

The New York Times

Robert Adams

'On Any Given Day in Spring'
and 'Light Balances'

*Matthew Marks Gallery
526 West 22nd Street,
Chelsea
Through Nov. 3*

Judging from its three-volume catalog, the retrospective of the esteemed American photographer Robert Adams at the Yale University Art Gallery in New Haven (through Oct. 28) is a stunning event. But if you haven't seen it, this show of two new series at Matthew Marks offers substantial compensation, attesting to the almost classical lucidity of Mr. Adams's work and the passion for nature that fuels it.

In some of his images — like his heart-rending photographs of bulldozed or dynamited old-growth trees in Oregon — this passion registers as an anguished, vehement environmentalism. At Marks, we see its softer, more lyrical side. In "Light Balances," 50 black-and-white photographs of edgeless expanses of Edenic, Barbizon-like forest are grouped in sequences of two, three or four images that invite all kinds of visual compari-

sons. An incredible variety that is at once highly specific and incipiently abstract accrues from the simple facts of light falling on, through or behind different types of leaves occurring in different densities, complicated by branches, trunks, degree of focus and depth of field. It seems possible that nothing on earth accommodates a greater variety of light and shadow than tree leaves, or reveals the essential magic of photography with such effortless richness.

In the second room 25 similarly arranged images from the series "On Any Given Day in Spring" take a quite different tack, capturing wide open beaches dotted with flocks of shorebirds called brant. They are shown landing, taking off or clustering in the waves at high tide, always in search of the increasingly scarce eelgrass that is their only sustenance. Formally, the all-over patterns of the "Light Balances" images give way to a spare, calligraphic energy.

In all these photographs the beauty and wisdom of nature are rendered explicit. Implicit is the unavoidable suspicion that threats from human activity of some kind lurk just beyond the frame.

ROBERTA SMITH