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de Saisset Museum Exhibition: Identity in the Landscape

Abstract:

In this essay, we discuss a selection of landscape and landscape-adjacent photography from the western United States, focusing on how different photographers represent different kinds of relationships between people and the landscape. We look specifically at the photographers' identities and analyze how they could factor into the meanings of the photographs, either intentionally or unintentionally, with the goal of making traditionally invisible identities like whiteness and maleness more visible. We begin by looking at the role of gender in photography, contrasting Ansel Adams with Judy Dater, who have very different approaches to including people in their landscapes. Then, we focus on the role of cultural identity, specifically Native American identity, contrasting Laura Gilpin, who was not Native, with Dugan Aguilar, who was. We then discuss Mark Klett, a more contemporary white man whose work is in the middle; he breaks down some norms while reinforcing others. We conclude with Dorothea Lange and Anthony Hernandez, emphasizing more non-traditional and socially conscious landscapes depicting poverty and a lack of rootedness.

Essay:

Our exhibition attempts to show the intersection of human influence and landscape photography through the analysis of photos from photographers with various backgrounds. There

are competing ideas of what role humans have in the environment, and we can clearly see this in the different perspectives of the landscape photos. Our exhibition focuses on men and women photographers as well as Native American identities. All of the photos in the exhibition were taken in the western part of the United States, which lays a common foundation for our analysis. Our main goal is to show the difference between the white gaze and photographs from various backgrounds that have been oppressed or excluded in history. Since the 19th century, the white gaze in photography has influenced our mindset in society and has been accepted as “the truth.” It is important to acknowledge and understand where the white gaze emerged from and how it has impacted our culture. This topic is especially relevant today because the role humans have played in the environment has impacted the Earth beyond repair. The white gaze, which focuses on control and power over the landscape, has influenced our mindset to become the controllers of the environment. The images in our exhibition attempt to show the different roles humans have in relation to the landscape and how they compare to the white gaze.

Beginning with two very different images of Yosemite, Ansel Adams’ *Yosemite Falls, Spring, Yosemite National Park, California* and Judy Dater’s *Imogen and Twinka at Yosemite*, some overarching gendered trends in landscape photography emerge. Adams’ image is very traditional, de-emphasizing the role of humans in nature and emphasizing a sense of awe and appreciation for nature. This sounds largely benign, but because the status of Adams and other similar male photographers is so high, that often leads to the idea that this viewpoint is the correct or normal one, rather than one of many viewpoints, and it reinforces the idea that white men in particular have control over the landscape. Dater’s image is a sharp contrast to this, as she places two women—the photographer Imogen Cunningham and Twinka, a model—very prominently within the frame of her image. Here, Dater asserts that there is a place for women in

the landscape, regardless of male norms, and also regardless of age since Cunningham is visibly older. Twinka's nudity is also a bold choice, especially for the 1970s when the photo was taken. The playful attitude of both women in the photo suggests a rejection of the male gaze which, again, would have been quite transgressive.

Laura Gilpin's *Navaho Sacred Mountain of the East* and Dugan Aguilar's *Stone Mother, Pyramid Lake* both intend to provide positive representations of Indigenous landscapes and, while given the previous discussion of gender with regard to Judy Dater, might suggest that Gilpin's image would be more beneficially genre-bending, that isn't really the case here. Native American groups have been consistently spoken over and spoken for historically, often represented photographically as oddities or archetypes rather than individuals. Because Aguilar is Native himself and Gilpin is not, there is a real power in Aguilar's ability to represent his own specific culture himself, as a kind of self-sovereignty. Gilpin valued representing Navajo epistemologies, she was an ally to Indigenous groups, and her work can certainly help bring Indigenous issues to white audiences, but her photos will never have the personal cultural dimension of Aguilar's.

Next, we see an example of an image that builds in some ways on the template of photographers like Adams with an emphasis on almost abstract black and white imagery, seeks to make human impact on the land more visible, and is also engaged in discourses about Native identity—*Camp 3 at Lake Powell* by Mark Klett. This 1984 photograph by Klett shows an almost otherworldly landscape with natural rock formations interrupted by a collection of items including a boat in the water on the right edge, a plastic bucket, two folding chairs, and a pool float. This juxtaposition makes sense for the location, Lake Powell, which was man-made and intended as a vacation spot, but which was also an important spiritual site for members of the

Navajo Nation, to the degree that there was a lawsuit in 1980 over the harm done to the site by the government (“Civil Rights: Religion” 183). Klett intended to suggest an interactive and everyday experience with a landscape in this image, but because of his emphasis on traditionally white and male aesthetics rather than social or political meaning, this image is ultimately rather exclusive.

Finally, Dorothea Lange’s *Arkansas squatters* and Anthony Hernandez’s *Landscape for the Homeless #22* both serve to emphasize the class lines that reliance on the landscape often correlates with. Lange’s photo was apart of her work with the Farm Security Administration in the mid-1930s and Hernandez’s photo was taken in 1988, so there’s a significant amount of time between the two photographers, but they both engage similarly with social issues. In both images, the inclusion of the landscape is less of an aesthetic choice than it is a fact of the places where migrants, refugees, or homeless people are found—both images include temporary shelters which of necessity are located in open landscapes. This demonstrates how interconnected the landscape is with these people’s lives.

Both photos have elements of race which are non-traditional, too. For Lange’s photo, the Okies (from Arkansas, though, in this image) who migrated to California as a result of the Dust Bowl were often seen as not quite white because of their poverty. In Hernandez’s image and in the rest of the series this photo came from, no people are represented, so the genders and races of the homeless aren’t shown, but in the Los Angeles area where Hernandez’s images were taken, the majority of the homeless population is non-white, so there are strong racial elements to homelessness. By removing the people from the frame, Hernandez keeps the viewer focused on

the issue of homelessness in an environmental context itself rather than inviting scrutiny of homeless individuals.

Landscape photography is a difficult genre of photography to discuss. On one hand, some of the images analyzed in this essay may not fit strictly into that category, but if we restrict conversations about landscape photography to only “traditional” and “classic” framing, we lose out on the richness of meaning that engaging with the landscape more broadly can provide. Traditional values and elitism in landscape photography aren’t helpful when they no longer reflect the reality of how people interact with the environment. By pushing these boundaries, we hope to move towards a conception of landscape photography that is more inclusive to nontraditional photographs involving the landscape—especially by photographers who are women or non-white—and everyday experiences with the landscape.

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