

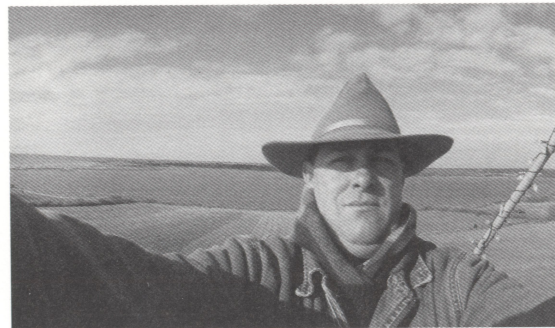
MICHAEL THOMAS: GABLES

Architectural Photography

Exhibition curated by
Stanley I Grand
Karen Evans Kaufer

Essays by
Stanley I Grand
William F. Stern

January 15–February 25, 2001
Sordani Art Gallery, Wilkes University
Wilkes-Barre, Pennsylvania



Michael Thomas, self-portrait on location in Rhode Island.



For some years, Michael Thomas has asked children to draw pictures of houses for him. This watercolor by Louisa Keil (age seven) is representative of the results. The universality of the gabled form in these pictures, which led Thomas to conclude that there is a fundamental resonance to the shape, was one of the factors that led him to undertake the Gables series.

Michael Thomas's Vision of Everyday Rightness

Stanley I Grand

AS A DESIGNER, Michael Thomas has chosen to engage architectural issues primarily through the medium of photography. This choice has allowed him to focus on the essential components of the most practical of the fine arts. Between 1987 and 1989, he completed a remarkable series of urban facades. More than simply a "doors and windows" study of Philadelphia, Thomas's photographs represent a dialectic between *domus* and *polis*, the family and citizen, the private and the public, the intimate and the facade, the hidden and the revealed. In the portals, ambiguity prevails: They represent a state of permanent transition, of ingress and egress, of passage between the inside realm and the outside. For Thomas, these themes are ideally suited to investigation by means of a project format or series. Rather than making a single static image, he provides a dynamic continuum through time, place, and space. If a picture is indeed worth a thousand words, then Thomas is interested in books made from a collection of essays.

In the Gables series, Thomas shifts from urban complexity to everyday rightness. Continuing his exploration of architecture stripped to its bones, he has turned his lens on simple archetypal structures. Designed by anonymous builders employing vernacular forms, these modest and unassuming buildings are not usually regarded as exemplars of architecture. Yet it is precisely their modesty that allows their formal qualities, especially proportion, to predominate. On one level, the Gables series is a theme and variation on the relationship between the triangle and the quadrangle, the trilateral and the quadrilateral, and the balance of geometric form. Despite their unpretentiousness, these photographs are profoundly concerned with the proportions of gable pitch, wall height, and building width. Indeed, like Vitruvius, Thomas seeks an ideal harmony and balance. In other words, he sees a metaphor for the human in the irreducible elements of architecture.

Gable No. 1 (Keil Barn, Bear Creek, Pennsylvania) represents Thomas's initial direction. Placed at a point somewhat above the barn, the camera's single eye gives the roof an importance and prominence that is atypical of the series. (Gable No. 6 is the only other such image in the exhibition whose view matches this perspective). More significant, No. 1 gives equal weight to the gabled and nongabled walls by placing their junction almost in the exact center of the composition. Finally, the stark contrast between the vertical, geometric weathered boards of the gable and the irregular, biomorphic patterns of the fieldstone walls reflects an impulse soon to be abandoned in favor of a more subtle approach.

By Gable No. 7 (Utility Pump House, Plymouth, Pennsylvania), Thomas had switched from a high, quartering viewpoint to a lower, frontal perspective in which the apex of the gable, and not the junction of the side and end walls, forms the center vertical axis. This change in orientation combined with a subject having fewer formal elements (especially the textures and coloration of the building materials), the use of large, simplified, flat shapes in the foreground grass, and the ratio of the gable's relatively shallow pitch to the wall's height results in a more classic, powerful, and monumental image. Lest we take the image too seriously, however, Thomas has selected a struc-

ture with an element of playful, self-deprecating shabbiness: the windows' arched eyebrows, the faux pilasters, the missing gable board, and finally the visual pun of a telephone pole transformed into a television antenna.

A more formal mood prevails in Gable No. 14 (Private Library, Dalton, Pennsylvania). In this essay in gray, the lozenge-shaped cast shadow, which had appeared previously on the wall of the utility pump house, becomes a major design element. Seen abstractly the gable wall appears to consist of two shapes—a diamond resting in an M-shaped cradle, whose base has been obscured by the diagonal running parallel to the picture plane. The image of something precious being cradled seems most appropriate for a library where readers hold books and documents and are elevated in consequence. In No. 14, Thomas carefully exploits the undulating line of the treetop contours to create a strong shape, a characteristic also found in Gable Numbers 9, 15, 24, 27, and 40 (none of which is illustrated in the catalogue).

Finally, in Gable No. 20 (Black's Store, Hop Bottom, Pennsylvania), Thomas shows a generic mercantile establishment on a snowy winter's day. The building proudly proclaims its function with "store" in no-nonsense sans serif letters perched like sculpture on the pediment ledge. Below, thin vertical supports and large windows with cross-like mullions de-materialize the front wall. The lightness of the architecture, the tonal contrasts of black, white, and gray (offset by a touch of red), and the directness of meaning proclaim a sense of small-town certainty, respectability, purposefulness, and community.

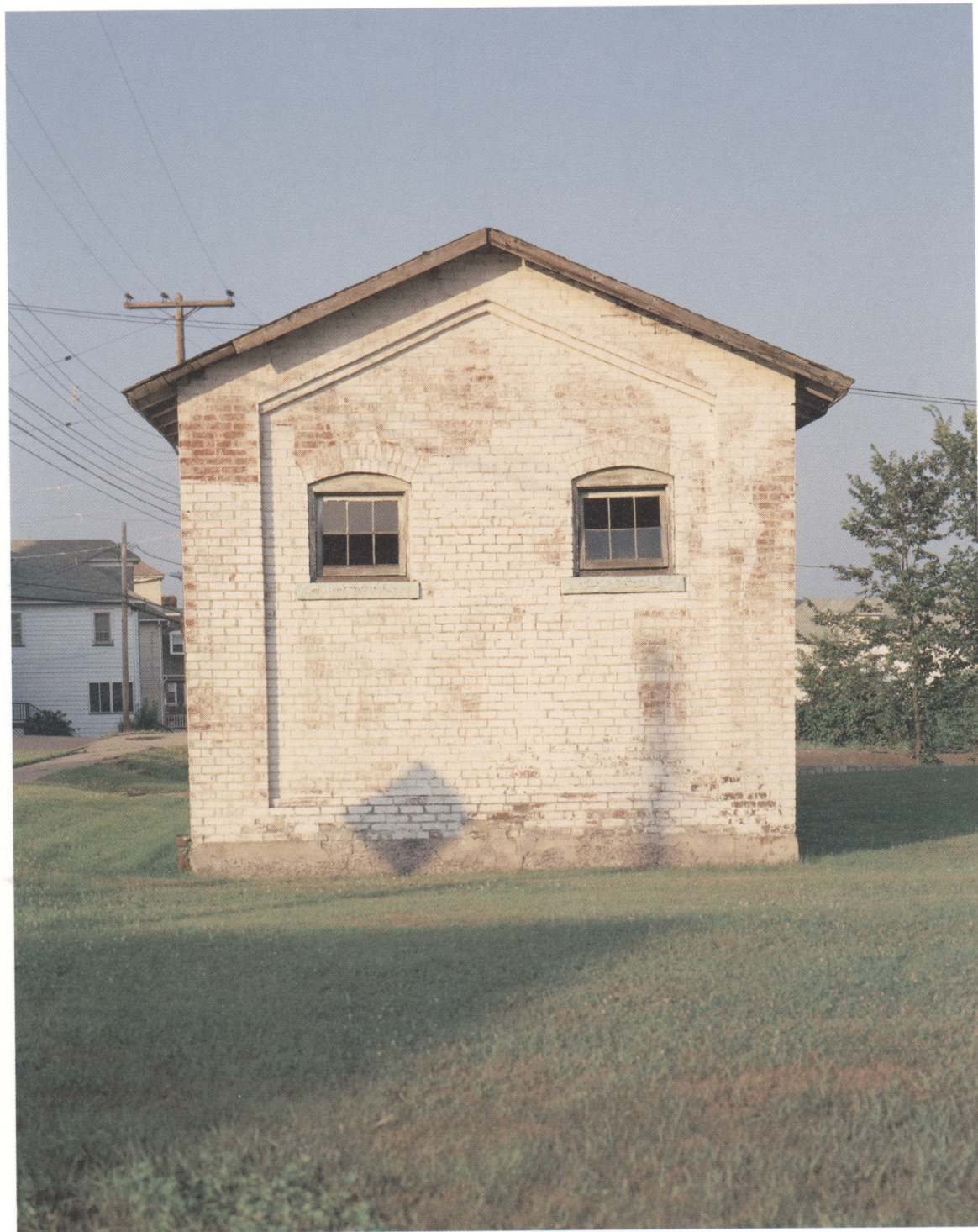
Thomas underscores the importance of his subjects not only by the large scale of his images but also by having the master printer, Singer Editions, use IRIS technology to print them on watercolor paper. Because the images are created by putting down layers of ink rather than by activating light-sensitive particles in a gelatin suspension, the prints display highly saturated colors with a rich matte surface. This produces an overall impression quite different from the effect typically associated with color photographs. (Indeed, photographic "printing" is something of a misnomer since the process is more one of developing and emerging rather than the application of ink onto a surface.)

Thomas's celebration of "architecture without architects," may be viewed as an implicit critique of much contemporary practice. At a time when platinum has replaced the merely gilded, when rich materials, ostentation, and elephantine scale are the architectural values of choice, when bombast smothers classic proportion and fine design, Thomas seeks inspiration in austerity and modesty, basic forms, right proportions, human scale, and democratic values.

Stanley I Grand, former director of the Sordani Art Gallery, is director of the Southeast Missouri State University Museum.



Gables Series No. 1
Keil Barn, Bear Creek, Pennsylvania
March 1998



Gables Series No. 7
Utility Pump House, Plymouth, Pennsylvania
August 1998



Gables Series No. 14
Private Library, Dalton, Pennsylvania
October 1998



Gables Series No. 20
 Black's Store, Hop Bottom, Pennsylvania
 December 1998

Choosing to Preserve

William F. Stern

THE GABLES SERIES derives from photographer Michael Thomas's deeply felt conviction that these small structures deserve to be noticed, looked at seriously, and preserved as artifacts of the architectural landscape. In selecting this simplest of building forms, Thomas elevates the banal, the forgotten, the commonplace to a position that begs awareness, contemplation, and understanding. Whether serving the function of a pump station, garage, or barn, these pure, utilitarian structures have been a part of the American scene since Colonial times.

Because Thomas, a photographer living in Wilkes-Barre, Pennsylvania, believes that there is ample, rich material just beyond the bounds of his own backyard, the majority of the twenty-five images that comprise the exhibition were photographed in Northeastern Pennsylvania. He could have just as easily chosen another area of Pennsylvania, or for that matter any other state, to assemble an equally compelling group of gable structures for documentation. But by choosing to

concentrate in a specific area, Thomas is telling us that we must open our eyes to the possibilities of architecture around every corner. Traveling fast in our automobiles, talking on a cell phone or looking for the next convenience store, we can easily miss the basic delights of our immediate surroundings. In a time of a homogeneous building, where one strip shopping center mimics the next and housing developments lack all sense of distinction, these quiet unassuming buildings, seen through Thomas's eye, are elevated beyond anonymity, presented as proud structures of particular individuality and presence.

Indeed, Thomas seems to have composed these photographs as a series of portraits where each gable form takes on its own personality.

For the most part, these portraits are consciously frontal or three-quarter view, tightly cropped, with the subject carefully centered on either side of the picture frame. But the building image is not seen in isolation. The picture frame includes immediate surroundings such as a telephone pole, overhead wires, chain link fence, or trees. Thomas incorporates these elements as part of a carefully thought out composition. A telling example is two images—Church Front 1 (Gables No. 8 [Church Front Elevation, Taylor, Pennsylvania]), and Church Front 2 (not in exhibition)—the same façade looking different because of the way it is framed. In each photograph, the stark white church is seen through the grille of a wrought-iron fence painted black; but in Church Front 1 the camera tightly focuses on the fence, which dominates the foreground, whereas in Church Front 2 the view opens up to include a street edge, telephone pole, and trees behind the fence.



Church Front 1



Church Front 2

Except for Gable No. 14 (Private Library, Dalton, Pennsylvania), none of the structures are specifically identified with an architect, and in all probability each is the creation of a builder or craftsman. For this reason, they are part of one of the richest traditions in American architecture. These indigenous buildings trace their roots to the Colonial saltbox houses that were built from necessity within the most frugal of means. They relate to the Southern shotgun houses, a typology introduced to the American vernacular by African slaves and captured most brilliantly in the 1930s through the eye of photographer Walker Evans. No matter how humble or crude, many of the buildings depicted in Thomas's photographs can be described and understood not just as mere buildings but as examples of architecture. In these buildings we can discern stylistic and structural patterns, attributes that we ascribe to architecture. For instance, Gable No. 7 (Utility Pump House, Plymouth, Pennsylvania) demonstrates characteristics of the simplest house form in America dating from the seventeenth century. The structure as depicted in Church Front 1 and Church Front 2 exhibits the qualities associated with the nineteenth century Greek Revival as it became popularized throughout the United States in the 1830s and 1840s. Its clapboard form shows the barest hints of classicism, particularly through the embellishment surrounding the two doors, the way the gable terminates at the four corners, and the Platonic proportions of its classical form.

Built later in the nineteenth century, Gable No. 50 (St. Mary's Chapel, Jessup, Pennsylvania) presents a simply articulated brick pavilion at a cemetery site. Its plain yellow brick walls have been delicately detailed by the mason craftsman with accents of red brick at the corners and around the door and oculus window openings. This perfect building has the idealized simplicity of the refined work of the eighteenth-century English architect John Soane. Like the church in Taylor, Gable No. 21 (Red Store, Hop Bottom, Pennsylvania) incorporates the barest hint of classical detail. Set against a backdrop of winter sky, snow, and trees, this brightly colored red clapboard structure appears to originally have been a small house. The triangular form of the gable front, the centered door, and the flanking windows combine to make the iconic image we associate with a house.

Not all the structures are so neatly rendered. Gable No. 18 (Hot Dog Stand, Dallas, Pennsylvania), built of concrete block, has a charming ad hoc quality. Looking at this photograph of the building set against a mature stand of conifers, one is as much attracted to an adjacent power pole and the sign placed in the gable: HAMBURGS PIZZA HOT DOGS. Other structures, like the disheveled building in Gable No. 26 (House, Plains, Pennsylvania) or Gable No. 33 (Boyer's Gas Station, Dupont, Pennsylvania) with its peeling paint and an aging Cadillac at its side, look old and run down. Still, these structures preserve the virtues of simple, unadorned building.

Taken throughout the year Thomas's photographs are instilled with an atmospheric quality—evoking the chill and grayness of winter in Gable No. 20 (Black's Store, Hop Bottom, Pennsylvania) or the crispness of fall in Gable No. 14 (Private Library, Dalton, Pennsylvania). Rendered as IRIS prints, the memorable qualities of these images are particularly heightened by the luminosity of their color and their play of light and shadow. Clearly, Michael Thomas wants us to take heed of buildings too easily dismissed, and has ensured our awareness through the sharpness and magical coloration of his photographs. The history of preservation in America will be remembered as the struggle of dedicated, impassioned individuals. With the Gables series, Michael Thomas has added another voice, speaking through the quiet grace of his photography.

William F. Stern is an architect in Houston, Texas, and principal of Stern and Bucek Architects.

Checklist of the Exhibition

All works are Iris digital prints on Arches cold press paper and measure 40" x 30" (height x width)

- Gables Series No. 1 (Keil Barn, Bear Creek, Pennsylvania), March 1998
- Gables Series No. 6 (Used Car Dealer, Plymouth, Pennsylvania), August 1998
- Gables Series No. 7 (Utility Pump House, Plymouth, Pennsylvania), August 1998
- Gables Series No. 8 (Church Front Elevation, Taylor, Pennsylvania), October 1998
- Gables Series No. 9 (Church Rear Elevation, Taylor, Pennsylvania), October 1998
- Gables Series No. 14 (Private Library, Dalton, Pennsylvania), October 1998
- Gables Series No. 15 (One Car Garage, Waverly, Pennsylvania), October 1998
- Gables Series No. 17 (Little League Stand, Edwardsville, Pennsylvania), November 1998
- Gables Series No. 18 (Hot Dog Stand, Dallas, Pennsylvania), November 1998
- Gables Series No. 20 (Black's Store, Hop Bottom, Pennsylvania), December 1998
- Gables Series No. 21 (Red Store, Hop Bottom, Pennsylvania), December 1998
- Gables Series No. 24 (Two-Car Garage, Exeter, Pennsylvania), February 1999
- Gables Series No. 25 (Loomis Colliery Shed, Nanticoke, Pennsylvania), February 1999
- Gables Series No. 26 (House, Plains, Pennsylvania), February 1999
- Gables Series No. 27 (Refreshment Stand, Wilkes-Barre, Pennsylvania), February 1999
- Gables Series No. 29 (Yellow Garage, Forty Fort, Pennsylvania), February 1999
- Gables Series No. 31 (White Garage, Forty Fort, Pennsylvania), February 1999
- Gables Series No. 33 (Boyer's Gas Station, Dupont, Pennsylvania), March 1999
- Gables Series No. 36 (Nathan Denison House, Forty Fort, Pennsylvania), April 1999
- Gables Series No. 40 (Gray's Mill, Adamsville, Rhode Island), May 1999
- Gables Series No. 50 (St. Mary's Chapel, Jessup, Pennsylvania), October 1999
- Gables Series No. 53 (Cottage, Lackawaxen, Pennsylvania), October 1999
- Gables Series No. 54 (Barn, Hamlin, Pennsylvania), October 1999
- Gables Series No. 56 (Bricktech Shed, Wilkes-Barre, Pennsylvania), October 1999
- Gables Series No. 58 (Garage Side Elevation, Dallas, Pennsylvania), October 1999

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