

# ArtReview



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# To the ends of the earth

In the 19th century, American landscape photographers documented their great national monuments to bring us face to face with the sublime. But contemporary artists have literally taken the genre to new heights in their attempt to record the indelible effects of man's presence on the planet. By **James Crump**

*Richard Misrach, On the Beach, 2002, c-type print, 180.3 x 279.4cm*



A mammoth plate photograph by the 19th-century photographer Carleton Watkins, of Yosemite or any of the singular topographic monuments of the American southwest, still has the power to instill awe, to put one face to face with the photographic sublime. While today we may view these large-format pictures, with their golden brown hues and sense of infinite space, through a filter of nostalgia, their scale and the raw emptiness of nature captured in them continue to move anyone looking at them today. Watkins, and other pioneering American photographers, drew attention to the unbridled potential of the landscape, its immense beauty, vitality and seeming limitlessness – qualities that remain the hallmarks of the great American landscape photograph.

Landscape photography in America has evolved a great deal since the beginning of the 20th century. In the postwar period the chief contention has been whether to immerse oneself in the aesthetics of the view or to interpret the image as a 'document' with embedded meaning. After such a long run of image-making in this genre, there seems to be no dearth of iconic images that address both concerns – think of Ansel Adams's *Moonrise over Hernandez, New Mexico* (1941), Edward Weston's work at Point Lobos, or Frederick Sommer's pictures of Arizona. Innovative ways of photographing America are still attainable, and much of the best work

such as Hiroshi Sugimoto's seascapes alluding to Mark Rothko and the minimalism of Donald Judd, or updating and extending Ansel Adams's mandates, as in Thomas Joshua Cooper's views of the Rio Grande gorge, the new landscape photography handily traverses the dichotomy of art and documentation, offering up multi-layered meanings while also playing with exuberant beauty.

In the late 1980s Emmet Gowin executed a series of aerial photographs of nuclear waste sites, toxic water-treatment facilities and abandoned missile silos which emphasise the appalling reality of man's encroachment on nature but do so in an unexpectedly beautiful way. Rather than condone a particular ideological camp, they lay out the bare information in a manner that inspires awe and empathy, shock and wonder. Gowin has extended the parameters of what is possible in landscape photography, creating pictures that can be valued both as works of art and as a record of nature's grandeur or human malfeasance. His vision has become embedded in the psyches of a generation of younger photographers who are also taking to the sky.

San Francisco-based artist Michael Light has long been concerned with the environment. His first book *Ranch* (1993), now considered a classic photo-novella with its rich gravure printing and intimate format, examined 'one of the last remaining traditional California ranches'

## Emmet Gowin's photographs emphasise the appalling reality of man's encroachment on nature in an unexpectedly beautiful way

of the last two decades – by Lewis Baltz, Richard Misrach, John Pfahl, Linda Connor, Mark Klett, Robert Adams and Thomas Joshua Cooper – engages in a dialectic with the past and the dispiriting reality of the present. Moreover, the work of several contemporary artists now gaining acclaim suggests that the landscape genre is far from exhausted. For although Yellowstone and Yosemite, and sacred sites like Canyon de Chelly, still provide the backdrop for rapturous images of nature, 'progress' in the form of technology and uncontrolled or ill-planned growth has wrought unremediable destruction on much of North America. Drive through any metropolitan centre and the evidence is clear. Visit the interior and the man-made devastation is less visible, but certainly present.

Ecologically conscious photographers are not a recent phenomenon. Since Ansel Adams merged his desire to achieve the perfect tonal range in printing with the goal to both document and preserve American monuments, a number of progressive artists have followed with their own clever means of representing nature. Today, some of the most innovative work is being created from the air, shooting out of planes or from high above the earth's surface. Whether it is riffing on modernist abstraction,

by deconstructing the American dream, the notion of endless land, and issues of possession and ownership. Light's subsequent archival projects – *Full Moon*, which reconsidered NASA lunar photography and images of the earth, and *100 Suns*, which reproduced the horrifying mushroom clouds created by the nuclear tests carried out before the 1963 Limited Test Ban Treaty – retrospectively reveal the world dominance that America sought during the Cold War at nearly any cost, be it mutually assured destruction on earth or the colonisation of space. The remarkable thread running through all Light's projects is the surfeit of loveliness in the face of impending danger, madness and even evil.

Light doesn't shrink from pushing the beauty button full force but, like Gowin, realises that content must be made intelligible to viewers. James Corner, the scholar of landscape architecture, has written that 'to detach the landscape from culture as an object of scientific or aesthetic contemplation – to objectify it – is not only to fail to recognise the constitutive power of representation in the forming of reality but also to be distanced from the various reciprocities and differences that are structured between the land and its occupation by ▶

**Right:** Emmet Gowin, *Assembly Buildings and Munitions Storage, Hawthorne Army Depot, Nevada*, 1988, toned gelatin silver print, 25.4 x 25.4cm







4 people.' In his latest series 'Some Dry Space', Light seems aware of this necessary balance. His aerial photographs of the California and Nevada deserts capture the arid and unforgiving surface of the remotest regions of the southwest and remind us of the fragility of the relatively new desert cities, from Phoenix to Las Vegas.

The American historian John Brinkerhoff Jackson wrote in 1951: 'It is from the air that the true relationship between the natural and the human landscape is first clearly revealed. The peaks and canyons lose much of their impressiveness when seen from above... What catches our eye and arouses our interest is not the sandy washes and the naked rocks, but the evidence of man.' Contrary to Jackson, perhaps, the most powerful photographs in *Some Dry Space* are the most abstract. Reminiscent of Ross Bleckner's abstract paintings or the drawings of Cy Twombly and Vija Celmins, images such as *Carson Sink*, #16, *Chidago Canyon*, #8 and *Railroad*, #3 record the raw archaeological data of the environment; but by shooting from the air Light is able to show the overwhelming beauty of the land in a way that couldn't be appreciated on the ground. Our eyes move over the surface of these luscious large-format prints, disoriented by the dot patterns of desert scrub and the mezzotint effect of craggy ridges and arroyos, and mesmerised by the play of deep blacks and hot, almost bleached-out whites.

Light isn't simply offering up abstraction for our visual pleasure. In his photographs of Los Angeles, he more closely concedes the 'evidence of man'. A maze of power lines, bridges, freeway arteries, railway tracks merging with residential neighbourhoods, high-rise towers and industrial complexes point to all that is so frightful about LA. In one of these magnificent views, the famous Hollywood sign is visible in the frame while the hillside homes seem to be sliding apocalyptically towards the ocean. Maybe the starring role of Light's LA pictures is the presence of that particular haze, the near blinding whiteness that confirms our presence in the City of Angels – a futurist's experiment gone terribly awry.

In its nascency, aerial photography held out the potential for use in the surveillance of specific sites and territories. David Maisel has for the last 20 years been photographing the locations of tailing ponds and former lakes, creating luminous abstractions noteworthy for their super-saturated colour. His most recent series, collected in the book *The Lake Project* (2004), reveals amorphous details of California lake beds, polluted from mining, development and agriculture, or dried up due to the notorious mismanagement of water in Southern California. These vertiginous pictures bring to mind Adam Fuss's trippy photograms of rabbit entrails and cow liver, and they also possess a disturbing science-fiction quality, as if civilisation were on the brink of extinction. ▶

**Right:** Michael Light, *1-5 and the 1-10, Los Angeles, California*, 2004, archival pigment on archival paper mounted on aluminium, 101.6 x 127cm









