

PHOTOGRAPHING NATURE, SEEING OURSELVES

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As we survey the broad sweep of American landscape photography

from the technology's early days to the present, it is interesting to consider how larger cultural assumptions about nature and human-kind's relationship to it might have impacted the photographers' choices of subject matter and expressive treatment, as well as how the works were received by contemporary viewers. In this brief essay, I want to highlight some of the historical shifts in environmental consciousness that I see reflected in the works at hand—not to minimize each photographer's contribution to the aesthetics of photography, but to illuminate how their works also reflect changing conceptions of landscapes as bearers of cultural meaning.

If there is an overarching emotional and dramatic tension in the American Landscape Story in this exhibition, it lies along an axis between sublimity and pathos. The two concepts are related in that sublimity is a feeling of being overwhelmed by the magnitude of an experience (to the point of fear and trembling) while pathos denotes a feeling of sorrow, empathy, and tenderness for the loss of something that was once grand and noble. As my essay title suggests, in looking at photographs of landscapes we are looking into a kind of mirror that projects back to us an image of what was intelligible and meaningful to viewers at the time of their making as well as to us now as we reflect on them in the context of this exhibition.

In the era of territorial expansion and conquest by settlers of European descent, landscape photographs of the frontier (not unlike their colonial counterparts from the Middle East, North Africa, and India) emphasized the vastness of newly explored territories, their unique topographical features, and their evident lack of civilization. When visible at all, native peoples were portrayed en masse as exotic noble savages (at best), but primitive in culture

fig. 9 Carleton Watkins *Cape Horn, Columbia River, 1867*, albumen print, 20 3/4 x 16 1/8 in., RISD Museum: Helen M. Danforth Acquisition Fund 1987.010

and impediments to progress. Once continental expansion had reached its limits, however, and no existential threats to white settlement remained, American landscape images began to reflect a new criticality—at turns romantic and realistic—that persists to this day. Indeed, for the last century, landscape photography has consistently mirrored Americans' anxieties about nature, or rather its imminent loss, whether due to industrialization, pollution, population growth, real estate profiteering, or bioengineering. Alternately portraying nature as a balm for the alienated modern soul or a dystopian fait accompli, modern and postmodern photographic landscapes mark a progressively disquieting understanding of humanity's relationship to the natural universe.

The role of photography as a mass communications medium that was believed to be objective cannot be underestimated in any discussion of the impact of nature photographs on popular consciousness. Attitudes toward landscapes and what they represented were shaped by a constant flow of images and commentary through a number of media portals: in the 19th century, paintings, dioramas, expositions, lantern-slide lectures, stereoviews, newspapers, and journals illustrated with line engravings; in the 20th century, direct halftone print media, modern photojournalism, film, television, and—most recently—instantaneous global image sharing through digital media. Though we see a relative handful of photographic prints on the walls of the museum, selected for their aesthetic qualities, we must also bear in mind these other ways in which landscape/nature photographs were disseminated to viewers and shaped their understanding of what they were looking at.

One of earliest works in *America in View* was made by Carleton Watkins (see fig. 9), who had followed the 1849 Gold Rush around the Horn to California and set up shop in boomtown San Francisco. Others, like Timothy O'Sullivan, William Bell, and William Henry Jackson, accompanied government-funded geological and military survey expeditions into the endless vastness of the continent, bringing back plate views and stereographs for dissemination and reproduction as line engravings and lithographs in scientific reports and illustrated newspapers.¹ Field photography in the wet-plate era (1850s–1880s) was arduous, requiring an initial outlay of funds for materials, wagon, and pack animals, as well as contending with unpredictable weather and difficult terrain. The glass plates had to be developed on site and the loss of many weeks' work in an overturned boat or mishandled crates was a constant threat. No doubt discouraged by long stretches of flat-line horizons, photographers reveled in the geological variety they found, from glaciated mountain ranges to volcanic hot springs, hanging rocks, and gorges sculpted by ancient rivers (see fig. 10).

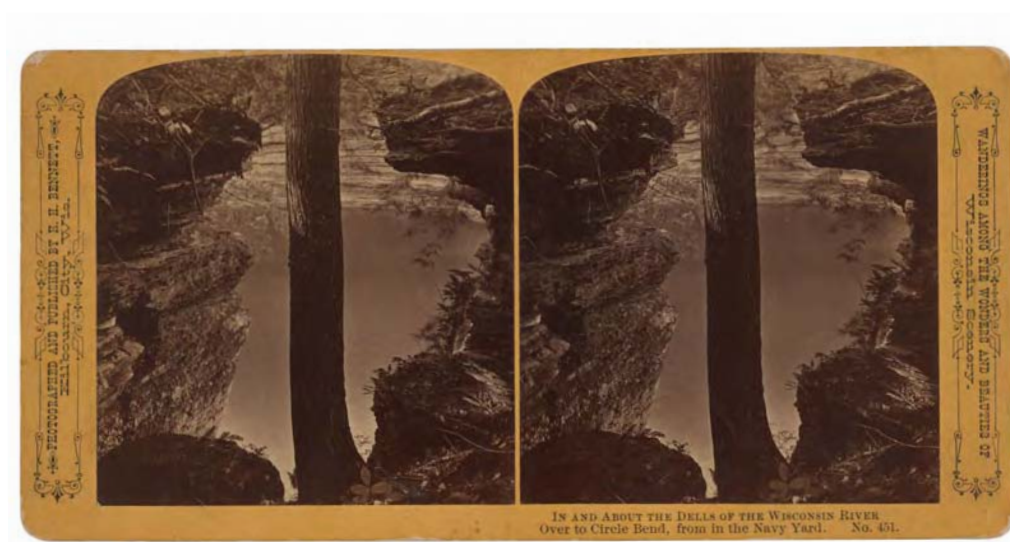


fig. 10 Henry Hamilton Bennett *In and about the Dells of Wisconsin: To Circle Bend, from the Navy Yard, No. 451*, from the series "Wanderings Among the Wonders and Beauties of Wisconsin Scenery," 1883, albumen print stereograph, 3 3/8 x 7 in., RISD Museum: Anonymous gift 84.028.8

fig. 11 William Henry Jackson *Gardiners River Hot Springs, Diana's Baths*, 1871, from the *U.S. Geological Survey of the Territories*, albumen print, 6 1/8 x 8 in., RISD Museum: Jesse Metcalf Fund 76.100

Along with nature's wonders, Watkins, O'Sullivan, Jackson, George Barnard, and A. J. Russell documented new railroad lines coursing through landscapes that bore eloquent witness to the bonanza of natural resources awaiting exploitation (see pl. 1). Disrupted by an exceedingly violent and costly Civil War (1861–1865) ignited by the extension of slavery into frontier states, railroad-building refocused the nation's identity and purpose. In 1869, the first Golden Spike connected the Central Pacific and Union Pacific Railroads at Promontory Point, Utah, and popular images showed transcontinental railroad-building as a glorious march of white civilization that would tame the vast uncanny spaces of the continental interior.

What strikes us now about these 19th-century views is our sense of their innocence. It is as though the photographers were capturing these places in some fixed, primordial state before settlement overran them with mining works, dams, boomtowns, asphalt, electrical pylons, resorts, suburbs, military bases, casinos, ATV tracks, and billboards. The whiff of nostalgia for a vanished Eden can be dated from 1893, when historian Frederick Jackson Turner gave his famous paper "The Significance of the Frontier in American History" at the World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago. Turner applied the ideas of natural selection to society, arguing that what made Anglo Americans so successful as a people was the development of particular character traits from their westward migration over three or four generations. A distinctly American type was forged on the frontier anvil, one who wrested productivity from uncultivated land and who was self-reliant, practical, and



disdainful of the institutions and social hierarchies that held sway "back east."²

While celebrating American rugged individualism, Turner noted that the frontier days were finished, that there were no more blank spaces on the map or "Indian Territories" to claim and settle. Every useful acre of land had been surveyed, named, and turned into a potential commodity to be bought and sold. The indigenous tribes who had survived three centuries of disease, displacement, and genocidal campaigns had either assimilated to the margins of white society or been forcibly resettled on reservations under federal control. Given this context, it is easy to see how images of what appeared to be "virgin land," especially in the wilder and more dramatic western places, would have such potent psychological resonance for mass viewers, especially descendants of white settlers who now considered themselves the "native stock."

Viewing stereographs, leafing through illustrated periodicals, and touring national parks and monuments allowed viewers to imagine themselves as explorers encountering these places for the first time. Jackson's views of Yellowstone from the first Hayden Geological Survey (see fig. 11) are often credited with helping convince Congress to establish the first National Park in 1872.³ Twenty years later, a group of journalists, lawyers, and professors from Berkeley and Stanford formed the Sierra Club, electing John Muir—an outspoken, persuasive advocate for wilderness preservation—as their first president. In 1916, Congress created the National Park Service with the mandate to "conserve the scenery and natural and historic objects and wildlife [in the parks]...by such means as will leave them unimpaired for the enjoyment of future generations." In 1908, sixty-nine thousand tourists visited the national parks. By 1921, annual attendance was over a million and today it tops 280 million.⁴

If there is one photographer who consciously linked Muir's preservationist ethic to the popular appeal of the West as a uniquely American Garden of Eden, it was Ansel Adams. In 1916, Adams's father bought his 14-year-old son a Brownie camera to take on a family tour of Yosemite. The Brownie was the first camera targeted to youth by George Eastman's Kodak Company, making "kodaking" a family activity. Awed by his visit, young Adams committed himself to the simultaneous pursuit of the sublime in nature and the art of photography, devouring camera club magazines and attending photographic exhibitions in his native San Francisco. At 17, he joined the Sierra Club and mastered the challenges of high altitude photography with a large-format camera. By his early twenties, Adams was making a living





fig. 12 Ansel Adams *Half Dome, Blowing Snow, Yosemite National Park, California*, ca. 1955, gelatin silver print, 14 1/8 x 18 3/4 in., RISD Museum: Museum purchase with funds from the National Endowment for the Arts 75.097

fig. 13 Clarence H. White *Morning*, 1905, from *Camera Work*, no. 23, July 1908, photogravure, 8x6 in., RISD Museum: Walter H. Kimball Fund 76.093

fig. 14 Paul Strand *Iris, Georgetown, Maine*, 1923 (printed 1975/76 by Richard Benson), gold chloride-toned silver print, 10x8 in., RISD Museum: Gift of Peter C. Jones 1987.107.2

publishing and selling his work. Images such as *Half Dome, Blowing Snow, Yosemite National Park, California*, 1955 (fig. 12), transport viewers to a realm of spiritual awe in the face of Nature's incomprehensible majesty and vastness. As did many of his peers, Adams shared the belief that the art of interpreting the natural world photographically could help restore a sense of spiritual wholeness that had become drastically attenuated in modern industrial society.

This was not a new sensibility. Turn-of-the-century Pictorialist photographers such as Gertrude Kasebier and Clarence White (see fig. 13), had drawn inspiration from Symbolist poets and Art Nouveau's turn to natural motifs as part of a widespread aesthetic revolt against the decline of taste evident in mass-produced commodities. But by the early 1920s, Paul Strand and Edward Weston abandoned the soft-focused allegorical and literary subjects of pictorial photography in favor of slices of optical reality transformed into surface pattern, rhythm, tone, and line (see fig. 14). The aim of the 1920s modernist generation inspired by Alfred Steiglitz's influential journal *Camera Work* was not to illustrate abstract concepts such as "nature" or "beauty," but to capture those instants of intensified seeing that the camera, alone, offered. One can also detect the influence of Zen Buddhism, especially among the northern California art photographers who gathered around Edward Weston in the *f/64* Group. Weston's famous methodology of "previsualization" focused all attention on the act of release—literally the click of the shutter—when matter coalesced into form, and when photographer, machine, and subject became one (see pl. 11).

The Depression years of the 1930s brought renewed interest in realist documentation, temporarily eclipsing art photography's tendencies toward abstraction. Now the focus shifted to landscapes devastated by interlocking ecological catastrophes such as soil depletion and an extended period of drought that turned farms into wastelands. There was unprecedented federal patronage for photographers through the Department of Agriculture's Farm Security Administration (FSA), among other New Deal programs. FSA photographers such as Ben Shahn, Walker Evans, Dorothea Lange, and Arthur Rothstein (see fig. 15) documented conditions of environmental, economic, and social stress in rural America and remedies offered by the federal government.

The FSA Historical Section's director, Roy Stryker, was a trained social economist who urged his photographers to "get pictures of lunch rooms, filling



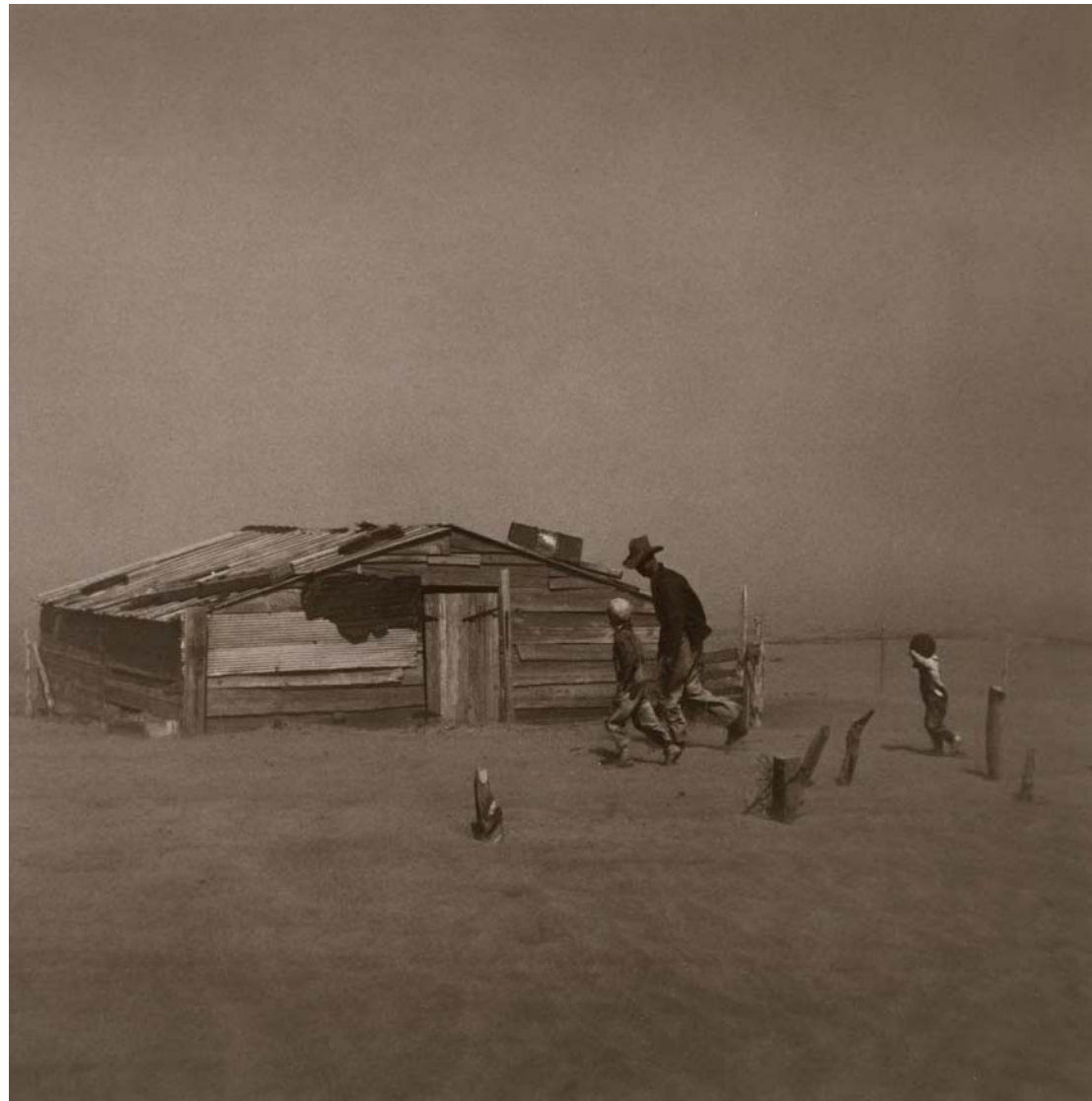


fig. 15 Arthur Rothstein *Father and Sons Walking in the Face of a Dust Storm, Cimarron County, Oklahoma, 1936*, gelatin silver print, 9 7/8 × 12 3/4 in., RISD Museum: Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Gilman Angier 80.088

fig. 16 Walker Evans *U.S. Post Office, Sprott, Alabama, 1936* (printed 1970 by James Dow), gelatin silver print, 16 × 20 in., RISD Museum: Gift of James Dow 1971.043.11

stations, advertising signs, churches and tent revivals, wall decorations in homes, backyards, men loafing under trees, people listening to the radio.”⁵ Inspired by the photographs of Eugene Atget that he had seen in Berenice Abbott’s New York studio, Walker Evans fleshed out a new concept of the American “social landscape” in photographs such as *U.S. Post Office, Sprott, Alabama, 1936* (fig. 16), where a weathered wooden storefront with a gas pump and mailbox—its sagging porch sporting a shiny new Coca-Cola sign—presides over a deserted intersection in the middle of the day, in the middle of nowhere. As in the best of Evans’s work, vernacular architecture speaks eloquently to the humble aspirations of those who built and used it—the antithesis of the slick, corporate “Madison Avenue” world Evans grew up in and viscerally rejected.⁶ Evans’s reticent but socially acute documentary style would inspire FSA peers such as Russell Lee and generations of American photographers who followed.



The genocidal atrocities of the Second World War and the new cold war chess game of mutually assured nuclear destruction made Nature with a capital-N all the more sacred to Americans at mid-century. Oil companies and automobile manufacturers capitalized on this subconscious longing, promoting domestic tourism as patriotic to get Americans on the road in new Fairlanes, Belairs, Deluxes, Silverstreaks and Rocket 88s, fueled by cheap gas. Postwar advertising melded the technological and natural sublimines in glossy color spreads shot in spectacular locations, an unbeatable formula for selling feelings of plenitude, freedom, and security in a frightening world. Though Ansel Adams had found his photographic calling much earlier, it was in the 1950s that he became a household name. Landscapes of Nature’s West, in black and white and Kodachrome, evoked myths of a simpler past when pioneers overcame hardships to build a great nation. Americans felt a renewed sense of Manifest Destiny, now on the global stage, a feeling eagerly embraced not only by corporate advertising but by politicians and the media.⁷

But some refused to be reassured as they experienced the price of postwar consensus: congressional witchhunts of homosexuals and suspected leftists, the ostracism of anyone deemed “un-American.” Borrowing the improvisational style of jazz performance, Jack Kerouac typed *On the Road* (1951) in a continuous scroll—a spontaneous Beat manifesto extolling the authenticity of living life on one’s own terms, at the subversive margins of the American Dream. In 1955, Robert Frank, a Swiss-American photojournalist and friend

fig. 17 Robert Frank *U.S. 285, New Mexico*, 1955, from *The Americans*, gelatin silver print, 13½ × 9⅜ in., courtesy Pace/MacGill Gallery, New York

of both Kerouac and Evans, received a Guggenheim Fellowship to take to the road, traveling throughout the United States and photographing its diverse social landscapes. His resulting carefully edited sequence of photographs was published as *The Americans*, first in France in 1958, then by Grove Press the following year, with an introduction by Kerouac.

Frank's photograph *U.S. 285, New Mexico*, 1955 (fig. 17), is the visual equivalent to Kerouac's paeon to the open freedom of the road and the Beat nomad's raw quest for meaning. Though it received negative reviews for its perceived disrespect to the United States and for the casualness of Frank's shooting style, *The Americans* would set the tone for photographers' responses to the American landscape in the 1960s and 1970s, notably the work of Lee Friedlander, Garry Winogrand, and Stephen Shore. Now, nature was apt to be viewed from a car window or in a rear-view mirror rather than from a hilltop. Overnight, the large-format magisterial views of Adams and Weston were replaced by a 35mm "grab-shot" style that captured the flux and contradictions of modern life with a fresh immediacy.⁸ Photographers were part of that flux, restless peripatetics criss-crossing the continent on new Interstates and side roads, retrieving evidence of the "Americas" they found (see pl. 18).

In 1960 the Sierra Club responded to the threats of automotive encroachment and plans for new wilderness development by launching its series of Exhibit Format Books, beginning with Ansel Adams's *This Is the American Earth*. The U.S. Forest Service was cutting access roads into the backcountry and the Club lobbied Congress to adopt a comprehensive system of land-use classifications and hold public hearings on any plans to alter the wilderness character of public lands. In 1962, the Club published *In Wildness Is the Preservation of the World*, featuring Eliot Porter's sublime yet intimate color photographs and texts by Henry David Thoreau. The Exhibit Format Books were intended to sway public opinion in favor of preservation and bolstered the campaign for the Wilderness Act that was passed by Congress in 1964.

The 1960s and '70s also coincided with a youth-driven countercultural shift away from consumption as a programmed way of life and widespread alarm over chemical contamination sparked by Rachel Carson's 1962 exposé, *Silent Spring*. The first Earth Day in the United States took place in April 1970, a grassroots teach-in that engaged more than 20 million Americans and was heavily covered by the press, persuading Congress that environmental reform had a national constituency. That year, President Nixon signed the Clean Air Act into law, followed by the Clean Water Act two years later.

Taking their lead from both Robert Frank's and Pop Art's cool send-up of the American Dream, photographers focused their cameras on the excesses of mass consumption in

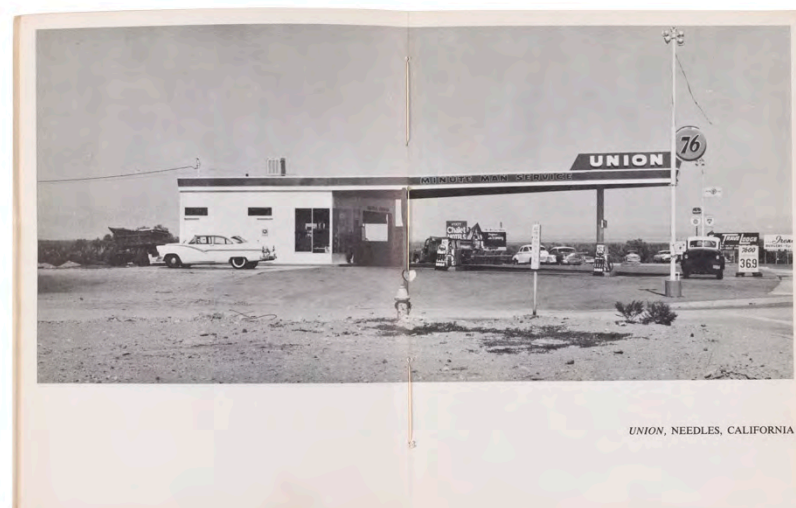


fig. 18 Ed Ruscha *Twentysix Gasoline Stations*, 1963, photo-offset lithograph artist's book, 7 1/16 x 5 1/2 x 3/16 in., courtesy John Hay Library, Brown University

suburbia, the kitsch culture of corporate leisure and entertainment visible in the resorts of Las Vegas, Disney World, and their down-market kin, and the explosive growth of tract home subdivisions, especially in the western Sunbelt. Ed Ruscha's self-published artist book *Twentysix Gasoline Stations* (1963; fig. 18), wryly documented the repetitive banality of the highway-scape between Tulsa and Los Angeles that inspired his California Pop paintings. In 1973, Bill Owens published *Suburbia*, featuring straight documentary photographs of nuclear families at home in Livermore, California, along with quotes from the subjects that were banal to the point of absurdity: "Sunday afternoon we get together. I cook the steaks and my wife makes the salad. . . . We're really happy. Our kids are healthy, we eat good food, and we have a really nice home."⁹ Ironically, the complacent satisfactions of family life in 1970s suburbia are more likely to provoke nostalgia than disdain in today's viewers.

If NASA's iconic "blue marble" on the cover of the *Whole Earth Catalog* (1968–1972) represented the ultimate macro view of humanity's home planet, Joe Deal's *The Fault Zone*—photographs of the edges of new suburban development along the new interstates east of Los Angeles—showed the ground-level reality (fig. 19). No longer was it a matter of preserving the aesthetic experience of pristine wilderness—it was too late for that. What was at stake was the very survival of local ecosystems whose carrying capacities were being overwhelmed. An international crisis would soon reveal the real costs of America's cheap oil dependency. Unhappy with U.S. foreign policy in the Middle East, the oil-exporting nations of the Arabian peninsula and north Africa (OPEC) proclaimed a temporary embargo in 1973, followed by a sharp rise in prices. Gas rationing at the pump shocked the public and sent the economy into a steep recession for over a decade.

In 1975, curator William Jenkins mounted the exhibition *New Topographics: Photographs of a Man-Altered Landscape* at the George Eastman House, featuring photographs by Robert Adams, Lewis Baltz, Joe Deal, Frank Gohlke, Stephen Shore, Nicholas Nixon, and others. The show can be seen as the antithesis of the Sierra Club's Exhibit Format political advocacy. Jenkins asserted that these photographers were showing landscapes in a radically new way. Instead of following earlier aesthetic approaches informed by metaphysical, ethical, or personal ideas about humankind's relationship to nature, these photographers



TWENTYSIX GASOLINE STATIONS

studiously sidestepped any visual rhetoric, sentiment, or judgment. As aesthetically neutral as real-estate snapshots, the photographers showed the facts without making a plea (see fig. 20). Nonetheless, the impact of *New Topographics* on viewers in the 1970s could not help but resonate with vigorous political debates in the press and local legislatures about the effects of the oil crisis and the ecological impacts of rampant suburban sprawl into fragile environments.

Regardless of whether the *New Topographics* photographers were personally invested in environmental politics, their photographs departed from their 20th-century predecessors in their implicit critique of the notion of nature as a refuge from the ills of industrial life. The accelerating degradation of the environment had become an inescapable reality; there was no longer any land or water source in the United States unaffected by human encroachment. The old dichotomies that had previously structured commonly held assumptions—nature vs. culture; urban vs. rural; human vs. non-human; first world vs. third world; private vs. public—were coming apart.

In 1981 the Sierra Club published *Dead Tech: A Guide to the Archaeology of Tomorrow*, originally released in Germany with photographs by Manfred Hamm. Hamm's images were organized by subject: military ruins, automobile graveyards, sunken harbors, abandoned factories, and so on. As a Sierra Club publication, *Dead Tech* was unabashedly a propaganda book that emphasized the long-term environmental hazards of industrial and military production at the very moment the United States was exporting much of its toxic manufacturing and waste disposal to impoverished nations with few, if any, environmental restrictions. The lid was blown off this ugly reality in 1984 when a gas leak at a Union Carbide (now Dow Chemical) plant killed over three thousand men, women, and children in Bhopal, India. Environmental regulation in advanced capitalist nations had pushed corporate polluters over southern borders and across oceans, into the lives of those unable to defend themselves.

The exportation of dirty industries abroad did not bring an environmental utopia to the United States. Aside from depressing wages and weakening unions (a plus for multinational corporations), capital flight devastated local economies and turned once-thriving communities into ghost towns. New England had suffered disinvestment earlier as the largest textile mills had relocated to the non-unionized South by mid-century. Fifty years later, photographers Salvatore Mancini, Scott Lapham, and Michael Cevoli trained their cameras on the former manufacturing landscapes of Rhode Island and Massachusetts when mill buildings that could not be repurposed for the newer economy were being demolished or left to



fig. 19 Joe Deal Colton, California, 1978, from The Fault Zone, 1981, gold-toned gelatin silver print, 15x15 in., RISD Museum: Museum purchase, Georgianna Sayles Aldrich Fund and Gift of James D. and Diana D. Burke 2003.76.19

fig. 20 Lewis Baltz Lemmon Valley, Looking North, 1977, from Nevada, gelatin silver print, 8x10 in., RISD Museum: Gift from the collection of Joe Deal and Betsy Rupp 2010.82.35.11

fig. 21 Scott Lapham *Providence Cold Storage #1, Demolished* 1999, 1999, gelatin silver print, 16×20 in., RISD Museum: Gift from the Collection of Dr. and Mrs. Joseph A. Chazan 2005.132.5

fig. 22 Edward Burtynsky *OMYA #51, Calcium Carbonate* Waste Area, Proctor, Vermont, 1991, digital color chromogenic print, mount: 34×41 in., Courtesy Howard Greenberg Gallery, New York

crumble (see fig. 21). The old industrial landscapes of New England may appear deceptively green and lush with vegetation, but the subsoils and groundwater are saturated with contaminants. After the Love Canal scandal in Niagara Falls, NY, Congress established the Superfund program (1980), charging the EPA with locating, investigating, and cleaning up the most hazardous toxic waste sites.¹⁰



The 1980s opened with a well-funded (and ongoing) backlash against environmental reform, epitomized by President Reagan's appointment of James Watt as Secretary of the Interior. Watt had led the Sagebrush Rebellion by western developers, ranchers, and energy corporations against government regulation and the establishment of the EPA. Meanwhile, a string of international disasters made headlines, including Three Mile Island, Bhopal, Chernobyl, and the Exxon Valdez oil spill. Scientific reports on acid rain, deforestation of the Amazon basin, desertification, ozone depletion, and global warming raised broad international concern. The scandalous deal-making and crony capitalism that rocked the EPA under Reagan and successive GOP administrations, along with the repeated refusal of the United States to respect international protocols on energy consumption, galvanized new waves of political activism, including grassroots direct-action groups such as Earth First!, whose members chained themselves to trees in national forests to prevent logging.

The *New Topographics* aesthetic of deadpan observation had embraced color in the modestly scaled photographs of Stephen Shore, who brought to the "Great American Road Trip" tradition of Frank, Friedlander, and Winogrand a Pop sensibility left over from his youthful days as a member of Warhol's Factory (see pl. 21). While many of today's landscape photographers trace their roots to *New Topographics*, photographers such as Richard Misrach and Edward Burtynsky have perfected what one might call the "topographic sublime." Burtynsky's photographs are straightforward documents of industrially impacted landscapes on truly superhuman scales, beginning with his series on Vermont's flooded marble quarries (1991–1992; see fig. 22), and continuing with his extended documentation of global sites of extractive and recycled waste mining and the decade-long building of China's Three Gorges Dam, which displaced entire communities. Burtynsky reprises the magisterial view tradition, using large-format cameras and high,



often aerial, vantage points. In this sense, he is less the inheritor of Lewis Baltz than of Albert Bierstadt. Unlike the *New Topographics* photographers, who tended to work close to home, Burtynsky seeks out global locations that are inherently spectacular, and his large-scale exhibition prints immerse viewers in a phantasmagoria of visual stimuli. Of all of the post-*New Topographics* landscape photographers working today, Burtynsky has been the most consistent in his focus on the massive transformations of environments wrought by modern engineering, technology, and the demands of global commerce.¹¹

The topographic style of the 1970s was also very influential on the German School photographers, a number of whom studied at the Dusseldorfer Kunstakademie with Hilla and Bernd Becher, whose precisely framed typological photographs of industrial structures were introduced to American audiences in *New Topographics*. Thomas Struth, a Dusseldorf graduate, photographed in Yosemite National Park for his 1991–1992 series *Paradise* (see fig. 23). In setting up his 8×10 view camera in some of the remaining old-growth forests around the world, Struth was not making any ecological, romantic, or socio-economic statement but rather confronting the viewer with a dense jungle of tree trunks, branches, and foliage. His stated intention with his mural-scale photographs was to inspire feelings of loss of direction and confusion—reminding us, perhaps, of how

fig. 23 Thomas Struth *Untitled*, 2004, from the portfolio *Paradise*, color inkjet print, 13×19 in., RISD Museum; Mary B. Jackson Fund 2006.11

ignorant we modern consumers have become about finding our way home—to nature or any other imagined paradise.¹²

If Struth deploys topographic realism to provoke disorientation when confronted with a “wall of nature” that does not yield to our mastering gaze, a very different feeling is elicited by other influential photographers—one that directly challenges the emotionally distanced (some would say masculine) style of *New Topographics* and much of the German School. Sentimentality is a culturally feminized emotion that expresses a private and tender response to what is beheld, rather than sublime awe or detachment. Sentimentality solicits a modest feeling, not a grandiose one. While the sentimental is most evident in the portraiture of such artists as Nan Goldin and Wolfgang Tillmans, it is also present in contemporary landscape tableaux composed by artists such as Justin Kimball, whose *Deep Hole, New Hampshire*, 2002 (pl. 48), updates a durable theme from the western canon (Giorgione, Manet, Eakins): youths enjoying communal leisure in a local arcadia.

Sentimentality’s postmodern affect derives from its sense of *déjà vu*, reminding us that we’ve seen this movie before. Is it Hitchcock or Billy Wilder? We can’t quite put our finger on it, but the scene appears both uncanny and deeply familiar. German photographer Uta Barth, who has been living and working in Los Angeles for many years, captures this feeling in her gauzy landscape fragments and interiors that are as spare in their detail as Struth’s are charged. Her choice to radically soften the camera’s focus removes all signs of site specificity and veils the scene in a dream-like haze. *Field #14*, 1996 (pl. 42), shows a literal *terrain vague*, a nondescript suburban landscape rendered in an almost monochromatic palette. It is a non-place as viewed through a heavily fogged window, or perhaps tears.

As we survey the possibilities of landscape expression in the present, we recognize that we can satisfy our curiosity to see what “America” (or anywhere else) looks like by roaming Google Maps as well as highways and airports. In his 2010 artist book *A New American Picture*, Doug Rickard selected and digitally enhanced images taken by Google Street View’s automated cameras of blighted neighborhoods across the United States, places that would have been difficult, even dangerous, to photograph in person. Rickard’s virtual road trip is a dystopian high-tech update of the genre, showing streetscapes of communities ravaged by capital flight and government neglect (see fig. 24). Trevor Paglen, a trained geographer as well as a writer and visual artist, used the Internet extensively to research what he calls the “black world”—secret military and CIA sites whose existence

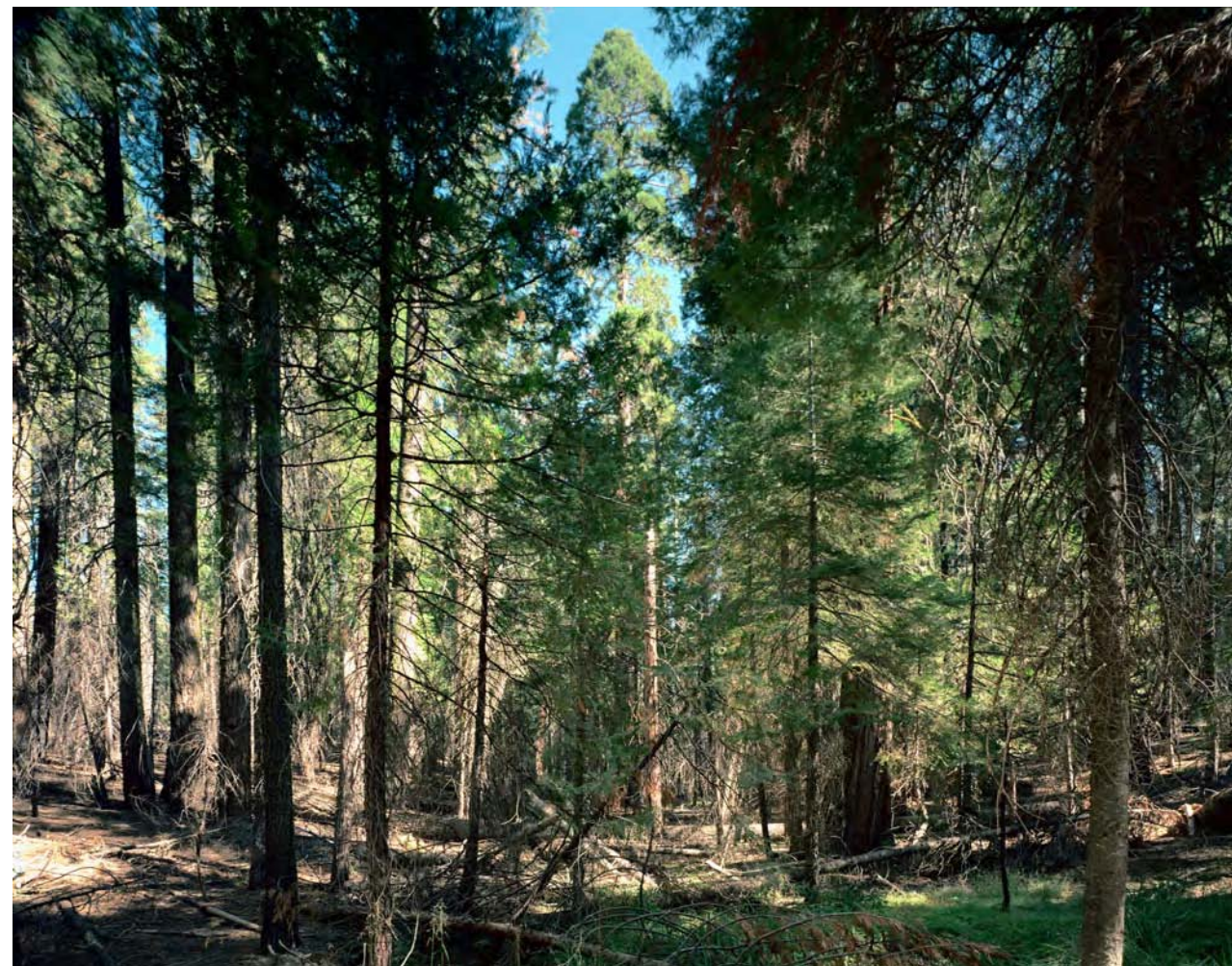


fig. 24 Doug Rickard #82.948842, Detroit, MI, 2009, 2010, from the series "A New American Picture," color inkjet print, 26 x 41½ in., RISD Museum: Mary B. Jackson Fund 2012.41

the government officially denies. Availing himself of an extremely high-powered telescopic camera used by astronomers, Paglan captured blurry visual evidence of militarized installations buffered by vast areas of restricted desert. Ironically, both Rickard and Paglan use cutting-edge technological tools to reveal landscapes that most Americans would prefer not to see or know anything about.

Tracing the relationships between photographic aesthetics and cultural shifts in American attitudes toward the environment is only one way of thinking about the histories of American landscape photography, but a particularly productive one. Though Turner's Thesis is long buried, the notion of a unique national character shaped by the frontier experience continues its myth-making work in the entertainment media and political speech, notably in debates about the security of national borders from both actual and imaginary outside threats. Despite billions spent on high-tech missile defense systems, surveillance satellites, electronic fences, airport body scanners, security cameras, and gated communities, many Americans feel neither safe nor secure. Even the weather seems ominous as rising temperatures are blamed for more violent storms, droughts, heat waves, and growing water shortages. Oceans are becoming more acidic, endangering aquatic life; the earth is running out of easily extractable fossil fuels; the food chain is increasingly subject to chemical and genetic intervention. Perhaps this accounts for the pervasive sense in contemporary American photography that a national landscape that once offered its citizens the promise of unlimited abundance, freedom, and opportunity has turned into a disquieting hall of mirrors.



NOTES

1. The earliest surviving photographic documentation from an expeditionary survey are several daguerreotypes made by William Mayhew on Lt. Israel Woodruff's 1850 survey of the northern boundary of the Creek Nation in the Oklahoma Territory. The Muscogee Creek nation was one of a number of native tribes forcibly relocated from ancestral homelands in the Southeast after the Indian Removal Act of 1830 opened twenty-five million acres to white settlement. Woodruff's images show the survey party in camp rather than the landscape itself.
2. See Frederick Jackson Turner, *The Frontier in American History* (New York: Henry Holt & Company, 1921). Turner's heroic frontier American types were popularized in dime novels and Buffalo Bill's Wild West Show, followed by motion picture and television Westerns. Invariably, the heroes were American-born, white, and male, and we recognize an unbroken Hollywood lineage from John Wayne in *Stagecoach* (1939) to Daniel Day-Lewis in *There Will Be Blood* (2007). Despite the efforts of historians to highlight the equally critical roles played by Native Americans, women, Hispanos, Mestizos, Chinese and Japanese immigrants, and African-Americans in the histories of the West, the stock drama of the frontier (of any frontier, for that matter) almost always turns on testing the character of Anglo-American masculinity.
3. Peter Bacon Hales, *William Henry Jackson and the Transformation of the American Landscape* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1988), 108.
4. 2010 Annual Summary Report, National Park Service website <http://www.nature.nps.gov/stats/viewReport.cfm?selectedReport=SystemSummaryReport.cfm>.
5. As quoted in Stuart Cohen, *The Likes of Us: America in the Eyes of the Farm Security Administration* (Jaffrey, NH: David R. Godine, 2008), 25.
6. Walker Evans's father was a copywriter and executive for several large advertising agencies in the Midwest, a world his artistic and literary son rejected as phony and inauthentic. See Belinda Rathbone, *Walker Evans: A Biography* (New York: Mariner Books, 1995).
7. See Deborah Bright, "Victory Gardens: The Public Landscape of Postwar America," *Views* (Spring 1990).
8. The 1952 publication of Henri Cartier-Bresson's *The Decisive Moment* also played an important role in advancing the rapid snapshot-style aesthetic.
9. Bill Owens, *Suburbia* (San Francisco: Straight Arrow Press, 1973), n.p.
10. As of 2010, there were 1,280 Superfund sites listed on the EPA's National Priority List, mostly concentrated in the Northeast and Upper Midwest. Assessing responsibility for the damage often sets off years of litigation with the designated polluters over who actually pays for the cleanup.
11. Another significant offshoot of *New Topographics*, not represented in this exhibition, was the 1994 founding of the Center for Land Use Interpretation (CLUI) by Matthew Coolidge (www.clui.org). CLUI's aim was to be an educational resource and databank for images of land use and development updated continually through a global network of participating photographers. Its projects to date have been interdisciplinary and eclectic, ranging from guided tours that are turned into online videos to books, exhibitions, and residencies. It remains to be seen how much of CLUI's original mission will be overtaken by Google Maps and other information-aggregating sites.
12. Hans Rudolf Reust, "Thomas Struth: Talks About His 'Paradise' Series," *Artforum* (May 2002), 151.