

# VESPERTINE

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*John Armitage and Joy Garnett*

How are we to describe selected paintings and artists concerned with the evening, along with small communities or sociocultural groups coming together in the twilight founded on apparently esoteric hunting beliefs? In the first sense, we might think of paintings such as Joy Garnett's *Crepuscular Dawn*, *Shade*, or *Beacon*, or of our appreciation for an apparition of an unidentified terrain, such as *Arbor*. Here, the terminology of vespertine connotes an enthusiasm for, and insider knowledge of, certain paintings or painters of the stars and their motions, such as *Shields, on the River Tyne* by Joseph Mallord William Turner (1823) or *Starry Night over the Rhone* by Vincent van Gogh (1888). The paradox is that such paintings and painters can have a simultaneously wide and specialist appreciation, although sunset tends usually to designate that powerful and seemingly fragrant portion of the day. In practice, understanding sunset in this sense is close to being an animal. The proof or mutual reinforcement of nightfall, of membership of those communities who appear at, or are active at, sundown, means that, say, hyenas, wolves, and frogs take the form of the "look" of the evening, of the nocturnal gesture, or even of one's own knowledge of the gods, heaven, or the planets. Garnett's almost shot-by-shot studies of the *Crepuscular Dawn* are characterized by their depiction of the setting at, or just after, sunset—cosmic events that have been logged in the encyclopedia of the stars and planets for millennia. Such paintings provoke an intense emotion of recognition of the earth and the desire for the endless repetition of the rising and setting of the sun. Yet these feelings can only be gratified by



**Figure 1** Joy Garnett, *Crepuscular Dawn*, 2014. Oil on canvas, 11 x14 in. Courtesy the artist

continually re-viewing the late afternoon covered with the sun's rays, the witnessing of planets setting after the sun and the sun's fullness, the construction of new imaginary planets and new imaginary suns by which the adepts recognize through each other a shared experience of the cusp of the day. A perfect painting, we may say, remains in our geological memory as a whole formation. However, Garnett's paintings feature sporadically inhabited militarized topographies and susceptible living beings, and must live separately, not as an area of canvas or numerous patches of night-vision green and black but as a kind of evening prayer or evensong concerning both the menace of killer technologies and

the paintings' glorious relationship to the evening.

In this first sense, the terminology of the evening might attach initially to the painting or painter and by extension to their appreciation. In the second sense, the sense of small communities, the term may attach to the aficionados and could be used now to describe rather strange and somewhat withdrawn hunting socio-cultural groups that have departed from normal hunting loyalties, or from earlier hunting groups. New Hunting Groups, as such communities might be called, are defined by the presence of experienced guides, by intense commitment (of time, money, equipment, and—of

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**Figure 2** Joy Garnett, *Shade*, 2014. Oil on canvas, 11 × 14 in. Courtesy the artist

course—state-of-the-art night-vision technologies) on the part of its often ex-military members, and in recent forms, by thermal-imaging equipment and violence, particularly as deployed in relationship to the animal kingdom.

Among the most well-known of the New Hunting Groups employing strong persuasion with regard to the normalization

of technical violence is Tactical Hog Control, which seeks to provide that “Hunt of a Lifetime.”<sup>1</sup> It is one of many New Hunting Groups deriving its beliefs and practices from the hunting of “critters” that “roam the night.” Founded by veteran hunters, these groups have a wide following in the United States and Europe and include in their ranks celebrity “outdoorsmen”

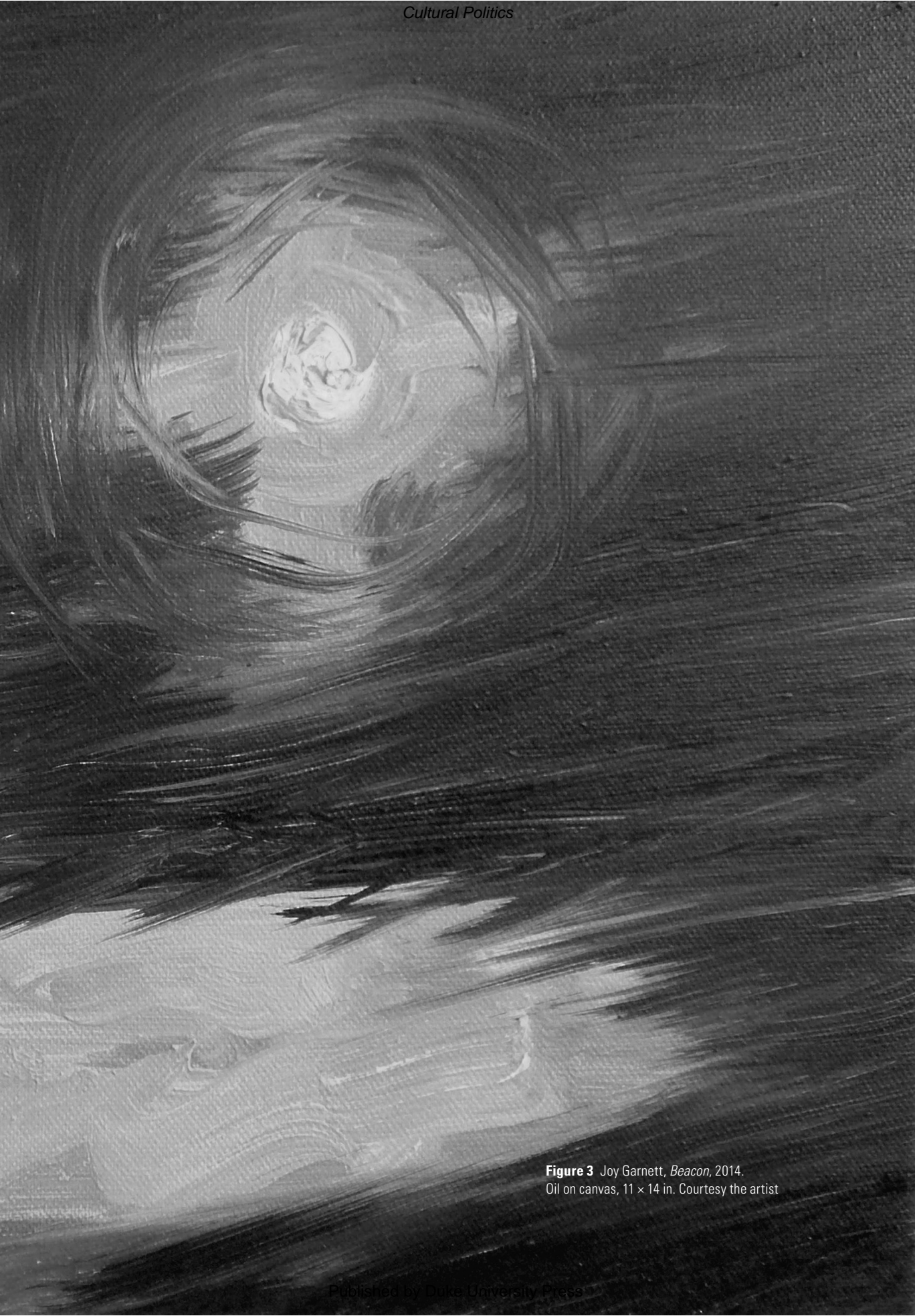
and “outdoorswomen” such as Morgan Freeman, Jennifer Lawrence, the Duke and Duchess of Cambridge, Avril Lavigne, Tiger Woods, Kurt Russell, and Sarah Palin. The New Hunting Groups, together with their cultural conceptions of hunting and approach to the politics of darkness, really ought to be the subject of serious academic study.

The most marked feature of New Hunting Groups in recent years has been their implementation of increasingly intimidating and authoritarian locational tactics and their involvement in stalking the “feral hog” or, more typically, in eliminating “these destructive animals on OUR TERMS.” The most sensational tracking and eradication of such “destructive animals” involves hunting “using a lot of the same equipment [AR-15 air-cooled rifles, etc.] that our soldiers in the field are using.” Such New Hunting Groups’ night-vision equipment is “Generation III . . . not the 1st and 2nd Generation stuff that you’ve seen in catalogs.” Unlike many other New Hunting Groups, Tactical Hog Control does not only arrange night-vision hunts based on the moon phase (i.e., only going out when the moon is full, so the hunters can see). Indeed, it does not matter to Tactical Hog Control if it is a full moon, half moon, quarter moon, or even a new moon. Its experienced guides will still go hunting, because they can see when others cannot—“just like the US military!”

All New Hunting Groups attach themselves to the extraordinary power of helmet-mounted goggles, or even to the extraordinary power of gun-mounted night-vision scopes: “You will not find higher quality gear anywhere in the civilian

world.” They are, by that token, a criticism of the apparently unmitigated banality of the capacities of the original human eye, of human vision equipment, or of conventional ideas concerning the night, and this displeasure has some sociovisual foundation and technological explanation. Recent examples would be inclined to suggest how present discontent with the imaging technology of the human eye finds a compensating interest or faith in the virtually mystical kingdom of forward-looking infrared and the ostensibly supernatural experience of night-vision equipment looking for light. Expressed both through Garnett’s paintings and through New Hunting Groups such as Tactical Hog Control, this dissatisfaction links the still emerging technologies of thermal-imaging equipment looking for heat with Garnett’s *Beacon*, for example. New Hunting Groups of both types can therefore help expose a contemporary and occasionally shared cultural yet “military mentality” (Einstein [1954] 1994: 144–46): the use of militarized imaging technologies to help locate both Garnett’s Internet-found source images for *Crepuscular Dawn* and Tactical Hog Control’s thermally enhanced imaging equipment for hunting hogs. Nevertheless, the crucial difference between New Hunting Groups such as Tactical Hog Control and the sense of the term *hunting* as it applies to Garnett’s paintings ought to be carefully observed. For while any aspiring tactical hog controller can see the heat signature of the hogs and other animals on a display screen in a military vehicle, not everyone can see the aesthetic signature of the Internet source images found on a computer screen in a civilian artist’s studio.





**Figure 3** Joy Garnett, *Beacon*, 2014.  
Oil on canvas, 11 × 14 in. Courtesy the artist

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**Figure 4** Joy Garnett, *Arbor*, 2014. Oil on canvas, 11 × 14 in. Courtesy the artist



### Note

1. All quotations attributed to Tactical Hog Control are taken from its website (2014).

### References

- Einstein, Albert. (1954) 1994. "The Military Mentality." In *Ideas and Opinions*, 144–46. New York: Modern Library.
- Tactical Hog Control. 2014. Company website, [www.tacticalhogcontrol.com/index.html](http://www.tacticalhogcontrol.com/index.html). Accessed August 9.

**John Armitage** is professor of media arts at Winchester School of Art, University of Southampton. He specializes in the work of Paul Virilio, the French critic of the art of technology. He is the editor of *Paul Virilio: From Modernism to Hypermodernism and Beyond* (2000), *Virilio Live: Selected Interviews* (2001), *Virilio Now: Current Perspectives in Virilio Studies* (2011), and *The Virilio Dictionary* (2013); author of *Virilio and the Media* (2012); and coeditor, with Ryan Bishop, of *Virilio and Visual Culture* (2013).

**Joy Garnett** is a multidisciplinary artist and writer based in Brooklyn. The paintings in her *Crepuscular Dawn* series are based on images she finds on commercial hunting websites that depict unknown landscapes recorded with night vision technology. Her work has been shown at the Milwaukee Art Museum, Museum of Contemporary Craft (Portland, OR), Houston Center for Contemporary Craft, BALTIC Centre for Contemporary Art (Newcastle-upon-Tyne, UK), Kettle's Yard (Cambridge, UK), De Bond Cultuurcentrum Brugge (Belgium), and MoMA PS1 and the Whitney Museum of American Art (New York). Her writings have appeared in *Harper's*, *Art21 Magazine*, *artnet*, *Journal of Visual Culture*, and *Ibraaz*. Information about her work can be found at [joygarnett.net](http://joygarnett.net).