

The Camera: Unsettling the West: Contemporary American Landscape Photography

The United States as a cultural and agricultural entity has largely been an experiment in transferring European traditions to a new continent. Somewhere around the Rockies, the experiment began to fail, and west of that it energetically fails in any number of interesting ways. Anyone who has looked down while flying from the East to the West Coast has seen the maplike grid of cities and cropfields loosen up and then fade away into the extraordinary immensity of undeveloped land in the western half of the country. At the 100th meridian, rainfall drops below twenty inches a year, the level necessary to sustain unirrigated agriculture. Throughout most of the Southwest, rainfall is far less than that, and little but scattered mines and cattle ranches punctuates the vast spaces between urban oases sustained by imported water. This is the kind of land that generates nomadic culture, and only cheap gasoline and predator control have made it possible for ranchers to live more like farmers than bedouins. Even so, Euro-American Westerners are notoriously unstable, their lifestyles unsustainable: the flimsy trailer home seems the most emblematic dwelling, the superb interstate highways their counterpart. The environmental historian Roderick Nash refers to Western lifestyles as "maximum-impact camping.

That the military with its bombing practices and extraordinary toxics generation is fighting a war against the land is not particularly incidental: the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers has built many of the huge dams that distort the landscape and ecology of the region. The clams are silting up, a six-year drought afflicts the West Coast, and long-term government-subsidized irrigation is flushing toxic elements out of the subsoil and emptying the aquifers. Cattle are degrading the fragile desert lands between vast open-pit mines. The West is rich in mineral deposits, particularly on the lands native peoples were forced onto (the uranium of Havasupai and Navajo land, for example), and mining is one of the most devastating, destabilizing practices of the region. Many of the surviving indigenous nations are in the West, and many of these are in litigation or open conflict with the U.S. government over land issues.

American landscape photography is grounded in both the scenery and ideology of the immigrant's West. The great migrations into this region preceded development of the wet-plate process by only about a decade, and many of the significant first landscapists accompanied the U.S. Geological Survey into the new territories of the expanding nation: Timothy O'Sullivan, William Henry Jackson. Early written accounts puzzle over what to make of the Western lands where little flora or even soil muffles geologic extravaganzas, but the new medium and newly discovered landscape seem made for each other. Landscape photography has been largely a Western enterprise since, and most of the major artists in the genre live and work in the West. Most of them prefer geology to botany, and the dramatic landforms of the region are peculiarly photogenic. Too, while landscape has most often been a respite from history – a pastorate, a zone of cyclic time – in the American West it is the slate upon which history is written: the proposal that a landscape is virgin implies that it is waiting to be deflowered, inscribed.

American landscape photography, however, went from the prehistoric to the ahistoric. The California photographer Carleton Watkins supported his mammoth-plate photographs of Yosemite by documenting the nearby gold mines for their owners, and the two bodies of work support each other: the image of a virgin wilderness legitimizes and relieves the images of a ravaged earth. Few major photographers made much of landscape during the heyday of modernism. The photographs in northern California's f.64 group were something of an exception, though their images tended toward a formalism that belied subject matter, and the work of such Californians as Wynn Bullock and Edward Weston has little to do with landscape as a category of phenomena beyond the aesthetic. Ansel Adams grew from that movement and from the epic landscape images of the nineteenth century into the Great Oedipal Father of American Landscape Photograph: he is an obstacle nearly every Western photographer had to find a way past. Like Watkins, Adams did considerable commercial

work (photographing the University of California for its trustees during its most violent years of unrest, for example) and made landscapes that proposed the image of a virgin wilderness, and like Watkins, Adams is defined by the purer images alone. This lineal tradition has dwindled into calendar pictures and coffee-table hooks, which are often important as fund-raisers for environmental organizations but which seem paralyzed by a worn-out aesthetic of purity.

There is another heritage for American landscape photographers in the social documentary work of the 1930s, which seems, however, more suited to the thoroughly acculturated landscapes of the South and East than the wide open spaces of the West (thus Robert Frank, William Eggleston, and Lee Friedlander, among others, have made many works that compositionally are landscapes but ideologically are social commentary). It wasn't until the 1970s that a new generation of photographers took on landscape as such as an important arena. Perhaps the distinction is between landscape as simply another variety of scenery and as a manifestation of nature, the great ontological Sphinx. And the West is not yet a domesticated landscape but a landscape still being broken to use, an unfinished process that poses grave questions. This unsettled state has provoked much of the landscape photography of the past decade and a half.

One great landmark is the *New Topographies* show of 1975, which was more a curatorial rubric than a real movement; it pointed out that neither medium nor subject was what it had been. The pictures, most simply, depicted the transformation of landscape into real estate, focusing on the stark, soulless tract-homes that sprung up like mushrooms in the central West. Some of the artists in that exhibition did not continue to produce significant work; one, Californian Lewis Baltz, has refined and redirected his approach until his work has a great deal to do with representation but little to do with the politics of landscape. Still, his 1980s photographs of vacant lots and construction sites are compelling revisions of what to look at and how to look. Coloradan Robert Adams is the major survivor of this group, and his pessimism about culture's impact on nature has evolved into a broader melancholy. His works of the 1980s are largely elegiac; where the first Adams photographed a world as though it were before man, this Adams photographs it as though it were after man. The loneliness of space and the palpable stillness of the photograph come together in these pieces.

The *New Topographics* vein reiterated the United States' favorite story of a virgin wilderness penetrated by civilization. In some of the first significant American landscape art, Thomas Cole, in his five-painting cycle of the 1840s, traced the evolution of an imaginary place from *Savage State to Desolation* with a lot of real-estate development in between. This historicized landscape was taken on by the Rephotographic Project, co-founded by Ellen Manchester, JoAnne Verberg, and Mark Klett in the late 1970s. The project set out to rephotograph the landscapes of some of the most famous U.S. Geological Survey images, from as nearly the same standpoint as possible. The results showed a landscape that had in most cases changed, but not always for the worse: a Nevada mine of the 1870s was by the 1970s nearly impossible to trace in a landscape that had regenerated itself. The Arizona-based Klett has gone on to other rephotographic projects, including *Third View*, a revisitation of the sites of the Rephotographic Project twenty years later. The unemphatic seems to be Klett's polemic: his images are neither assaults on the tradition of virgin wilderness photography nor elegies for a raped landscape. Instead, he often photographs majestic "wilderness" landscapes with a foreground of civilized appurtenances that are not intrusions. In a photograph of the Grand Canyon, a pair of legs juts into the picture, and a plastic wrapper, a pair of apples, and a box of matzohs adorn the rim of the majestic chasm. In *Profiles of the New West, Parker Strip, 11/11/84*, a horizon line of jagged mesas includes a television antenna. The West, his work suggests, is not less sublime for its banal and kitsch additions; instead, the two cohabit a landscape without simple moral or visual resolutions.

San Franciscan Manchester founded, with her husband, Bob Dawson, an ambitious documentary project, *Water in the West*, an ongoing survey by many photographers of the manipulation of this most limiting and crucial element of the western environment. Organizationally, the project seems very much in the tradition of survey photography, from the uses to the WPA; its radical component is the project's concern with using single landscape images as pieces in a picture of a political/ecological system rather than a simpler documentation of a region or landscape. The project poses large problems of representation: environmental disasters are often invisible, so that only a title tells of chemically polluted drinking water, for example; the after-state of a place often says nothing of its before-state; the relationship between a field of dust and a water policy is not inherently visual or even visualizable. Although individual images in this vein are often compelling, the emphasis is on education rather than epiphany. Peter Goin, from Reno, is another *Water in the West* photogra-

pher, whose *Nuclear Landscapes* is an anthology of deadpan images of nuclear-war production sites, labeled with blocky black letters. In jettisoning the self-questioning and formal exploration of the art world for straightforwardly presented information, such work recalls the photojournalism of the WPA and the picture press; its captivity within the art world seems to undermine its purposefulness. (There are, however, many superb young activist photojournalists working with environmental issues – Randi Baird of Greenpeace, anti-nuclear activists Rachel Johnson and Dana Schuerholz of Impact Visuals, and the older David Cross, who documents Earth First! – who have come to terms with photography as a political medium and have left the art world out of the picture.)

Richard Misrach is the contemporary artist who has most unswervingly met the challenges of landscape photography and art without leaving behind one or the other. His huge, formally stunning color images take on the subject matter usually reserved for photojournalism: the unnatural disaster is his most perennial theme. His work uses the representational vocabulary of landscape photography to address issues more akin to social documentary that is, it refuses to respect the tradition in which the landscape is our refuge, is timeless, serene, and it equally refuses to respect the tradition in which politics is represented in the hasty, grainy black and white of photojournalism. His work provokes immense controversy in the West Coast photography community, because, so far as I can tell, there is no ready correspondence between what is beautiful and what is good in his landscapes, in that what is beautiful is often deadly, damaged, evil, wrong, sick (a sense of moral prohibition in looking aesthetically at crimes, in the belief there is a nonaesthetic, noninterpretive way of looking may also be at work which brings us back to the conventions of documentary and photojournalism). Misrach's lush documents of political catastrophe point out that politics has invaded the landscape, that history is not only the history of human actions, of causes, but also the history of effects, of ecological damage. Thus, we see not the soldiers bombing the landscape action pictures but the landscape shattered by bombs. In representing violated landscapes, landscapes populated by dead animals or bomb craters, as sublime, he refuses, too, the neat aesthetic before-and-after virgin-whore categories in which both nature-calendar and New Topographies photography participate (in fact, the latter may be regarded as the flip-side of the former).

Through the mid-1980s, it seemed possible to propose a relationship between gender and landscape ideology. Even compositionally, the work of the genders seemed distinct, with the women's work abandoning the sweeping prospect for more intimate and enclosed scenes. Linda Connor has been one of the most consistent working in this vein: her oeuvre constitutes an investigation of manifestations of the spiritual on the land and of cultural relics that are a part of their landscape, be they the megaliths of Brittany or the petroglyphs of Arizona. Meridel Rubenstein, perhaps the other prominent figure in this emergence, often combines portraiture with landscape in iconic, multiple-image configurations to suggest a symbiosis between inhabitants and terrain. Her ties to New Mexico, where the indigenous people have long left a visible impact on the environment and where nonnative habitation dates back four centuries, is crucial in this context. After a series of landscape/portraits, Rubenstein went on to explore more symbolic issues, and, using the imagistic skills from her earlier work, emerged with her current project: *Critical Mass*. An attempt to connect the birthplace of the atom bomb, Los Alamos in the Pueblo country, to its philosophical and social context, *Critical Mass* is a magnificent foray into connecting the tangible nature of landscape to the intangible nature of physics.

In many ways, this work opened up the largest questions about the relationship between the viewer and the view, the art object and its environment, the nature of perception, and the legitimacy of existing categories (including landscape). The responses to these questions since the mid-1980s have increasingly led away from photography as an adequate medium and from landscape as an adequate category toward installation, video, and conceptual work. There is, thus, virtually no younger generation of landscape art photographers making significant art in the West. Instead, there are a number of impressive young installation artists who began as photographers. Installation itself insists on a more bodily, diffuse experience, on the possibility of ongoing creation and transformation, on unframed and unresolved contextuality. It may be that landscape has become environment, politically and phenomenologically. As politics, the environment leads us to corporate boardrooms, toxin-damaged people and animals, systems of control, and other unscenic arenas, and leads photographers to questions about the impact of their work; as phenomenology, the environment is about the relationship between belief, perception, and sensory reality.

Look the Other Way: New Western Landscapes

Two genres shape the popular image of the American West: nature photography and Western movies. In the former, there is no evidence of human presence and, therefore, no history. In the latter, there are people, but they are all cowboys; the complex, shifting history of the American West – Spanish monks, Chinese miners and railroad builders, Mexican ranchers, indigenous hunters and storytellers – has been winnowed out, leaving behind white protestant pastoralists and sharpshooters. The occasional menace of a passing Indian or recalcitrant Mexican (or civilizing schoolmarm) is easily squelched to restore the timeless saga of gunslinging and squinting into the gorgeous distance. In reality cowboys learned their craft and got their tools from spurs to lassos from Mexican ranchers, and the great cattle drives of Western movies took place only in the brief interval between white (and black) westward emigration and the arrival of barbed-wire fences and railroads. But the genres triumph over real history, and most inhabitants of the American West believe that little has happened here amid the unceasing apotheoses of manhood and sunsets. Schoolbooks tend to suggest that all history took place in the East, with the Revolutionary and Civil Wars. Monuments are few; memories are short - and the question of what traces history leaves in the landscape remains.

In Europe the year 1998 was the anniversary of the great uprisings of 1848 or, for those who prefer their radicalism more recent, the uprisings of Paris and Prague (and myriad American cities) in 1968. In California, officials started the 150th anniversary of the Gold Rush a year early (gold was discovered in the Sierra Nevada foothills in 1848, but the rush started in 1849), eclipsing the equally significant anniversary of the 1848 Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, which ended the Mexican-American war with the U.S. acquisition of Mexico's northern half, a vast land mass stretching from Texas to northernmost California. As Californians biannually pass state ballot propositions that portray all Latinos and Spanish-speakers as immigrant intruders, the state's history as part of Spain and Mexico is shoved further and further into the shadows. Perhaps it is because of cowboy movies that whites tend to suffer from the delusion that it is they who are being invaded. Little evidence remains of the Mexican-American war, few if any battlefields are marked, and not many people recall why Spanish place names dominate the state. Aesthetics and circumstances have conspired to make California the world capital of amnesia, and nowhere is this more evident than in its landscape.

The history of erasure in the West is partly the history of photography, the landscape photography that became nature photography. (I distinguish *nature photography*, whose common characteristic is a concern with the notion of a pure and resplendent nature, from *landscape photography*, in which a certain spatial composition defines the genre. That is, the former is thematic, the latter is compositional.) If American landscape photography has a birthplace and a spiritual home, it is in Yosemite Valley, the seven-mile-long canyon whose high waterfalls and rock faces have made it one of the most famous landscapes in the world. Soon after the technology to make good landscape photographs came into being, Carleton Watkins hauled his glass plates and huge camera into the remote valley. During the gold rush, Yosemite was in the mother lode country, and Watkins had earned his living photographing mines and miners before going to Yosemite in 1861, eight years after the first white men had entered the place. His widely seen, widely celebrated photographs helped convince a distant Congress to preserve the place, and in 1864 Yosemite became the country's first federally created park. Thus Yosemite began its long career as a contradiction, a place celebrated as the home of pure nature but known largely through cultural mediations – through the books of John Muir; the photographs of Watkins, Eadweard Muybridge, and, in the twentieth century, Ansel Adams; and the paintings of Albert Bierstadt, among others. These mediations taught people how to see this place and others and, by implication at least, what not to see.

The love of nature as scenery, though widely considered to be an ennobling virtue, has a checkered history, from its aristocratic origins (luring the enclosure acts of England to its eugenicist episodes in the United States at the turn of the century and in Germany during the Third Reich. The nineteenth-century American era, in which virgin wilderness was invented, is less well understood. Perhaps people do not appear in Watkins's Yosemite photographs because of the long time exposures photographs then required, or perhaps it had to do with the landscape aesthetics of the sublime and the beautiful that Watkins had clearly absorbed. Either way, images of nature without human traces became definitive of the western landscape. The genre of nature photography – those lush color images of dewdrop-bedecked spiderwebs, red maple leaves, and bright blue water – encoded this principle. The Scottish emigrant John Muir came west shortly after the Indian wars had

subsidied in California and (lid more than anyone else to reinvent this old homeland full of battlefields and massacre sites as virgin wilderness, a place apart from society and even humanity. Muir transformed the American landscape from a site of heroic conquest to one of pure nature, a site where the scenic tourist standing breathless before a pristine world was the first arrival, Adam in his Eden.

By the time the definitive Adam, Ansel Adams, began photographing in the tradition of his Yosemite predecessors, the myth of Yosemite as an uninhabited place and the U.S. Army's 1851 invasion as a "discovery" had begun to become dogma. Amazingly, the indigenous population never vanished, as Indians were popularly supposed to have done when they were remembered at all; they merely became invisible in this most visible place in the natural world. Invisible inhabitants of a small valley visited by millions annually, they became invisible in the public imagination of the relationship between nature and culture, perhaps because they had disappeared from the representations that mediated most people's sense of the place. In this homeland whose population never disappeared, never left the region, and never abandoned their claims to the park, the popular American idea of virgin wilderness was invented. For most of its history, the American environmental movement toiled to preserve places it portrayed as being without history, without human influence or presence, creating the New World myth of nature as a place where people do not belong. By the time Adams – America's most famous photographer, sometime president of the Sierra Club, which Muir co-founded, environmental activist, f. 64 cofounder – came to photograph in Yosemite, he had to crop out the trappings of tourism to make Watkins-like photographs of a land touched only by dazzling light. Yosemite Valley had, during his decades of photographing it as wilderness, a golf course, a luxury hotel, several campgrounds, stores, a school, churches, and even a beauty parlor. Cropped out in the name of beauty, of formalism, of composition, but his heirs learned to leave these things out, too, and thus was nature photography created. Americans learned not to see what Adams cropped out, leaving the American landscape a checkerboard of scenic wonders and blank spots.

California is also famous for several recent cases of recovered memory syndrome – that is, for criminal cases involving witnesses said to be so traumatized that memory of the event was suppressed until something triggered a sudden recollection of what they had seen or suffered as children. American history has also been on trial at least since the quincentennial of Columbus's arrival in this hemisphere, and some recent landscape photography constitutes a kind of recovered memory of what has been going on in the blank spots - the Indian reservations, battlefields, military sites, toxic wastelands, abandoned mines, prisons, and tourist infrastructures, which so often air bathed in the same radiance and backed by the same mountains as the most formalist photographs. Perhaps the most famous example is Manzanar, in the high desert of the eastern side of the Sierra Nevada, not far from Yosemite. Manzanar and the nine other internment camps opened up in the United States to imprison Japanese-Americans during World War II have now been addressed by the photographers Masumi Hayashi, Joan Myers, and Patrick Nagatani (whose earlier series *Land of Nuclear Enchantment* documented nuclear sites around the state of New Mexico, where he lives). Manzanar was also photographed by Ansel Adams, who diverged from his usual subject to create a hook trying to demonstrate that Japanese-Americans possessed all the virtues of the 1940s: family ties, good cheer, and hard work. One photograph, the view of Mount Williamson from the camp with boulders in the foreground, was used in Edward Steichen's *The Family of Man* as a generic image of pious landscape uplift. The social foreground of the camps, or rather their ruins, has been restored by their contemporary photographers. They are bleak, lonely places now; the injustice Adams failed to photograph is now nothing more than shards and memorials.

Hayashi's pictures are made by piecing together a mosaic of narrow-angle 35mm snapshots into a scene that bellies out or curves to make of the landscape a kind of vessel fractured, warped, imperfectly restored, and laden with association. Her images particularly seem to address the reconstructedness of memory, the fractures in truth. As at many other such sites, the landscapes seem to remain silent about what went on. And this is the paradox of landscape and memory: the landscape itself often seems to have forgotten, or we have learned to see the landscape as a refuge, a zone of tranquility, and thus to assume the innocence of its past--or the evidence is too slight. Landscape is visible; too often history is not, or assumes strange unrecognizable forms. Sometimes blood only nourishes the next season's crop of Crass. As Toni Morrison once remarked, some lynching trees are very pretty, as trees. (In this vein, Joel Sternfield recently published a book of photographs of the scenes of famous American crimes, playing up the banal inscrutability of these locations of murders and kidnappings.) The reason there are battlefield monuments and monuments at places such as Manzanar is to distinguish them from fields in general.

Zig Rising Buffalo Jackson, a Mandan photographer from North Dakota now living in San Francisco, has been photographing the cruelly funny cross-cultural ironies of being indigenous in the contemporary United States. An earlier series of photographs called *Indian Photographing Tourists Photographing Indians* looked at the consumption and documentation of indigenous culture by people who seemed to imagine themselves as invisible subjects rather than camera-ready objects, while *Indian Man in San Francisco* placed the large, melancholy-looking Jackson in his feather headdress in incongruous urban locales. His most recent series documents the signs that mark the boundaries of Indian reservations in what would otherwise also be fields in general. They are resonant with paradoxes. The images indicate a political and cultural boundary in an otherwise indivisible sweep of bleak landscape: on this side of the sign you are on public land, on the other, Wind River Reservation or Fort Berthold Reservation land. The homes and human life of the reservations are a long way down the road past the signs. And the reservations themselves are arbitrary chunks of land, often the barren leftovers from the land grabs of the last century. They are, in a sense, pictures of the arbitrariness of signifiers of signage, of borders in the face of the landscape. In the unrevealing landscape, they are often the only indication of these histories of forced migration, of cultural survival, of poverty over the horizon. They are testimony that the story is invisible and the sign has only begun to tell you where you are.

In Anthony Hernandez's color series *Landscapes for the Homeless*, on the other hand, the signs of life are all too visible, but life itself is elsewhere. Like Jackson's pieces, these photographs are tangled up in paradoxes: homes of the homeless photographed when they are not at home. Most of the photographs document the marginal, half-natural sites where the homeless try to become invisible in order to rest undisturbed; some images suggest extended occupation. They recall Richard Misrach's photography, in that they, too, are lush, even gorgeous images of the bleakest parts of American culture, though Misrach's subject is often the might of the military and Hernandez's, at the other end of the spectrum, is the pathos of the disenfranchised. On a hank of dry grass or hay, a cardboard box is dismantled and spread out on the ground, its creases suggesting the body that lay there the night before, and pink and blue bits of litter dot the place. A sort of down-and-out Eden appears in another photograph, with a snaking brown belt, razor, hairbrush, pencil, and shining red-and-green apple on a scrap of carpet covered in pine needles. Three tin cans dangle inverted on tree limbs like ersatz fruit. Another image shows a bed of shredded porno magazines; another, a yellow telephone receiver amid dark lumps of cloth; and in yet another, a heap of pale blue bedding fills up the foreground of a beautiful bower of bare branches. These unseen people are, like the earliest explorers, roughing it, but they are no longer on the open frontier but rather in a closed system that has cut them out. They are camping at the end of the history of opportunity, and like that history, they have become invisible in the landscape.

Cynthia Rettig's photographs of her family's vacations bring us back to that history, or rather to the point where that history dovetails with that of her childhood, so that the conquest of the American West comes back as a kind of recovered memory of violence. Looking some years earlier at her sturdy blond family vacationing at Lake Mead, I first realized that much of American outback recreation reconstitutes the conquest of the West with shooting, all-terrain vehicles, motorboats, and other implements for compressing distance and shattering silence. Rettig's family would have done very well in 1848; that they are still gunslinging and squinting into the gorgeous distance in 1998 is what makes them terrifying. Winning the West has become a repetition compulsion, or a ritual of identity, or perhaps just fun. That Lake Mead is not a real lake but the backup from the Hoover Dam, a place that should not be there in the Arizona-Nevada desert, completes the picture: here are people repeating a history they cannot remember at a vast lake that is itself the result of manipulating the landscape sixty years before.