



Susan Wides

Untitled, (American Home), 1994-95; ektacolor print, 30 x 40"

by Ellen Handy

Genius loci,

Ingenious Locations, and Landscape Photography Today

Nostalgia, Femininity, and Looking Toward the Millennium

Landscape is a word profoundly inscribed with subjectivities. The writer Margaret Drabble has proposed that if not precisely hereditary, landscape sensibility is at the least imbibed in one's earliest days, absorbed as if from the groundwater of a given region.¹ This feels like a profound truth; even in an age of uniform and spreading suburbianity, a sense of place is deeply marked in our consciousness. Though we learn about ourselves from our early portraits preserved in family albums, we don't need to learn about landscapes that way — we have no trouble seeing them as we do seeing ourselves, for they are all around us. But landscape photographs are very important as ways to describe the world we live in, wish we live in, fear we live in. The genre of landscape in art has always asked us to look outward, to suppose that pictures are windows upon the world.

We are known by the landscapes we inhabit — and by those of our imagination. For example, the landscape of my mind's eye is one of modest New England green-clad mountains arranged in sociable patterns around boulder-strewn cornfields and wandering rivers. Once, on a trip to Santa Cruz, California, with a most congenial colleague hailing from Minnesota, I was startled to learn that the famously scenic landscapes of northern California struck her as claustrophobic and unnatural. I proposed an excursion to a redwood forest; she countered that too many big trees were menacing. Back home in Minnesota, she reminded me, you can always see clear to the horizon. One woman's scenery is another's inconvenience.

This anecdote acquires a slight bite of irony, the characteristic flavor of our age, when more contextual information is included: my originally Minnesotan friend now calls the suffocatingly rich, wooded Hudson Valley home, while I live in densest Manhattan with nary a hillside nor a rocky pasture to be found. And her native topography makes me shiver with anxiety at the nakedness of space, while the sequoia forests that repelled her strike me as merely an exotic Western version of the "correct" landscape type. Evidently, each of us retains an inner landscape certainty, like a navigational compass's perpetual pull to the north. I am reluctant to suggest that landscapes bear different significance for women than for men (such sweeping essentialism is dangerous), but just as the concept of home is particularly resonant in feminine experience in our culture, so too is that of place in a larger sense. To take but a single example, in Laura Ingalls Wilder's classic series of *Little House* books (written by a woman for a primarily feminine readership), it is the landscapes rather than the specific houses in which the Ingalls family dwells that characterize their experiences and provide the most memorable imagery.

Like literature, photography has long been complicit in the development of landscape prejudices and allegiances — and in the marvelous recording of topography



above: Jungjin Lee

American Desert Series, III, 1994; hand-applied photo-emulsion on rice paper, Courtesy Pace/MacGill Gallery, NY

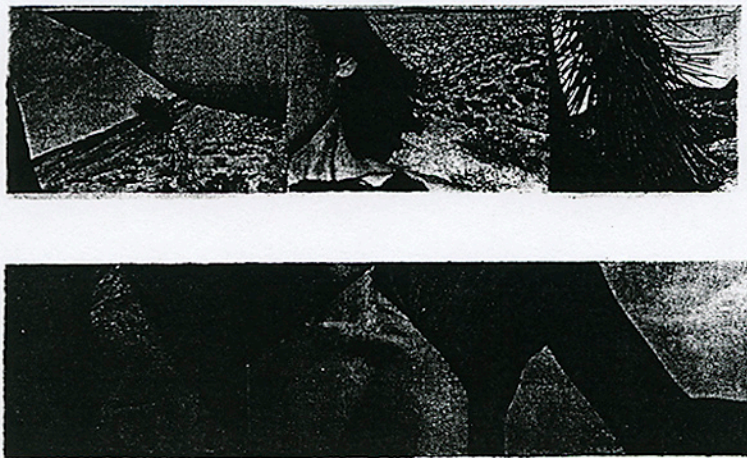
below: Andrea Modica

Leadville, CO, 1994; platinum/palladium print, 8 x 10"



Jungjin Lee

American Desert Series, III, 1994; hand-applied photo-emulsion on rice paper, Courtesy Pace/MacGill Gallery, NY



Helen Levitt, Lisette Model, and Diane Arbus — whose landscapes were urban, inhabited, and never abstract, each mapping a personal terrain within the city, and insisting that the twentieth-century landscape is primarily human and social.

If landscape is not currently the central genre of contemporary photography, it is nonetheless a vital one. There are any number of photographers and artists for whom the landscape remains a possible and vital subject, one which will allow for yet another generation's transformations of the theme. Much of the most thoughtful and original work in this vein today is being made by women, despite the fact that landscape was the only genre of photography that women did not practice in numbers and with distinction in the early days of the medium. Nonetheless, they are amply present today, and their work varies widely in approach. In contemporary landscape photography in general, there is a kind of healthy confusion about directions for the future. This diversity prompts questions: What can landscape art say to us in these troubled times? Who is making it? And why?

One of the most important aspects of landscape photography today is its frequent and fertile overlapping with sculpture and environmental and conceptual art, all of which are deeply concerned presently with the landscape as subject. Ana Mendieta's legacy is a very potent force in current landscape practice in photography, particularly as regards her use of the camera as the tracing method for her geographically remote, environmentally ephemeral sculptures. Her notably anti-rational attempts literally to inscribe her body upon the landscape parallel many less personal, less physical projects of conceptual sculpture, such as Hamish Fulton's rather dry but intellectually appealing and faintly lyrical use of the camera to preserve aspects of his erratic, idiosyncratically patterned hikes through empty terrain. Alfredo Jaar's work represents a different direction away from a shared starting point: rather than mark or pass through the actual earth, his gallery installations use light boxes whose images reflect

upon the complex economic relationships that are traced alongside the geopolitical boundaries of our maps of the world. The political engagement of his work matches the passion of Mendieta's, but to a very different end.

Perhaps it is Andy Goldsworthy who, of those artists using the camera in partnership with their sculptural interventions in and upon the landscape, is making the work richest in recognition of the importance of place itself. Very different from Mendieta's work in some ways, his pieces, often of extremely short duration and inaccessible location, are joyfully commemorated in photographs that are then gathered into books. His almost animistic attunement to the complex and diverse forces of nature active in the landscape is consonant with the outlook of many environmentally sensitive groups, including the ecofeminists who proclaim this as a gendered sensibility. The title of one small but stunning sculpture he created on the surface of a pond somewhere within the Yorkshire Sculpture Park sums up this aspect of his work: *Iris blades pinned together with thorns filled in five sections with rowan berries fish attacking from below difficult to keep all the berries nibbled at by ducks.*

Lorie Novak's projections of family and historical portrait imagery onto actual landscapes are a direct personalization of the landscape through both autobiography and art history. The haunting faces that she causes to float on and over the trees and ground are intimations of human experience and memory brought into conjunction with the landscape. Her work is intimate and concerned with photography in personal history, while Shimon Attie — who also trains powerful slide projectors upon the ground and photographs the results — works in an urban, tightly thematic, public vein. His appropriations of historical images of pre-war Jewish life float over the facades of German houses in an uncanny reanimation of what has been lost. Novak's invocation of time and loss is more personal, and looser (wider) in suggestion. Her work recognizes and honors place as much as history. Jungjin Lee uses the landscape as a stage for her own dancing, moving, changing response to the landscape. Her images are constructed from multiple frames exposed on her travels in the American desert, which is theatricalized by her presence. At once photographer, model, performer, and explorer, she sets her own mark upon the terrain. The landscape is also seen as a frame for human experience in the work of Andrea Modica. Her extended portrait series *Treadwell* is significantly named for a place, not the family who are its protagonists. The powerful sense of the landscape as a place for people and emotions is one that her work shares with the early photographs of Emmet Gowin, whose tender backyard views of his extended family have since given way to elegant but detached landscape studies that celebrate photographic virtuosity more than places and experiences of places. The romanticism of Modica's work is present also in the better-known photographs of Sally Mann, who situates her children in idyllic landscape settings for their portraits. But Modica's photographs take more interest in the autonomy of the people portrayed and in their relationships to their settings, which are particularized, rather than generalized as in Mann's work.

Like Barbara Ess, Sally Apfelbaum is uncompromising about the significance of personal vision and natural beauty. Her

work privileges the detail, often seen in gloriously myopic focus. Recalling the saying about not seeing the forest for the trees, her work reminds us that we may profit when we concentrate upon the flowers rather than the garden. Such work takes a simple phenomenological basis as sufficient justification for art, and bears a curious and unexpected affinity to the far less tranquil or celebratory, decidedly obsessive work of Lewis Baltz, whose photographic investigation of waste grounds at the outskirts of cities affords a grim, intense exploration of the power of detail in perception and photography. Apfelbaum reclaims photography's skill of close observation from the realm of the disagreeable, and embraces pleasure and beauty without reservation.

Personal experience and perception in the landscape is also a key aspect of Barbara Rosenthal's work. Her multidirectional activities result in a loose overlapping of her photographic images and writings, a rich and unforced connection of reverie and analysis of experience that frequently returns to the landscape for inspiration. Her landscape photographs serve as visualizations of emotions and experiences chronicled in her often journalistic writings, and her construction of images into composite works (often incorporating textual elements) may employ or themselves operate as metaphors. In Rosenthal's work, landscape is typically a metaphor for experience that admits of many interpretations.

Nancy Goldring's work is a combination of dreamed and manufactured landscapes. Her technique combines drawing with photographic imagery in a lambent blaze of color, and looks as though it could have been executed by means of computer imaging but was not. Like Nancy Rexroth, whose *Iowa* photographs were not necessarily taken in Iowa, and Ruth Thorne Thomsen, whose travel photographs were not taken in any real landscape, Goldring's work is literally a construction of reality, perception, and imagination. Its power lies in its easy persuasion of the viewer to enter into the world created in the pictures, or to imagine that world as overlapping with the quotidian one of actual experience. These photographs propose that travel is a state of mind and that culture is a residue, suspended in memory.

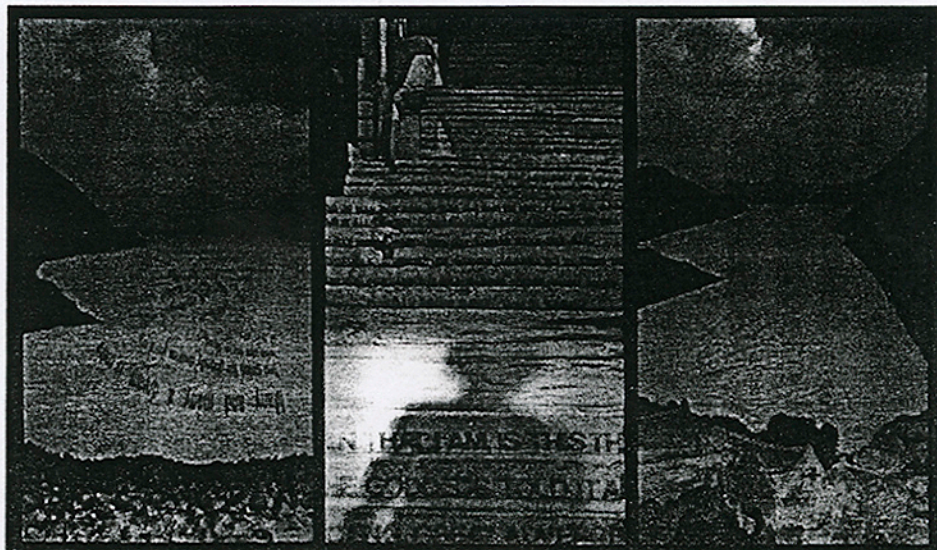
Some years ago, Susan Wides began a series of photographs of wax museums. Evocative though these were, they now seem to have been a prelude to her current work, which concerns the outdoor museums of botanical gardens. These lush and splendid images investigate the ways in which gardeners taxonomize nature (in particular, specific plant species). Both observant of the ironies of nature's place in contemporary culture and aware of the enduring importance of flowers as symbols and expressions of emotion, Wides is working in a new territory. Like Lynne Cohen, whose extended portrait of cryptic, airless, and intensely artificial interiors demonstrated the contradictions and tensions of the 1980s, Wides inventories the vagaries of our culture's use of space and place. In landscape photography today, we find the same mixture of nostalgia and attention to the future that has always characterized the art of landscape representations. Places are rendered as refuges, visions, ceremonial stations, generative environments for human and other life, vast resources from which to cull significant details, and stage sets for various dramas. Landscape photography has been less marked than some categories of photographic practice by the cultural shifts of postmodern feminism, but it is emphatically and certainly an important arena for women in the 1990s. The strange days of the 1870s, when for the only time in its history the photographic medium managed to exclude women from an important area of practice, will never come again. As the last years of our century pass toward a future as unimaginable now as it ever was, we can look to photography to remind us of the landscapes that we sometimes forget we inhabit.

NOTE

1. Margaret Drabble, *The Realms of Gold* (New York: Penguin, 1977).

Ellen Handy is associate curator at the International Center of Photography in New York. She has written extensively on the history of landscape imagery, and on contemporary photography and art.

Nancy Goldring Symi, 1992; cibachrome photo projection, 38 x 70"



too distant from the pictures' audiences to be familiar. It served for several fateful decades as the faithful witness that minutely described as many terrains as possible, particularly those that were deemed new, unfamiliar, or exotic by the cultures that invented and first practiced photography. These photographs presumed that a single *genius loci*, or spirit of the place, existed in each location, and that the camera could effectively capture it. But the fundamental impossibility of delineating a record without bias or unspoken editorial commentary finally impelled the genre to make important claims about the relations of humankind and nature: the use and character of the land, and the concept of landscape as "nature," that is, as a refuge from the city and from human-built environments, societies, and experiences.

From the celebratory and un-self-consciously documentary photographic landscape surveys of the late 1800s, the landscape came to be understood as a site of photographic art production at the turn of the century. And from idealistic renderings of harmonious and "unspoiled" scenery, a newer picture type eventually emerged, that of the only too-human-altered social landscape. From this enduring fascination with suburbia expressed in the 1970s to the present is a large step. As we face the approaching end of the century and end of the millennium, we are at a suitable moment for considering how photographic artists address global, environmental, and essential questions about the continued survival of our terrestrial home.



In fact, the genre of landscape photography has been in a state of uncertainty for the last ten or fifteen years. Postmodernity has not been congenial to landscape; the pictorial subject that gave birth to modernism in painting with the appearance of Impressionism during the late 1860s is far from central to the small conceptual revolution in photographic and artistic practice that occurred a century later. The era that saw the use of topographic subjects as the ideal theme for pioneering modernism in art was of course the one that saw the European and American landscape under threat from industrialization for the first time. That period has in turn given way to one in which alienation from anything resembling natural terrain is almost inevitable in developed societies. And simultaneously, the application of contemporary critical theory to the themes of the body and the commodity have drastically refigured the poles of artistic practice. Imagery of the land itself has sometimes seemed curiously beside the point at a time when race, class, and gender identities and agendas, the disputed existence of authorial status of texts and works, and the development of nondisciplinary cultural criticism have come to dominate artistic practice.

The expansion of tourism as a conception and as an industry in the late nineteenth century occurred as populations became, for the first time, primarily industrial rather than agrarian. Today, a new type of ecological tourism brings developed-world travelers to experience what remains of ancient ecosystems, and activists agitate on behalf of suddenly popular rain forests, while the United States Congress debates returning the national parks to the hands of developers. Popular and commercialized enthusiasm for the earth have become widespread precisely as its objects come under threat or begin to vanish. From the pastoral poetry of the early modern period to the landscape imagery of the nineteenth century, artistic involvement with the landscape has included elements of nostalgia and loss. A love of the land today is more likely to be linked with the purchase of organic tomatoes at a suburban health food store than with the direct experience of agricultural work. Our culture has moved from the constructions, appropriations, and simulacra of the 1980s to the virtual worlds and digital possibilities of cyberspace: Netscape, not landscape. Photographers for whom the landscape is an important theme today frequently eschew the urgent environmental issues argued by conservationists and activists, and instead render the landscape as a symbolic or abstract space, as artists have done for centuries in other media.

There is a heroic tradition in American landscape photography of the twentieth century: a rough sketch of its trajectory moves from Alfred Stieglitz to Edward Weston to Harry Callahan. Stieglitz inaugurated this boys' club of landscape symbolism, in which the land was a blank canvas onto which the artist projected his emotions much as he did onto the bodies of the women he also photographed. Nature as a surrogate (or "equivalent," as he termed it) for Stieglitz's emotions became Nature as an embodiment of the life force, which Weston found indistinguishable from his own sensual response to it. An archmodernist, Weston didn't attempt to tell the dancer from the dance. Callahan's Bauhaus-inflected experimentation with form gave his landscape imagery a different emphasis, but aspects of the same passionate projection of self and desire onto the earth's terrain appear in his often highly abstract images. This tradition ran into trouble during the 1970s and 1980s as suburbia, rather than the frontier, became the defining experience of the American landscape. From then on, landscape photographs were about equally divided into lyrical, narrative, intimate nuanced scenes and deliberately dispassionate surveys of the modern-built environment, telephone poles, parking lots, and all.

But if we return to Stieglitz, Weston, and Callahan, we see that they were never alone, and that their emerging tradition of landscape imagery was always only a single thread of meaning among many. Beside Stieglitz, let us place his protégé Anne Brigman, whose landscapes were defiantly inhabited, peopled with her own nude body in a very different kind of identification of the artist's experience with the landscape itself. With Weston, let's recall Imogen Cunningham, whose landscape world was condensed into still life, distilled from the great outdoors into the brilliantly abstract plant studies she made during the years when her children were young and she photographed what was near to hand rather than ranging widely across the landscape as Weston felt free to do. And beside Callahan, we can array a group of women —