Fig. 1 Carnegiea Gigantea, 2024

Virtual Landscapes, Ongoing

Chapter One

After Carleton Watkins marks a new stage in the evolution of Francesco Del Conte's photographic practice, combining several lines of research that the artist has developed in recent years. Firstly, as we will see later, this work represents a novel approach to the subject of landscape. Despite it being one of the most classic and foundational themes in photography's history, Del Conte had never felt fully close to this particular declination of the photosensitive tool: perhaps precisely because of its omnipresence and the weight of tradition, the landscape had remained an unexplored territory.

The discovery of the work, and the troubled life, of Carleton Watkins represents a significant turning point in this sense. The encounter with the refined views of the American West created by Watkins in the 19th-century fascinated the artist to the point of wanting to pay homage to him. Watkins, one of the most influential and innovative authors of his time, today, outside of specialized contexts, in Europe is far from having the recognition that he deserves. His photographs of trees, rock formations, vulcanos, and mountains, due to their unique sharpness and composition, were in high demand among the most prominent scientists working in the institutions of the East. The birth of disciplines such as botany and geology was particularly backed by Watkins's pictures. In addition to being an incredibly talented composer, he was also a camera designer and innovator. To capture his landscape views, Carleton Watkins employed a colossal camera of his own construction that accommodated glass plates of about 40x55 cm. These negatives yielded prints with exceptional clarity and a rich tonal range, earning him prizes at the International Exposition in Paris in 1868 and in Vienna in 1873. Notably, he was ahead of his time in presenting photography like painting: he would frame his large-scale works and hang them on walls, much like painters did, rather than the typical display of unframed prints laid flat on tables. Ultimately, his photographs of pristine territories not only shaped the perception of the American West for the rest of the United States and the world but also profoundly influenced society. Crucially, his work contributed to the establishment in 1864 of the first federally preserved land in the United States—the Yosemite Grant, which later became the Yosemite National Park in California in 1890. This achievement might be considered his greatest legacy.

Taking inspiration from the subjects chosen and the compositional style of the American photographer, from the places he portrayed and the visual grammar of the time, Del Conte creates a new photographic series that, however, does not directly immortalize the world around him. Rather, the world from which the artist draws is the digital one, that of online archives of images, such as Flickr and Wikimedia Commons. That space where we can download for free billions of photographs taken and posted by any users, visual fragments abandoned in the endless flow of today's photographic production.
The reappropriation of anonymous images is the second aspect with which the artist wants to engage. Since its inception, and subsequently passing through Dadaist collages, Richard Prince's Cowboys, and Thomas Ruff's Jpeg series - to name just a few - the silver halide technique has lent itself to the recycling and reuse of images. With 19th-century American photography in the background, Del Conte explores this aspect by hybridizing found digital landscape images with analog processes, thereby pushing the limits of photographic representation.

The project involves the creation of analog prints starting from digital photographs, through an experimental technique designed by the artist over the last few years. The initial phase entails downloading the proper copy-

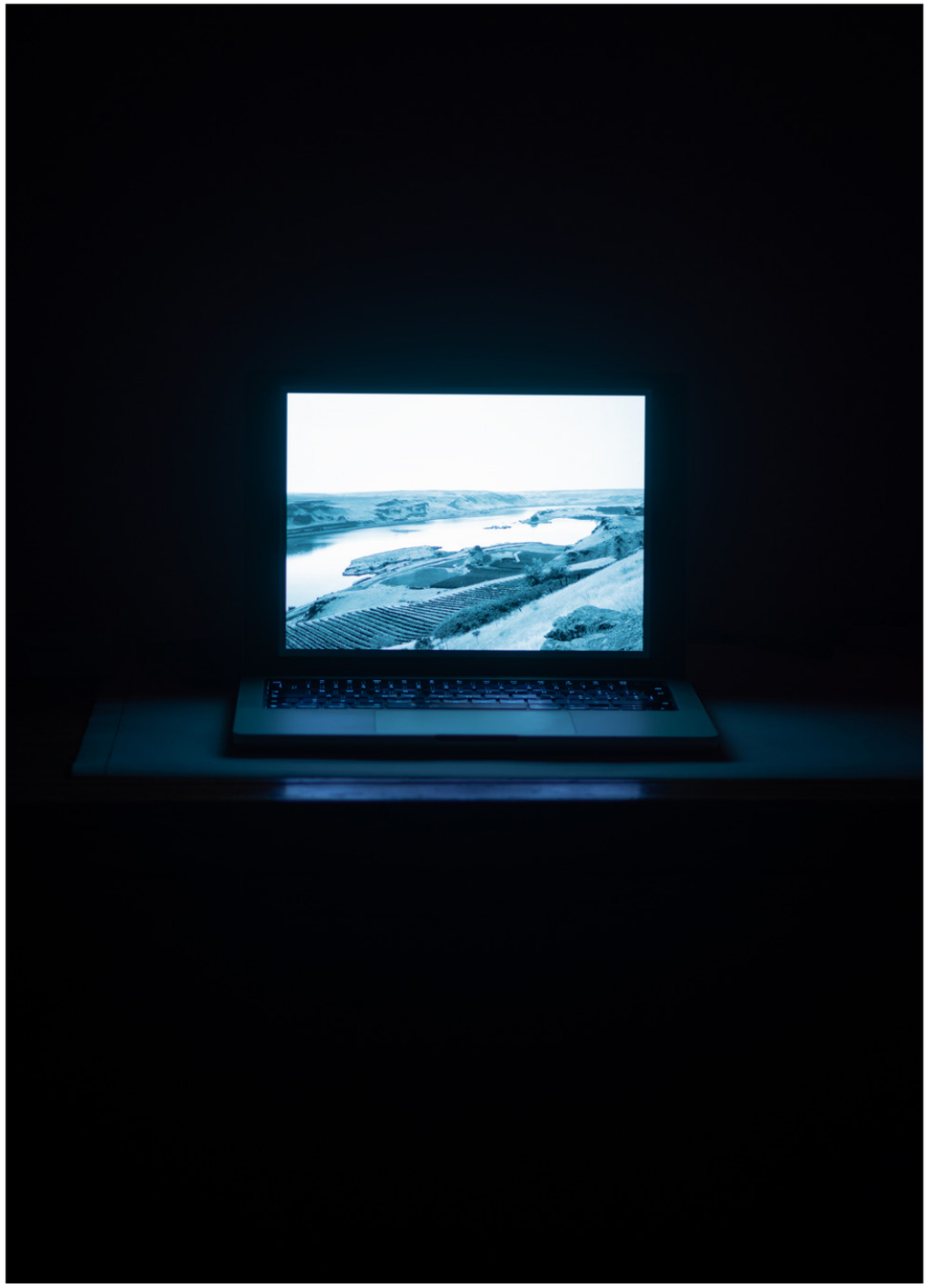

Fig. 2 Computer in the darkroom with an image downloaded from Wimedia Commons

right-free files from the platforms mentioned above. Post-production software can facilitate slight changes in contrast to echo 19th-century photography. Subsequently, in the darkroom, a 13x18 cm B&W negative is directly placed against the computer monitor and exposed to the digital image for a fraction of a second. In a process opposite to that of digitizing analog materials, the silver emulsion accurately records the numeric photograph underneath the screen. Following traditional darkroom processes, the film is then developed and printed on warm-tone paper. These digital/analog hybrids generate pictures with a rich tonal scale that are not perfectly sharp when viewed up close: the blur is produced by the distance between the negative and the pixels, caused by the thickness of the computer's screen. Nature is the protagonist of these timeless panoramas, yet the human presence is perceptible through a few urban structures and figures in the distance.

The pictures challenge our assumptions: despite their resemblance to early photography, who created them, and when? The characteristic blur conceals the smallest details, leaving the viewer puzzled in front of these familiar - and yet enigmatic - views of mountains, countryside, sea, deserts, trees, and rivers. Through this dialogue between photography's origins and current digital practices, Del Conte suggests a multilayered narrative that reconsiders how the photo-sensitive medium can represent the landscape. Finally, navigating historical homage and endless online archives, *Virtual Landscapes* investigates the evolution of our view of the land from the 19th century to the present day while seeking for original photographic approaches.

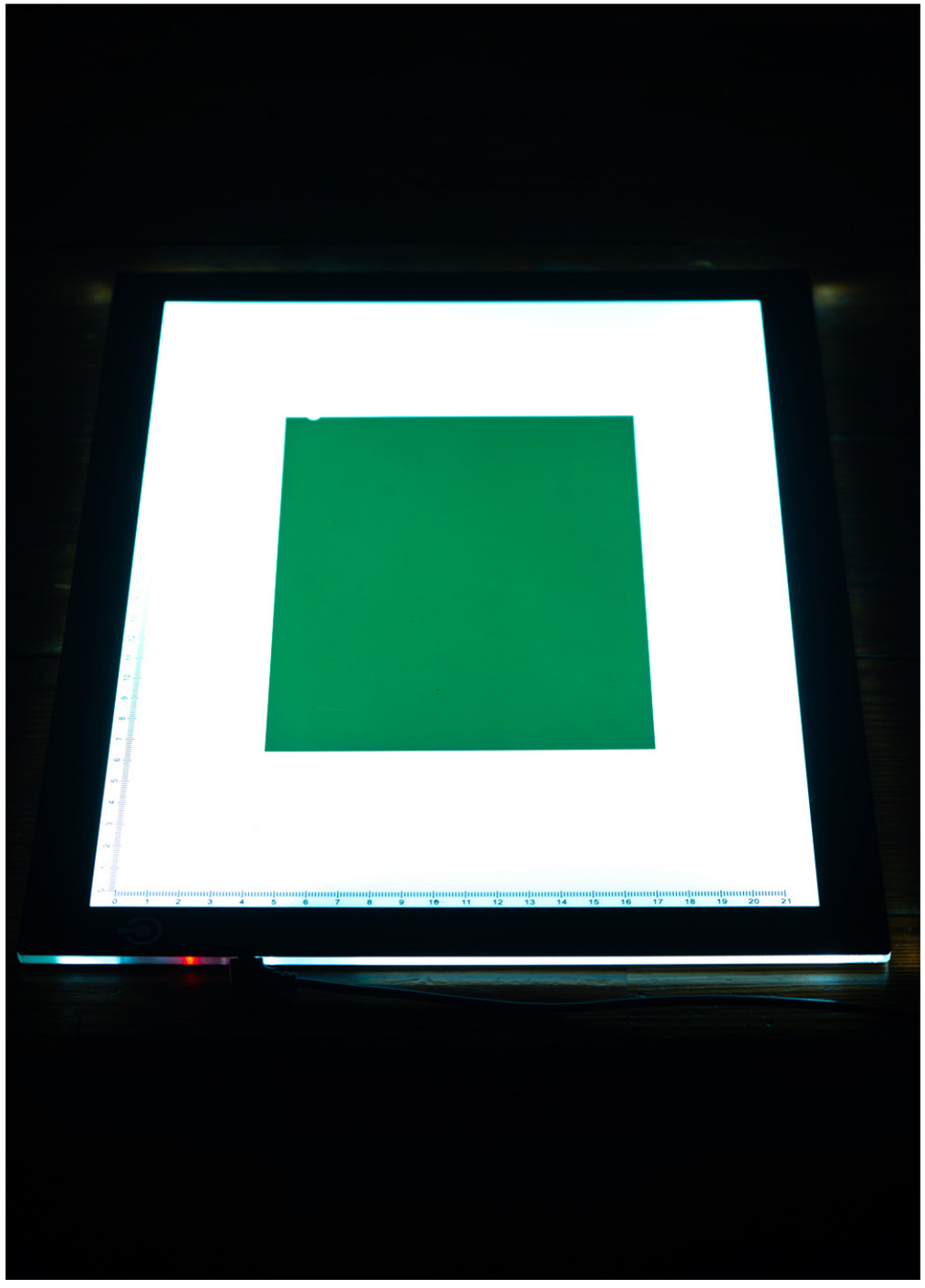

Fig. 3 Large format film

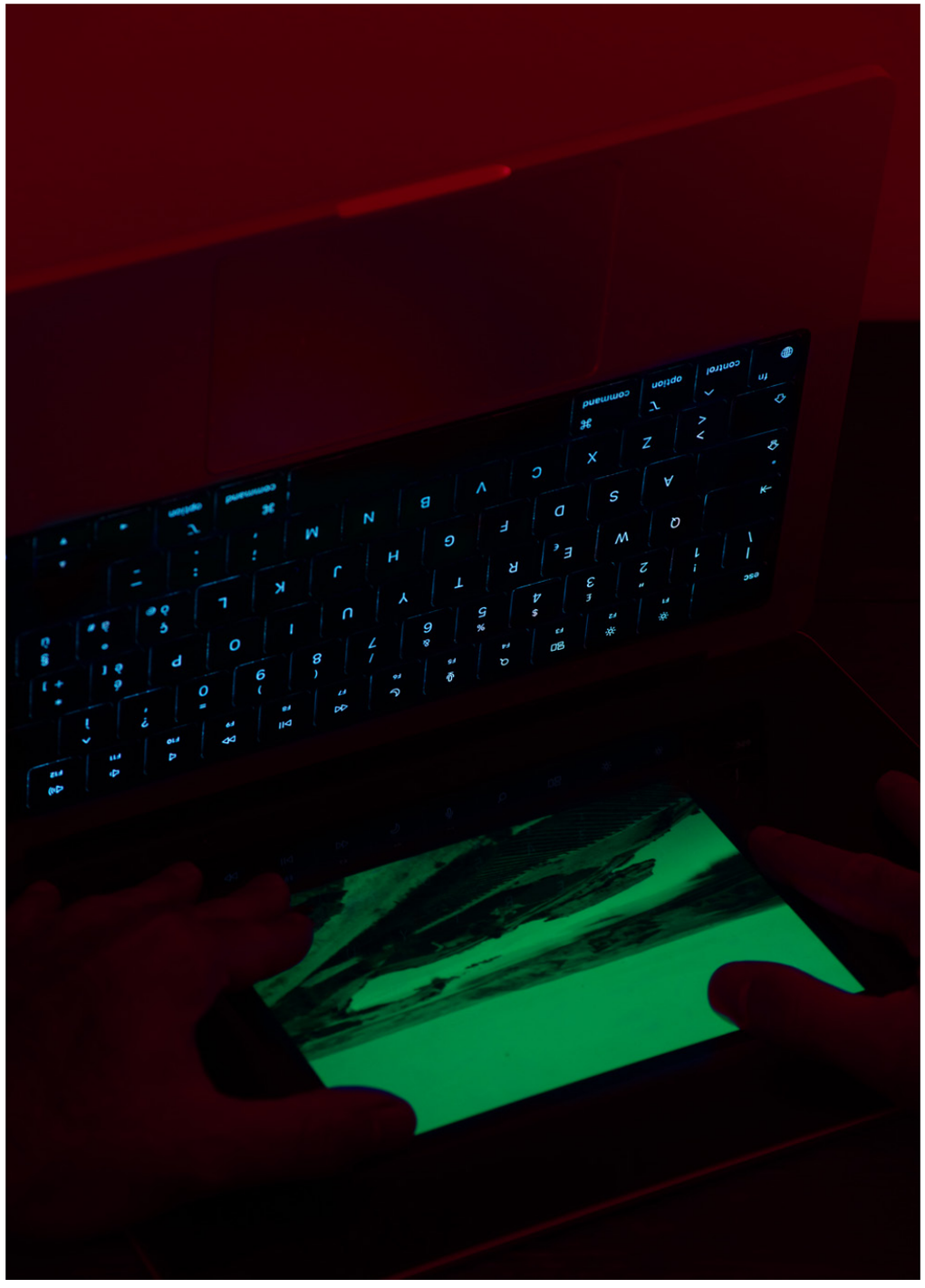

Fig. 4 A 13x18 cm sheet film on the computer monitor during exposure

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