EXPERIENCING THE VIEW

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This article discusses the way people experience the landscape. Tracing the progress of landscape photography from the late nineteenth century to the present, I introduce the way concepts in landscape photography have changed. My photographs are discussed regarding how they build on the foundation of this historical precedent. Using photographs of individuals at places they think are special, I examine their perception of landscape. The positions and actions of the subjects shape the way their attitudes are conveyed. The concept of beauty is discussed as it relates to the appreciation of landscape. By discussing with the subjects why these places are special and photographing with the intent to convey what those reasons are, my photographs examine the relationship of people to the landscape.
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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

When Timothy O’Sullivan and William Henry Jackson ventured forth into the western United States with the government sponsored surveys after the Civil War, the land was not a vast wilderness. Inhabited by Native Americans for years, the area was already being settled by miners, and the transcontinental railroad was soon to be completed. Still, the land between the Sierra Nevada Mountains and the 100th meridian was a harsh and forbidding place where survival was the first priority. Described as a land “where continuous settlement is impossible”, nevertheless the West was surveyed and photographed to explore its commercial possibilities and geologic curiosities (Phillips, 1996, p. 23).

O’Sullivan tended to show the land as powerful, but still included evidence of people working with it. In a group of photographs of Shoshone Falls in Idaho from the first King expedition, O’Sullivan showed the grandeur of the landforms as well as members of his party surveying the scene (Trachtenberg, 1989). In his image of the sand dune, the upper part of the image shows the natural landforms of dune, mountain, and sky, while the lower part shows his wagon, its tracks, and his footprints. The place may be desolate, but not so rough that he cannot wheel his wagon in to make an exposure.

On the other hand, Jackson made both man and the land look heroic. The views tended to romanticize the places with pictorial conventions from romantic painting such as dramatic raking light, bold areas of highlight and shadow, and exotic geographical forms. In an image of the Grand Canyon, a figure poses in a grand gesture with a
telescope while another reclines nearby. He placed figures in high positions and with confident postures that emphasize the sense of achievement in conquering these places. As the West was settled, Jackson “traveled widely to photograph the burgeoning civilization that came from winning the war with the wilderness” (Phillips, 1996, p. 26).

Along with the other survey photographers, O’Sullivan and Jackson influenced the settlement of the West by showing its incredible landscape in context with successful human endeavor. After the close of the frontier, attitudes about the western landscape changed as survival became less of a concern. The emotional power of the wilderness to move the heart became more significant than the physical power to threaten the body. Ansel Adams’ photographs embodied that change as he focused on the landscape as a beautiful place of metaphysical importance. Preservation of it in a wild state was a priority with the new national park system. Where earlier photographers showed people in the landscape as a positive comment on its habitability, Adams worked to show the emotive power of a pristine landscape without a human presence.

Later in the century, Robert Adams looked at the landscape after man had altered it. Adams focused on both the destructive effects of man on the landscape and the emotional power the inhabited land still had. Works like *Los Angeles Spring* signaled a frustration with the loss of nature to man’s thoughtlessness, while *Prairie* looked favorably at the balance of land and life on the plains. Rather than a celebration of what existed before man like Ansel Adams’ work, Robert Adams’ work was a call to action to halt man’s undo influence on the environment and appreciate our relationship with it. It did not include the ideas of the picturesque that Ansel did, rather it played against those ideas to create a new kind of aesthetic that celebrated the beauty in a banal landscape.
Working after both Ansel and Robert Adams’s, Mark Klett found a middle ground between their work. He looks at the landscape with some traditional ideas of the picturesque, but he is also realistic about man’s effect on the environment. His work actually harks back to the work of the exploration photographers, but he looks at his exploration as a personal one. His photos are like a diary. He looks at the individual’s experience in the landscape through himself.

The questions that arise from the work of this tradition of photographers involve the environment and humanity. How does the condition of the environment in a landscape affect a person’s appreciation of a place? Where is the point of balance between consumption and conservation? How is a landscape described aesthetically? How does a person experience the landscape? These are the issues that face landscape photographers today.

My previous work has explored some of these questions. After photographing the unpeopled landscape looking for subtle evidence of a balance between man and nature, I realized that the real relationship happens on a personal level so I made photographs of people at their favorite place in the landscape. Some images included people looking out into the landscape, while some worked more like environmental portraits. Some people took me to nature oriented places, others took me to domesticated places, and some suggested interior spaces. I narrowed the focus to places that are special because of a relationship to the natural world. I gave the images a slightly warm tone to connect to the historical precedents in landscape photography. These images led me to the work in this project.
Statement of Problem

I intended to explore the relationship of people to places. I asked people to take me to places they thought were special because of a relationship to the natural world and explain what quality made those places special. Then, I photographed the people in those places. The approach was a collaboration between me and my subjects. It paired my ideas regarding natural environment and visual language with my subjects' ideas about their relationships to the places. With my prerogative as an artist driving this equation, the result primarily served as an examination of my response to these situations while also documenting other's ideas about places. I addressed the following questions:

Questions

1. How do my subjects experience the landscape, and how do I as a photographer show what I think that experience is in my photographs?
2. How do the actions and placement of the person in the image affect the meaning of the image?
3. How does the concept of beauty enter into my choices in making the photograph?

Methodology

I answered these questions through the production of a group of 29 photographs. I asked 29 people to select places meaningful to them because of a relationship to the natural world, and to explain the reasons they selected that place. Then I collaborated with them to make an image of them in that place.
The images consist of 29 toned, black and white photographs. The seven images that I determined to be the most significant in answering my questions I printed eighteen inches square, while the other twenty-two images I printed ten inches square. I have written a creative problem in lieu of thesis paper to detail the answers to the questions in my problem, and I had an exhibition of the work from the project in the Cora Stafford Gallery from February 3-7, 2003.
CHAPTER 2

DISCUSSION OF WORK

Creating the work for this Problem in Lieu Thesis led me to a range of people and landscapes. As I looked at the work I was making, trends appeared based on how the people experienced the landscape and what type of landscape they selected. I also saw some consistency in the way I tried to portray those experiences in my photographs. The images were grouped in the exhibition based on these trends, because the different ways in which photographs from similar situations answered my questions provided an interesting dialogue among the images. People looked out at broad vistas, spent time in their backyards, returned to places from their memories, and interacted with animals. I also found that images of children functioned in a unique way so I hung them as a separate group as well. Within these groups each image answered my questions in an individual way. Following are explanations of how select images answered those questions.

In my first question I asked how my subjects experience the landscape, and how do I as a photographer show what I think that experience is in my photographs? Many of the earlier photographs present people looking out over a broad vista. In Tim’s Pond (fig. 3) the subject looks over a mirror finished pond past a dramatically lit tree to a small tree on the horizon. Tim liked to take walks on his grandparents’ property because of how beautiful he thought the place was in the evening. To show his aesthetic experience I photographed him in a still, contemplative pose. His hands are in his pockets, and his posture is relaxed. To convey his idea of the beauty of the place, I portrayed the landscape with the picturesque conventions of raking evening light,
smooth tones, and an ordered composition. Combined, the beautiful scene and his act of looking show in the photograph what I thought his experience was.

While it does not appear to be a backyard, *Mona’s Forest* (fig. 2) was taken a stone’s throw from the subject’s home. Mona wanted to be photographed only partially visible in the forest, because what she said she liked about the forest was that she could disappear in it. I realized that this was indicative of why Mona chose to live in a small house down an isolated dirt drive surrounded by a dense forest. She liked to hide in the woods, so in the photograph she emerges from behind a tree in the midst of a thicket. Her position in the woods is representative of her position in life.

Many of my subjects experienced landscapes through their memories of places. *Doug’s Treehouse* (fig. 1) was an excellent example of this type of experience because Doug took me to a lot next to his parents’ home where as a child he played in a treehouse. Now all that was left were a few small boards still nailed to the tree, so I had him look up into the tree where the house was now absent. By titling the photograph after the missing treehouse, I emphasized to the viewer how Doug’s experience was in his memories.

In *James’s Corral* the subject’s relationship to the landscape is shaped by his relationship to the other animals that share it with him. James explained that what he liked about the land was that it allowed him to raise horses. Rather than take me out to a picturesque field to present an idyllic scene with his horses, James went to the corral, quite a barren setting. I saw that he was more interested in the relationship he had with the horses than the aesthetics of the place. I showed this by having him stand with the horses, holding one, with the sun at their backs so that their shadows emphasized their
closeness by blending into one dramatic shape on the foreground. I used a tree and the fence to close off the background, emphasizing that the relationship to the animals took precedence over the view.

Robert’s Creek is photographed on a new farm Robert’s father was building. It is on land with a drive winding through the forest past a windmill on a hill, a place full of what one might consider beautiful locations. Robert, however, wanted to go to the creek, a place with things to do. He collected sticks and rocks, skipped rocks across the water, and waded around in his boots. The image in the show was shot just as we were leaving, and rather than look down the creek to see the light filtering through the trees, Robert kept dragging his stick back and forth through the water. This landscape was special to Robert because of all the things he could do there. Having deduced what I thought Robert’s connection to the landscape was, I showed it by catching him in the midst of his play. The way his body stretches out to the right and he reaches with his stick creates a dynamic posture that emphasizes his activity. His stick has a slight blurring, another visual cue to his active energy. To emphasize his preference in his activity over the view, his eyes are focused on the end of the stick not the view of the stream snaking back to the upper right of the frame.

The second question I ask regards how the actions and placement of the person in the image affect the meaning of the image. A comparison of Tim’s Pond (fig. 3) and Robert’s Creek (fig. 5) describes how the actions of the person affect meaning. Tim stands still, his body facing directly away from the camera and into the image. He looks straight back to the horizon. His actions suggest contemplation, an activity of the mind. Robert on the other hand displays activity of the body, as he stretches across the frame.
While the creek winds back behind him, Robert is engulfed in doing not looking. Both these subjects occupy a similar location in the frame, but their actions create different meanings.

Another comparison can be found between Kay’s Bluff (fig. 6) and Gary’s Porch (fig. 7). Both are photographs of people surveying a vista, but how they do it is very different. Kay stands perched on a pile of rocks at the edge of a bluff. Her stance feels a bit precarious amidst the blowing wind. Positioning her out in the landscape makes her seem integral to the place. Looking out at the same lake, Gary sits on his porch drinking a glass of ice water. By shooting from inside his house looking out, I connected Gary to his domestic environment as he looked out into the natural. His experience is more of an observer than Kay’s experience as a participant.

The compositional placement of the subject in the frame also affects the meaning. John David’s Bottomland (fig. 8) and Jake’s Perch (fig. 9) both feature subjects holding on to a tree with a similar posture. John David is positioned slightly below the center of the frame with the camera looking down at him, while Jake is slightly above the center of the frame with the camera looking up at him. Jake’s higher position imbues him with a sense of power and dominion that John David lacks. Jake’s facing the camera makes his image much more about him as a person. John David looks away from the camera and off to the horizon, and this positioning makes the image more about the landscape.

My last question asks how the concept of beauty entered into my choices in making the photographs. The idea of beauty plays an important role in the way people perceive the landscape, but it carries a number of meanings that can lead to confusion.
In this context I will think of beauty as Robert Adams describes it in “Beauty in Photography.” He said beauty is “a synonym for the coherence and structure underlying life” (1981, p. 24). “It helps us meet our worst fear, the suspicion that life may be chaos and that therefore our suffering is without meaning.” (1981, p. 25) He wrote how art simplifies life with a careful sorting out in favor of order called composition. This idea of beauty is the one I have used in considering my compositions while shooting. Both using my own ideas about ordering what I saw and interpreting how a desire for ordering influenced my subjects’ appreciation for landscapes directed my composition.

*Gary’s Porch* (fig. 7) shows how I used this idea of beauty to convey the way that Gary viewed his landscape. Gary explained to me how he would trim the tree behind his porch flat across the top so that it would not obstruct his view of the lake. The tennis court and his neighbor’s house encompassed more of his view than the lake, but I realized that he had ordered the view in his mind to focus on the lake. He could look past the sawed off tree to see the beauty of his view though his way of ordering the world around him inside his head. I used the shapes of the windows and the porch to cordon off the picture to suggest the way he sees the beauty in his mind.

In *Roger’s World* (fig. 10), I used my own sense of beauty to elevate a common view. Roger liked his backyard for what he could do there: build odd things, play golf, or just sit in the sun. While he did not consider the scene for its beauty, I ordered the elements in the photograph to look beautiful. Because of how the shapes of the lawn, tarp, buildings, and trees interact, the image carries the reassuring structure that Adams discussed. By considering beauty as I made this photograph, I helped to convey the special affection Roger had for the place.
CHAPTER 3

CONCLUSIONS

Analyzing these photographs has helped me in answering the proposed questions and has given me a better understanding of how people experience the landscape. Each individual subject had a unique way of experiencing the landscape. When I listened to what they told me, and carefully observed how they acted in a place, I found more success than when I tried to shape them to fit a preconceived stereotype. Even though I later saw patterns emerging that helped me group the images, the similarities within the groups really emphasized those qualities which were unique. Whether based on memory, activity, or beauty, each subject’s experience was their own.

In the way that I positioned the subjects in the frame, I could affect the meaning of the photograph. Simply having the subjects active or still changed their relationships to the places. While shooting I experimented with what they were doing and later selected the best frames based in part on how their actions affected the images’ meanings.

Keeping the idea of beauty in mind helped me understand my subjects’ places and create images that described their experiences. I learned how people impose a sense of order on their experience to see beauty in their lives, and that I can intimate that process by carefully ordering elements in my frame to use the idea of beauty in my photographs. Through answering these questions I have become better equipped to understand my subjects’ experiences and show what I think those experiences are in my photographs.
Figure 1. Doug’s Treehouse
Figure 2. Mona’s Forest
Figure 3. *Tim’s Pond*
Figure 4. James’s Corral
Figure 5. Robert’s Creek
Figure 6. Kay’s Bluff
Figure 7. Gary’s Porch
Figure 8. John David's Bottomland
Figure 9. Jake’s Perch
Figure 10. Roger’s Yard
WORKING BIBLIOGRAPHY


