting not only that it is less autonomous than it looks but that its atmospheric and textural effects are not unique to the medium. The blur that spreads across *Evening Comes*, 2001, has a palpability that gets under one's skin, fraught as it is with the poignancy and anxiety—and ironically, the intangibility—of memory. Partially obscuring the landscape behind it, the blur becomes a gestural surface—a representation of process painting, as it were—as well as a mental image. It dematerializes the landscape and reinstates it as formless fluidity. Neff's work is alchemical: The *prima materia* of landscape becomes the *ultima materia* of atmosphere, with movement as the *via media* of the transformation. Ironically, the more tangible the image, the more remote it seems, and vice versa.

Neff structures her photographs like abstract paintings, blocking them into geometric sections that go against the grain of the blur. Each part becomes a kind of figure that can stand out against the others; focusing on one changes the figure-ground relationship. In some works the blur becomes the atmospheric background for the landscape, in others the reverse occurs. Sometimes landscape and blur achieve perceptual parity, as in *Hedging*, 2000, and *Newton's Field*, 2001. If the blur represents unconscious feeling and the landscape self-conscious reflection, then Neff is struggling to overcome the split between reason and feeling, which T.S. Eliot called the curse of modernity. *Anecdote of the Tree*, 2000, is particularly striking in this regard. In one half of the image, wispy blur and grainy tree form a common plane; in the other, a distant, relatively focused landscape serves as the tree's background. The tree acts as a linchpin for the discrepant perspectives without reconciling them. The work is a subtle formal triumph, discreetly minimal and sober, especially in comparison to the lavish green of the landscape in other images.

Almost (November 21, 2000), 2001, involves a perceptual trick: The house and trees reflected in the water don't exist in the landscape, suggesting that the scene is a memory or perhaps a kind of afterimage. *Narcissus*, 2001, involves a similar illusion, hinting at the duplicity inherent in appearances. But Neff's photographs don't play games; her images are ultimately about the elusiveness of beauty in the passing scene. She insists that, however accidental it may be, beauty abides, if only in the mind's eye.

—*DK*