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Kelly Dennis



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Eclipsing Aestheticism: Western Landscape Photography After Ansel Adams

Kelly Dennis

Introduction

- 1 This essay discusses two of Ansel Adams's most iconic photographs of the desert Southwest—*Moonrise, Hernandez, New Mexico*, and *White House Ruins, Canyon de Chelly*, both from 1941—as they feature in relation to some contemporary photography artists' re-imaginings of the West, both visually and conceptually.¹ The legacy of Adams's landscape photography remains virtually uneclipsed in mass culture and among collectors, and photographers particularly respect Adams's technical prowess. But within academic and historical scholarship, Adams might be seen as a victim of his own popularity. Like Jackson Pollock, Adams may have done his best work by 1949,² although I would contend that he participated in a number of very fine collaborations during the 1950-60s.³ A casualty to some degree of his own overproduction, Adams spent years in the darkroom repeatedly printing many of the same negatives out of a sense of perfectionism, certainly, but also out of generosity and greed—greed for overdue acknowledgment, perhaps, as well as for money (Spaulding 351-4; Alinder 1996 303ff; 2014 263, 265, 237-8). That he remains an icon of landscape photography is in large part due to his accessible merging of avant-garde abstraction and expressive beauty (Sailor 135-60) in a genuine popularizing of landscape for the masses during the post-WWII era. But Adams's continued prominence is also a function of the careful husbanding of his reputation by the Ansel Adams Publishing Rights Trust, which cultivates Adams hagiography by authorizing frequent circulation of popular Adams prints in selected exhibitions, books, and calendars. The Trust has also zealously protected Adams's biography by exercising editorial manuscript review as a right of reproduction,⁴ ensuring that Adams's work stood the aesthetic if not the critical test of time. Although excellent work authorized by the

Trust on Adams has, of course, been produced, his work is seldom included or even central to serious visual culture histories. By the end of the 20th century, social historians characterized Adams's iconic mid-century landscapes of the American West as aestheticizing and depoliticizing Cold War-era US western expansion.⁵ His work was largely ignored by postmodern photography theorists and he was generally dismissed by critics as the monolithic icon he had become through scholarly neglect on the one hand, and hagiographic overproduction on the other.⁶

- 2 Photography artists nonetheless have maintained a continued engagement with Adams's work, simultaneously acknowledging his iconic status and technical mastery as well as his limitations, both personal and historical. As photography production and criticism shifted after midcentury from justifying photography as art to criticizing institutional apparatuses and the history of art's marketing and exclusions, Adams's pristine landscape views were seen as increasingly at odds with concerns about the environment and overdevelopment of the West (Spaulding 323-4, 355-7). In what follows, I will survey a few of the photographic responses to Adams, including those by Robert Adams and John Pfahl, as well as consider a number of "case studies" as a way to define some of the types of dialog that have developed between Adams's work and photographers at the turn of the 21st century. The kinds of environmental issues that concerned Adams and that characterized his tendentious involvement with the Sierra Club and his often frustratingly naïve cooperation with corporations and developers⁷ are engaged in new ways by such photographers as Robert Adams and those involved in the Rephotographic Survey Project. Aestheticized landscape photography's historical and ideological occlusions are explicitly addressed in work by Deborah Bright, while Trevor Paglen's early visual work juxtaposes Adams's work with surveillance technologies in order to expose the omnipresence of total war. Even Bruce Myren's contemporary expressive explorations of personal experiences of landscape mark the embeddedness of such experience in the region and in the histories of American conquest. What follows, then, is an admittedly selective overview of some of the expansive photographic dialogs that occurred *after* Ansel Adams—both in the sense of "post" Adams but also *pace* Adams.

Moonrise, Hernandez, New Mexico, 1941

- 3 Perhaps Adams's most famous photograph, *Moonrise, Hernandez, New Mexico*, was taken late in 1941, just over a month before the attack on Pearl Harbor. Adams had recently been hired as a photographic muralist by then-US Secretary of the Interior Harold Ickes, who commissioned him to create a series of photographic murals of America's national parks for the new Interior Building in Washington, DC. Characteristically, Adams added a few commercial assignments to his southwestern itinerary for the Interior Department murals in order to help fund the necessary road trip through the desert, as well as to subsidize his own creative photographs on the same trip. These additional commissions included promotional campaigns for Standard Oil and for US Potash. In a familiar irony, the American West thus provided landscape imagery both for the region's corporate exploitation and for its putative government protection. Indeed, Horace Albright, the Vice President and General Manager of US Potash, had previously served as Director of the National Parks Service, whence Adams made his acquaintance (Senf "Southwest," 67).⁸ Also characteristically, perhaps, Adams himself saw no inconsistency in aesthetically serving contradictory agendas: At the time, he desperately needed the money. Even as his

fame and coffers grew in later decades, he continued to accept commercial work, even as he blamed it for blocking him creatively in his artistic endeavors.

- 4 The unincorporated township of Hernandez, New Mexico, sits near the cottonwood tree-lined banks of the Rio Chama, roughly 30 miles outside of Santa Fe and near the San Juan Pueblo. *Moonrise* depicts a village dwarfed by the surrounding landscape and bearing picturesque witness to the sublime. The scene famously captured by Adams takes place shortly after moonrise and just as the last rays of the setting sun strike the white crosses of the little town's cemetery in the foreground, illuminating them with an unearthly glow. Although he tried to capture a second exposure, as he later noted in published accounts, the sun slipped below the horizon as he attempted to load a second plate into the tripod-mounted 8x10 camera (Adams *Examples*, 42; Alinder 1996 189-90). *Moonrise* consequently turned out to be "a less-than-perfect negative," as Mary Alinder acknowledges in her biography of Adams, "with a severely underexposed foreground, flat and thin, and an overexposed band of clouds so brilliant that its portion of the negative approached total blackness" (Alinder 1996 191).
- 5 Adams nevertheless made over 1,000 prints from this "difficult" negative over nearly a 40-year period (Alinder 1996 197; 2014 167). And the difference between a straight print of the negative, which appears to show a daylight scene; and prints of *Moonrise* made by Adams between 1943 and 1980, which emphasize contrast to create a largely nighttime scene, is dramatic.⁹ Prints from the negative before 1960 include significant cloud detail; whereas prints dating after the 1960s are far more romanticized and self-consciously epic, even "Wagnerian," as characterized by one scholar (Peeler 331; cf. Alinder 1996 336; cf 2014 284). These later prints utilize significantly more contrast and eradicate much of the cloud detail, darkening the sky to velvet blackness. Adams further burned the foreground of the print exposure in the darkroom in order to increase detail in the chaparral (Adams *Examples*, 42) and especially to brilliantly highlight the crosses glanced by the setting sun.
- 6 Early and late prints of *Moonrise* thus represent quite different points in Adams's own career, and we might reasonably ask how prints struck some 25 years apart in such an "evolving" fashion conceivably represent what he stressed as the singularity of the felt original moment of capture in 1941 (Alinder 2014 164-5). As Alinder observes,

The sky in the earliest [1943] version of *Moonrise* contains numerous pale streaks of cloud, whereas in Ansel's last interpretations of the image, made in 1980, no hint of cloud mars the fully blackened heavens, save for the thin layer settled low behind the Truchas Mountains, a ribbon that glows with glorious light, well described by subtleties of tone. (Alinder 2014 165, plate 2)
- 7 Adams is frequently quoted as comparing the photographic negative to a musical score and the photographic print to an interpretation thereof (Alinder 2014 165; Cf., 284-5). Indeed, Adams claimed that, due to the difficulty of printing the negative, it was not until the 1970s "that [he] achieved a print equal to the original visualization that [he] still vividly recall[ed]" (Adams *Autobiography*, 274). Similarly, he observed, "papers differ, toning sometimes gives unwanted density changes...It is safe to say that no two prints are precisely the same" (Adams *Examples*, 42). Such sentiments well suit the purposes of Adams and his fellow fine arts photographers as well as the art market in photography, for they calculatedly negate earlier 19th-century beliefs that photography was a mere "mechanical" recording process rather than the creative, artistic medium that Adams and friend and mentor Alfred Stieglitz, among others, promoted during the first half of the 20

th century. Such emphasis on the individuality of each print also brings the multiplicity of photography's technological reproducibility into line with fine art's traditionally vaunted uniqueness and authenticity. One consequence of "new" print versions of a negative is the creation of new markets and audiences, and the reinvention of the negative as newly unique within a print's edition.¹⁰

- 8 Accounts of Adams's making of *Moonrise* are well known, but their details vary in interesting ways, owing not least to Adams's attributing dates varying widely between 1940-44 to each of the 1,000 prints made from the negative over the next 40 years. Adams always maintained that he was unable to recall the year or context for the negative's creation despite his own claims of its epiphanic significance for his creative development. In his book, *Examples: The Making of 40 Photographs*, published a year before his death, Adams recounts the making of *Moonrise* in elaborate detail and with considerable drama not only as a combination of "serendipity and immediate technical recall," but also as the image that saved an otherwise discouraging day of photographing a cloudless Chama Valley (Alinder 1996 189):

We were sailing southward along the highway not far from Española when I glanced to the left and saw an extraordinary situation—an inevitable photograph! I almost ditched the car and rushed to set up my 8x10 camera. I was yelling to my companions to bring me things from the car...I had a clear visualization of the image I wanted, but...I could not find my Weston exposure meter! The situation was desperate: the low sun was trailing the edge of clouds in the west, and shadow would soon dim the white crosses. [...] I suddenly realized I knew the luminance of the moon—250 c/ft [foot-candles]. ... I had no idea what the value of the foreground was, but I hoped it barely fell within the exposure scale. Not wanting to take chances, I indicated a water-bath development for the negative [in my notes]. (Adams *Examples*, 41)

- 9 Yet, despite the memorable *fiat* recounted both in *Examples* as well as in his later *Autobiography*, Adams also makes light of his characteristic inability to date the photograph (Adams *Examples*, 42-3; *Autobiography*, 273-5). Although he maintained a meticulous log of exposure data and developing instructions for every photograph he took, he notoriously maintained little or no such contextual data as to date of capture. Others have invested considerably more trouble in dating *Moonrise*.¹¹
- 10 Indeed, the 1941 date Adams ultimately cites in his books is attributable to astronomer David Elmore, whom Adams describes as using geological survey maps and a computer in 1980 to determine elevation and the moon's azimuth, and thus to fix the photograph's moment as between 4:00 and 4:05 pm on October 31, 1941 (Adams *Examples*, 43; *Autobiography*, 274; Alinder 1996 199). Eleven years later, however, another astronomer, David DiCicco, determined that the image must have been made a day later, on November 1st, 1941, at 4:49:20 pm MST: Having visited the site himself in 1991, he concluded that, 50 years earlier, Adams was more likely to have positioned his tripod on the old road rather than on the newer highway likely used by Elmore as a reference point in 1980 (Alinder 1996 198-200).
- 11 As we will see, such scientifically-based and computer-aided tactics as those used by astronomers to recuperate date information, which Adams himself found of little interest or bearing on his creative process, would themselves become a prominent feature of much Western landscape photography by the turn of the 21st century.

Irony and the postmodern turn

- 12 Forty years after the making of the famous negative, the failure of a print of *Moonrise* to meet its reserve at auction in 1980-81 signaled, according to one historian, a “crisis” in American photography, one especially visible in the genres of landscape and documentary photography by this time (Hales 10). In apparent illustration of said “crisis,” John Pfahl, tongue firmly in cheek, quotes Adams’s *Moonrise* in his own early color photography landscape series, *Altered Landscapes*. Set in the twilit Southwestern desert, Pfahl’s *Moonrise Over Pie Pan*, Capitol Reef National Park, Utah, photographed in October 1977, at first glance teases our primed expectation of the moon’s water-mirrored reflection before we realize that there is no desert stream, and the full meaning of the title registers: the moonrise in the blue twilit sky hovers over purpled buttes and vermillion-colored sandstone further reddened by the setting sun; the moon is mirrored amidst the chaparral below not by a stream but by the artist’s placement in the near foreground of a single pie tin that appears, impossibly, to be the precise dimensions and distance as the moon. Pfahl takes postmodern liberties with Adams’s *Moonrise*, which he conflates with clichéd scenic imagery of a moon’s reflection in water, to invoke the prehistoric sea responsible for the reef’s geologic formation.¹² Like many Conceptual artists of the period (most notably, the Netherlandish artist Jan Dibbets), Pfahl in his *Altered Landscapes* series plays with the perspectival limits of the photograph as well as with the perceptual expectations of the viewer. Perhaps in tribute to accounts of Adams’s technical virtuosity in making *Moonrise*—particularly his recollection of the moon’s luminance in the absence of his exposure meter—Pfahl manages to photograph the humble baking implement in a manner suggesting that it, too, caught the final rays of the setting sun. The absurd domesticity of the pie pan in the context of this reflection of Adams’s iconic *Moonrise* further tweaks the heroic mythos with which photographs of the American West are so often imbued.
- 13 Although less of a visual pun, Robert Adams’s (no relation to Ansel Adams) *Fort Collins*, CO, 1976, also appears to refer to Adams’s iconic moonrise and foreground illumination; however, in this instance, the light source is neither the moon nor the setting sun, but evidently a nearby street lamp installed in what is clearly a parking lot. Robert Adams’s choice of a 4x5-inch portrait orientation rather than a traditional 8x10-inch horizontal “landscape” format ultimately constrains and transforms the impact: the vertical format echoes the upright form of the lone tree in the center of the composition, a thin, recent transplant and a far cry from the majestic pines and sequoias in many of Ansel Adams’s famed Yosemite photographs. Boxed within a rectangular bed cut into the asphalt lot and echoed by the painted lines of the parking stalls, the lone tree reveals the oxymoronic fashion by which industrial and corporate urban planning include such tokens of the very landscape obliterated by overdevelopment in the West. The parking lot’s isolation within the landscape—is it a shopping mall? A corporate or industrial park?—with the city lights twinkling in the distance, bears witness to the burgeoning ex-urbanization of American cities and to the increasing cultural reliance—particularly in the West—on commuter automobility during the 1970s in the midst of the Arab oil embargo (Bright “Machine,” 65-66).
- 14 Thus, as Robert Adams and others have observed, the world depicted in Ansel Adams’s photographs was, 30 years later, no longer the world in which *they* photographed—if,

indeed, *Adams's* world had ever truly existed (Klett "Legacy," 72-3). Jonathan Spaulding astutely sums up postmodernist criticism of Adams:

Moonrise is clearly not a complete image of the American West. Missing are the darker aspects of the national legacy. Where, for example, are the slaughtered buffalo, the dispossessed Indians, the sweating gangs of underpaid immigrant laborers, the scarred earth of the open pit mines? (Spaulding xiii)

- 15 During the last quarter of the 20th century, artists sought to re-vision landscape photography and to break from idealized depictions of the West as a pristine wilderness. Indeed, as Alinder notes, "Ansel never intentionally included a human or an animal in his creative landscapes. For him, nature was Teflon-coated: man did not stick" (1996 239). Contemporary photographers have implicitly or explicitly acknowledged Ansel Adams as the "unwitting embodiment of the false dichotomy between humanity and nature at the root of our continuing legacy of environmental destruction" (Spaulding xiv).
- 16 Significantly, many contemporary photographers, much to Adams's dismay, insist on highlighting the beauty that remains in the "man-altered" landscape. Some corresponded with Adams, seeking his oedipal blessing as well as justifying or explaining their own conceptual aesthetic to the great master. Richard Misrach—whose own work was made iconic as the featured screen image for Apple's iPad when it was introduced by the late Steve Jobs in 2010 (Newman 2010)—was one such photographer who corresponded with Adams. Misrach's work from the 1970s onward used the aesthetic to remark some of humanity's uglier interactions with landscape. Adams responded by reproaching the intrusion of the discursive into the form and content of Misrach's photographs. Adams was no fan of the conceptual turn in photography, strongly believing that the aestheticized photograph should speak for itself.¹³
- 17 Yet, the "man-altered landscape" was precisely the premise for what is now considered a landmark 1975 photography exhibition.¹⁴ *New Topographics: Photographs of a Man-Altered Landscape*, the exhibition by which a group of landscape photographers working in the 1970-80s also came to be known as New Topographics, nodded to the documentary underpinnings of 19th-century topographical survey photography in the service of the Pacific Railroad and US Geological Surveys. Such 19th-century topographic photographers as Carlton Watkins, William Henry Jackson, and Timothy O'Sullivan, among others, claimed objectivity, yet drew upon pictorial conventions of the sublime and picturesque from 18th-century landscape painting. In contrast to those original survey photographers, on the one hand, and to the operatically expressive chiaroscuro of Ansel Adams, on the other, New Topographics photographers produced lighter, more even-toned prints, matching an opaque formal style with seemingly banal and straightforward subject matter. Photographs in the exhibition by Robert Adams, Joe Deal, and Lewis Baltz, among others, took as their subject development construction sites in the middle of the desert, beer cans and graffiti in what otherwise appears to be untrammelled terrain, a plume of dust rising from a bulldozer as gracefully as a plume of spray from Yellowstone's famed geysers—banal images that nonetheless are rendered through modernist formal aesthetics. As a consequence of such "muscular formalism,"¹⁵ however, the photographs are less easy to "read" and, neither sublime nor picturesque, they thus partake of yet another 18th-century aesthetic mode characteristic of postmodern art—irony.

Battlefield Panoramas, 1981-84

- 18 Yet, stubbornly embedded within the New Topographics' modernist formal paradigms is a long-established patriarchal privilege. As Rephotographic Survey Project director Mark Klett has observed, "when [survey photographer W. H.] Jackson placed human figures in his photographs [in the 19th century], they appear on a level with or above the landscape. They often stand with their hands on their hips," their body language further reinforcing the camera's and viewer's dominion over the land and its resources (Fox 43). Historically, the "body" to which that language of dominance belongs is male. Such historical views of landscape from on high stand, for instance, in marked contrast to the proximate and highly intimate photographs of "rock art"—Native American petroglyphs carved or painted into the earth—by Linda Connor. In their proximity to rocks and the larger geological formations that provide pueblo habitation, or punctuating those distant horizons of traditional landscape photography, Connor's views remind us of the indigenous inhabitants whose relation to the land was markedly different from their Anglo-European usurpers, and whose depictive language now appears to us as fully abstracted as Adams's widely admired aesthetic.¹⁶

No. 1 William Henry Jackson, photographer (American, 1843-1942)
Marshall Pass, Colorado, 1899, Photocrome print



IMAGE: 20.3 x 53.7 CM (18 x 21 1/8 IN.)
THE J. PAUL GETTY MUSEUM, LOS ANGELES
DIGITAL IMAGE COURTESY OF THE GETTY'S OPEN CONTENT PROGRAM

- 19 For many scholars and critics, the genre of landscape photography, like the 18th-century painted landscapes after which the genre is so often modeled, became firmly established in the aesthetics of mastery associated with territorial exploration, expansion, and imperialist conquest.¹⁷

No. 2 Deborah Bright, Crow Agency: Battle of the Little Big Horn from Battlefield Panoramas series, 1981-84



COURTESY DEBORAH BRIGHT

- 20 The mastering view from on high over the landscape is, perhaps, most symptomatically visible in the landscape panorama, which seeks to encompass a totality of that point of view. Though referencing the panorama tradition of such 19th-century Western photographers as Edward Muybridge and William Henry Jackson, [No. 1] contemporary photographer Deborah Bright's *Crow Agency: Battle of the Little Big Horn*, from her Battlefield Panoramas series [1981-1984], disrupts the largely masculine landscape photography tradition in a number of significant ways. [No. 2] Like previous panorama photography, *Crow Agency* replicates a 360-degree landscape view. But, whereas panoramas are traditionally intended to be viewed in linear fashion, their edges matched to replicate a "total" landscape view from on high, Bright situates her panorama from a "grunt's eye" view of the battlefield at Little Big Horn; that is, from the *bodily* perspective of those fighting battles on the ground rather than of those admiring the landscape from a detached, mastering, or even contemporary touristic position. [No. 3, detail] This embodied perspective of battle and terrain is reinforced by the panorama's accompanying text, which includes not merely the date of battle but its details and length of time—"duration: one afternoon." In the course of the two-day battle, "one afternoon" marks the eternity one regiment positioned here spent under Sioux and Cheyenne crossfire before death claimed all of their lives. Bright's black and white panorama captures the distant horizon, the white marble tombstones that mark where Custer's mutilated soldiers fell in the mid-ground, and the sun-illuminated and -shadowed Montana chaparral in the foreground. By aligning the horizon in its elevational irregularity across the resulting seven photographs, rather than aligning them to the linear regularity of traditional panoramas, *Crow Agency* also invites a "reading" not from left to right, with the associated implication of narrative progression, but in a more disjunctive fashion that analogously questions the straightforward "master" historical narrative of events.

No. 3 Deborah Bright, *Crow Agency*, detail.



- 21 As such, *Crow Agency* structurally mimics the hillside on which Keogh's I Company—one of five regiments at the battle—was effectively trapped in their efforts to rejoin Custer's command at the top of the hill. Indeed, though the hill occupied—seemingly advantageously—by Custer symbolically replicated the mastering, “view from on high” adopted by 19th-century survey photography and American ideological perspectives, it ultimately proved the military unit's undoing as it positioned them ideally for the surrounding Sioux and Cheyenne ambush. What is more, rather than employ a large view camera on a tripod, the way that Muybridge, Jackson, and, indeed, as many contemporary landscape photographers still do, Bright instead used a handheld 35mm camera, with high-resolution copy film to capture as much detail as possible. The smaller camera permitted a more physically intimate perspective of the surrounding landscape, picturing it, again, as those fighting might have perceived it, down to the individual spikes of chaparral. This bodily and experiential perspective of battle and terrain is reinforced by the accompanying historical details of text to the photograph, thus associating the “view” with the soldiers' and Indians' mortality, rather than with the timeless aesthetics of American Manifest Destiny. *Battlefield Panoramas* was completed after the end of the American War in Vietnam, and during the early years of American Reagan-era imperial foreign policy. In accompanying texts, Bright emphasizes casualty numbers to reinforce “the horrible, inhumane calculus of any war: piles of human bodies and body parts to feed an imperial war machine with dubious objectives” (Bright 2011).

No. 4 Photograph by author, 2009.



- 22 By maintaining the integrity of the landscape in the alignment of photographs, Bright disrupts our easy linear viewing consumption of the panorama, and thus then-standard narratives of the battle itself. Indeed, *Crow Agency* was shot in 1982, nearly a decade before Custer Battlefield National Monument was renamed Little Bighorn Battlefield National Monument in 1991; and nearly two decades before the first two red granite markers were added to the site in 1999 where Native warriors fell.¹⁸ [No. 3] Bright's title, *Crow Agency*, remarks upon what was then the absenting of Native Americans from the site's memorialization, which heroized Custer and, by extension, commemorated the Indian Wars and celebrated the Native deaths on what was and remains reservation land. One more way we might think about Bright's *Crow Agency* panorama is that, aside from formal differences from traditional landscape photography, the panorama is part *not* of a series of landscapes of the American West, but part of a series of 14 panoramas documenting historic battlefields and their touristic memorialization in the present, including The 100 Years' War; the Napoleonic Wars; the Civil War; the Indian Wars; and World Wars I and II—each of which took place in different landscapes and during different moments in the history of weapons technologies and of their effects on the bodies of those who fight those wars. Where the American West functioned ideologically as Cold War metonymy for the global west in the United States, Bright's *Battlefield Panoramas* thus resituates this American West landscape within a larger, ongoing context of bloodshed over land possession in global western culture.

White House Ruins, Canyon de Chelly National Monument ,1941

23

For all that he advocated a purist definition of fine arts photography, Ansel Adams was himself singularly impressed by the geological survey photographs taken by Timothy

O'Sullivan in the 19th century. O'Sullivan's topographic photographs were taken under the auspices of the military to survey the 100th meridian, and also under the civilian and scientific auspices of Clarence King's Geological Survey of the 40th parallel. Though O'Sullivan did not himself consider his photographs "artistic," Adams especially admired O'Sullivan's *White House Ruins* photograph, taken in 1873. Adams clearly appreciated the formal and abstract qualities of O'Sullivan's characteristic emphasis on what seemed to be, from a 19th century, East Coast perspective, the surreality of the desert landscape.¹⁹

No. 5 Timothy H. O'Sullivan, photographer (American, about 1840 - 1882)
Ancient Ruins in the Cañon de Chelle, New Mexico, 1873, Albumen silver print

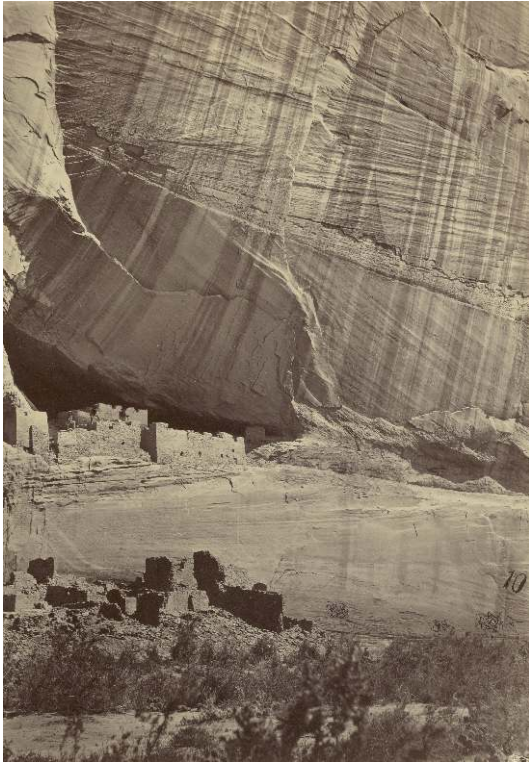


IMAGE: 27.6 x 19.2 cm (10 7/8 x 7 9/16 in.) MOUNT: 50.8 x 40.6 cm (20 x 16 in.)
THE J. PAUL GETTY MUSEUM, LOS ANGELES
DIGITAL IMAGE COURTESY OF THE GETTY'S OPEN CONTENT PROGRAM

24

On the same photography road trip in the desert southwest that produced *Moonrise*, Adams replicated the admired O'Sullivan photograph as to composition and nearly as to the time of day and year in his photograph *White House Ruins, Canyon de Chelly, 1941*. [No. 5] One Adams scholar asserts that re-creating O'Sullivan's photograph had been a goal of his on this trip (Senf 67). However, the fact remains that in *Examples* Adams describes this near replication as fortuitous, elaborating how he came across "a strangely familiar scene," of which he made two photographs, claiming that he only later "realized" the "familiar aspect" of the photograph as O'Sullivan's (Adams *Examples*, 127-29). Yet, in a letter written to friends at the time Adams crows, "I photographed the White House Ruins from almost the identical spot and time of the O'Sullivan picture! ! Can't wait until I see what I got (Alinder and Stillman 132)."

- 25 Other photographers have since looked to O’Sullivan both for their aesthetics and for their conceptualization of the Western landscape. Photographer Mark Klett, himself trained as a geologist, and who, like O’Sullivan a century earlier, had worked for the US Geological Survey as a photographer, formed the Rephotographic Survey Project in 1977 with Ellen Manchester and Joanne Verberg. Together, they and an evolving team of photographers set out to rephotograph many of the 19th-century topographical survey images, material they eventually published in 1984 as *Second View: The Rephotographic Survey Project*.
- 26 Distinct from New Topographics but similar to Ansel Adams’s one-time O’Sullivan copy, the Rephotographic Survey Project (henceforth RSP) worked from 19th-century survey photographs to “make precise replicas of the originals” (Klett *Second*, 2).²⁰ Unlike Adams, however, the RSP was interested in documenting site changes that occurred during the 100-year interim, as well as in revealing such subjective choices embedded in the original “objective” survey photographs as camera position and visual editorializing. The latter is evidenced, for example, in RSP’s rephotographic image of O’Sullivan’s Tertiary Conglomerates, Weber Valley, Utah [1869]: The rephotograph reveals that O’Sullivan had dramatically tilted his camera, presumably to render the boulders’ hold on the earth as even more tenuous (Klett *Second*, 17). Although, as one might expect, many of the rephotographs documented egregious examples of land transformation resulting from western expansion, still others depicted landscapes seemingly untouched, still too remote for human impact. And, not infrequently, the Rephotographic Survey Project documented nature’s *reclamation* of abandoned efforts at habitation or industrialization, or revealed other palimpsests of failed 19th-century ventures largely effaced by time and the land.
- 27 What principally distinguishes Adams’s *recreation* of O’Sullivan’s *White House Ruins* from the Rephotographic Survey Project’s *rephotography* of other O’Sullivan images? While the RSP seeks to capture the impact of intervening time and human intervention on the landscape, Adams sought to establish the image as timeless. Thus, in keeping with popular perspectives of the period, Adams reinforced the idea of the ruins as themselves timeless; as ancient, and as mysteriously transcending the historical upheavals of the 70 years intervening between his and O’Sullivan’s photographs. His recreation implicitly honors and preserves the expeditionary and expansionist historical conditions of O’Sullivan’s own era both as natural and, ultimately, as irrelevant to his own aestheticized aims. Rephotography, by contrast, acknowledges the mediated status of photography itself as representation and as subject to the biases and historical conditions of its making and its maker.
- 28 A “Third View” incarnation of the Rephotographic Survey Project group began in 1997 and more self-consciously uses technologies to mark its own passage through the surveyed landscapes of their photographic forebears.²¹ In RSP’s third iteration, Third View includes more overt references to the kinds of painterly landscape paradigms that inflected the first survey photographs of the 19th century. But the group also remarks on its own implication within the man-altered landscape: Klett’s 1997 photograph of Third View colleague Byron Wolfe checking the position of the moon with his laptop, 8:56 P.M. August 8, 1997, Flaming Gorge, WY, includes the latter’s silhouetted profile along the left frame of a late twilit landscape with moon. In an ironic reference to Adams’s *Moonrise*, in Klett’s photograph the laptop’s illuminated screen display of an astronomy software program’s GPS-charted moon occupies the foreground of the landscape. Moreover, as in Robert Adams’s *Fort Collins, CO*, foreground illumination in Klett’s photograph does not

derive from the fortuitously setting sun found in Ansel Adams's *Moonrise*, but from an artificial light source specific to the contemporary cultural moment—in this instance, the LCD illumination of the computer screen. Indeed, the photograph's documenting of the newest instrument of the rephotographic survey places into ironic juxtaposition GPS-assisted navigation and 18th-century lunar navigation, the latter itself rooted in millennia-old celestial navigation. The photograph also cannily captures the moon itself as technocratic target of Western expansion, as, indeed, it had served as contested territory for Cold War-era conquest between the US and the Soviet Union.

The Fortieth Parallel

- 29 Bruce Myren's *The Fortieth Parallel* [1998-2012] panorama series traces that latitudinal parallel from East to West coasts of the United States at one-degree points of longitude, much as 19th-century survey photographers did before him, particularly O'Sullivan. Myren's use of a view camera, tripod, and dark cloth relate him to 19th-century survey photographers and decades of landscape photographers, while his use of 21st-century GPS technology marks a tendency among contemporary landscape photographers to note the confluence between documentary and aesthetic landscape views. To be sure, the triptych format of Myren's depiction of each of the 52 documented confluences references 19th-century topographical panoramas. However, the triptych's original function in religious altarpieces is also of a piece with both the reverential tone of Myren's approach to documenting landscape and the awesome effect landscapes often have on us; effects that, in this series, differ from East to West, and from degree site to degree site along the parallel that traces American Manifest Destiny.
- 30 Whereas the Rephotographic Survey Project is concerned to precisely replicate original 19th-century survey site photographs by Jackson, O'Sullivan, and others, Myren's panoramas record contemporary "views" from the 52 confluences at sites both "precise yet arbitrary" (artist's website). The project dates—1998 to 2012—overlap the lingering effects of the Cold War on GPS technology. As Klett notes of photographs taken early under the auspices of Third View, pinpointing 19th-century survey sites involved supplementing early GPS technology with USGS maps and compass. "It's not," as Klett describes, "that the new technology isn't capable of pinpointing our position, but that the satellites are run by the Department of Defense, which in its post-Cold War paranoia deliberately programs them to send readings that can be as much as three hundred yards off in any direction" (Fox 10).
- 31 US satellite GPS selective availability was turned off in 2000 to facilitate consumer²² use, in turn facilitating the government's surveillance of its citizens.²³ Although the geographic latitude and longitude coordinates and conventional site names—city, state—constitute each panorama's title, ostensibly referencing objective data conferred by science as well as cultural convention, both are revealed as fundamentally arbitrary in Myren's landscape photography series.
- 32 For Ansel Adams and for the Rephotographic Survey Project, replicating the time of day and year of the original survey photographs resulted in less than ideal conditions from a contemporary perspective: 19th-century survey photography most often took place during merciless summer midday in order to maximize what were then much longer exposure times as well as to facilitate transportation of heavy camera, film plates, and tripod equipment by horse-drawn cart over difficult terrain. Landscape photography's

famed “golden hour” it was not. Myren, however, embraces not only the relative arbitrariness of GPS data available before and after establishment of WGS83 Datum, but also the time of day and season of the year marking his arrival on the various journeys undertaken during his intermittent 14-year odyssey. These degree increments along the parallel represent not only distance but *time*, and the vicissitudes of weather and season; for example, the amount of daylight available between meridians and thus feasibly when the photographer may work, varies by roughly six hours between summer and winter solstice. The confluences, then, mark not only the objective tracking of US western exploration, expansion, and settlement, but also the various ways landscapes challenge people to conform to place as much as how environments have been transformed by people.

No. 6: Myren, N 40° 00' 00" W 116° 00' 00" Saddler Brown Road, Eureka, Nevada, 2012



COURTESY BRUCE MYREN

- 33 Myren records the confluences’ fall at isolated and desolate, developed and populated, public and private spaces: commercial trucks blurring by on highways seemingly in the middle of nowhere; the edge of a dirt road just visible in the corner of one triptych of a seemingly empty meadow desert foothill; the courtyard of a small town hall flanked by trees and statues of founders; cows in a snowy pasture; the moonscape of otherwise forbidding—and sometimes forbidden—areas of the Nevada desert [No. 6]. *The Fortieth Parallel* thus merges with regional and vernacular photography. Myren’s undertaking of the series during different seasons and times of day—midday as well as the golden hours of sunrise and sunset—combined with differing exposure lengths and with his deployment of different “view” devices, including a judicious use of vignetting in some photographs, both remarks upon and reconceptualizes the devices of landscape photography and the way they historically inform viewer expectations. The photographer’s site-specific photographic restriction to 20’ of a viewer’s actual viewing perspective, like Bright’s *Battlefield Panoramas*, gives the series an experiential aspect, while the specificity of photographs taken over 12 years of the life of the photographer invest *The Fortieth Parallel* with personal history.

No. 6: Myren, N 40° 00' 00" W 118° 00' 00" Fallon, Nevada, 2012.



COURTESY BRUCE MYREN.

- 34 The army and civilian topographical and geological survey photographs of which O’Sullivan is among the most renowned producers are constituent of the West during the period of US expansion.²⁴ Like Bright, however, Myren locates American Manifest Destiny within a longer political history of landscape use and ideologies. Whereas 19th-century survey photographs “from on high” literally *survey*—that is, gather visual data about—the land for its acquisition and partitioning in order to document federal land possessions, Myren, rather than merely trace the surveyor’s—and Adams’s—footsteps, instead registers the ambivalences of our relation to landscape. In one striking instance, a rare silhouette “self-portrait” appears as an unavoidable consequence of the location and time of day of the shoot, and is very nearly merged with shadows thrown by desert brush in the late day sun [No. 6]. By contrast, at the height of the Cold War an overt silhouette self-portrait by Ansel Adams taken in Monument Valley, 1958 is cropped both to heighten the abstraction of the image but also to emphasize the photograph’s “magisterial gaze” and the artist’s self-heroizing stance over the indigenous landscape.²⁵ Myren’s panoramas both value and question the respective objective and aestheticized investments of his landscape photography forebears; his “views” confess to personal, local, and regional landscape investment even as they negotiate landscape photography’s participation in US Manifest Destiny.
- 35 Myren’s series is, like Bright’s *Battlefield Panoramas*, inevitably rooted in US Western expansion. *The Fortieth Parallel* thus acknowledges that the American West—and thus western landscape photography—has always already been situated within global Western geo-politics. Although the coordinates are variably aligned—and misaligned—in accordance with the technological histories of British and American Imperial dominance, Myren’s panoramas nonetheless reaffirm regional, local, and personal views in experiences of place, no matter how they may be otherwise overdetermined.²⁶

The “other” night sky

- 36 Embedded in landscape photographs of the West, then as now, are the ideologies of surveillance and conquest. Geographer and artist Trevor Paglen included a reproduction of the famous White House Ruins in a 2010 diptych entitled *Artifacts* (Anasazi Cliff Dwellings, Canyon de Chelly; Spacecraft in Perpetual Geosynchronous Orbit, 35,786 km Above Equator). The Anasazi ruins are juxtaposed to a long-exposure photograph of equatorial satellites some 36,000 km from the earth’s surface. As Paglen notes in a statement about the work, there is little atmospheric drag at that altitude and, functioning or not, the satellites “will remain in orbit in virtual perpetuity” (artist’s

website). “Anasazi” is the Navajo name for “ancient enemies,” and the cliff dwellings indeed functioned as shelter against the desert heat as well as a means of evading enemies. But the Anasazi remain for us a mystery, having left few clues as to the reasons for their disappearance from the site. They are as abstract to us now as are the many military satellites above orbiting earth among the stars. Juxtaposed with the “timeless” image of the mysteriously disappeared Anasazi, Paglen’s photograph of classified spacecraft activity suggests that military satellites foreshadow both potential cause for and artifacts of our own inevitable disappearance.

- 37 Paglen’s diptych juxtaposes the military’s historical and contemporary presence in the conquest of the American West by visual communications technologies: First, by the army’s 19th-century photographic surveys, then by its omnipresence in the geosynchronous orbit of military satellites overhead. *Artifacts* is thus related to another a photographic series by Paglen titled *The Other Night Sky*, in which he tracks and photographs classified spacecraft—namely satellites—from his own calculations and from those made by the amateur community of astronomers who, as Paglen acknowledges, “have taken it upon themselves to maintain a catalog of classified spacecraft in Earth’s orbit by producing accurate orbital elements...for classified objects (Paglen *Blank Spots*, 85).” Paglen’s long-exposure photographs trace the satellites’ star-like paths above such Western landscapes as those aestheticized by Adams. Photographs in this series close the presumed distance between orbital evidence of “the other night sky” and those skies we associate with picturesque Western landscapes, including Yavapai Point (DMSP B5D2-8 from Yavapai Point (Military Meteorological Satellite; 1995-015A), 2009) overlooking the South Rim of the Grand Canyon, and Glacier Point (KEYHOLE IMPROVED CRYSTAL from Glacier Point (Optical Reconnaissance Satellite; USA 1860, 2008) overlooking Yosemite Valley, both points from which Ansel Adams photographed the West as an uninhabited wilderness. The landscapes photographed by Adams and referenced by Paglen constitute geological evidence of a prehistory that predates human existence; coupled with Paglen’s documentation of “covert operations and classified landscapes,” they become veritable *momento mori*—Heideggerian allegories of what will have been.
- 38 His *Limit Telephotography* [2007-12] is but one of Paglen’s additional series wherein he photographs military “Black Sites,” many of which are located in the deserts of the American West, with a camera outfitted with an astronomical telescope lens from desert hideaways, mountain-tops, and even from Las Vegas hotel rooms (Paglen *Blank Spots*, 33) often some 26 miles or more away. In these instances, Paglen ironically uses the traditionally masculine and domineering landscape prerogative “from on high” to reveal where state power is deployed in secret Western landscapes, without civilian oversight and, yet, in its name. The use of such a powerful lens ironically also marks the immense distance of these covert operations from public knowledge and consciousness: and while the lens makes these sites visible it does not necessarily render them legible. Indeed, such “Black Sites” show up on Google Earth satellite imagery and even official USGS survey maps as “blank spots”—invisible sites where military weapons testing and extraordinary rendition take place (Paglen website, *Blank Spots, Invisible*; Pritchard 2009). *Artifacts, The Other Night Sky*, and *Limit Telephotography* thus provide correctives to our tendency “to think of war as an activity, confined to a place, to the battlefield,” (Solnit 7) and remind us that surveillance and preemptive war are constantly being waged overhead and even, as we stargaze in search of solace, beauty, and the sublime, before our very eyes.

Epilogue

- 39 In 2006, a print of *Moonrise* sold for more than \$ 300,000, most certainly eclipsing the previous “crisis” in photography announced a quarter century earlier. Indeed, the recent market for and exhibition of contemporary photography, which favors such epically scaled prints such as those by German artists Thomas Struth and Andreas Gursky, the largest of which measure 17 feet long, appear to demonstrate, as Julian Stallabrass observes, “photography’s graduation to the pinnacle of art. Indeed, scholars frequently draw parallels between this work and the history of painting, rather than [to] the history of photography” (Stallabrass 96).²⁷ In theory, Adams might have been pleased by this art market sign of photography’s high art status; in practice, it is unlikely that he would have approved of either the subject matter or the fact that the works are in color. Ultimately, Adams associated color photography with the commercial work that these mural-sized photographs inevitably resemble, and color photography now of course infuses our aestheticized view of the cultural landscape.
- 40 As envisioned within one history of landscape photography, the American West remains the site of expansive vistas, surreal topography, great natural beauty, and a pristine isolation from civilization valued only by those who truly appreciate it. Yet, in practice, and, indeed, in everyday experience, the American West remains both familiar and unfamiliar to us, despite the increasing exactitude of its topographical measurability. In the 21st century, artists are re-visioning not merely Adams’s aestheticized legacy for landscape photography; they are also re-visioning The West as traditionally represented in visual culture. Such artists are less interested in documenting a culturally constructed ideal of our Fall from an Edenic wilderness than in how ordinary people experience the landscape, albeit one codified, commercialized, and contained. Increasingly, artists and photographers refer less to the aestheticized legacy of Ansel Adams’s *Moonrise* as an image of the West, than to legacies, histories, and experiences of western landscapes previously eclipsed by such aestheticization.

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NOTES

1. Earlier versions of this essay were given as talks at the Université de Toulouse-Le Mirail (2014) and at the Missoula Art Museum, the latter in conjunction with the annual meeting of the Western Literature Association and the exhibition, *Ansel Adams: A Legacy* (2011). A transcript of the Missoula Art Museum talk was published in translation (Dennis 2012). My gratitude to Wendy Harding for the invitation to submit the revised version here, and to Stephen N. Brown, Nancy Cook, and William R. Handley for everything else. I am also grateful for detailed and concise feedback from external reviewers that helped improve this essay. Any remaining errors or misstatements remain my own.

NB: A substantially revised version of Mary Alinder's 1996 biography of Adams was published in 2014 after this essay was originally submitted. Publication scheduling constraints prevented a complete update; however, I have included attention to both editions whenever possible as well as noting where material significant to my argument was omitted from Alinder's 2014 edition.

2. Alinder concurs (1996 260-1; 2014 221) and correspondence between Adams and Beaumont and Nancy Newhall in the early 1950s suggests that Adams himself was unhappily aware of this perception and wondered if it was not inaccurate (Nancy Newhall to Adams 30 April 1951; 18 April 1952; Adams to Beaumont Newhall 7 May 1952, among other correspondence held in the Center for Creative Photography). Indeed, a new generation of photographers pronounced Adams irrelevant by the early 1950s—in retrospect, a fate seemingly confirmed by the 1959 US publication of Robert Frank's influential *The Americans* which, although initially not widely accepted in the US nonetheless had enormous impact on a subsequent generation of photographers.

3. Many of these issues are explored in further detail in my book manuscript in progress.

4. In this, the Trust followed Adams's own lead in idealizing his autobiography: See Alinder 2014 290-1. Scholars who have explicitly acknowledged the Trust's refusal of publication reproduction rights include Spaulding in his influential 1998 biography (372; see also Alinder 1996 382) and Hudson (302-3).

5. Bright 1991 333. Cf. Alinder's account of the posthumous use of Adams's work by the defense industry (1996 378-80). This account is excluded from Alinder's revised Adams biography (2014).

6. Compare Alinder 1996, 378. Renewed attention to historicizing Adams and his work can be seen in Bryan-Wilson, Sailor, Hudson, and in a superb 2012 MA Thesis contextualizing Adams's work within Hawaiian statehood and the Civil Rights movement by Lauren Walton.

7. Spaulding 264-6, 334-49; Alinder 2014 239ff, especially 255.

8. See also Fahlman 111-12. It is worth noting that the potash promotion accompanied a strategic increase in potash mining production in the United States, which had previously depended on European suppliers, a dependence that became increasingly untenable during the build up to World War II. See *Mining: Potash Politics*, 1939.

9. In the 2014 edition of her biography, Alinder recounts that she "badgered" Adams into permitting a side-by-side comparison shot of a straight print of the negative of *Moonrise* with a

fine art print, which she reproduces in plate 3. Alinder's 2014 chapter on *Moonrise* is considerably revised and lengthened from its 1996 counterpart.

10. Compare Alinder 2014 253ff, especially 257-8.

11. Because the photograph was taken on a federally-funded trip, public domain of *Moonrise* is asserted in a 1989 *Los Angeles Times* article, based on dates available in public records of Adams's contract with the Interior, in government records, in court documents, and in copy negatives held by the US National Archives. See Parachini. Continued confusion and controversy resulted in the 1989 publication of Adams et al. *The Mural Project* from signed original prints in the US National Parks Archives. Adams retained the negatives despite their being government property. See Alinder's apologia, and her conclusion that, thanks to astronomers' definitive dating, *Moonrise*, at least, is not in the public domain: Alinder 1996 200-02.

12. Capitol Reef is a 120-kilometer north-south geologic barrier formed by the collision of the continental plates that formed the North American continent during the Cenozoic era.

13. Spaulding 324-6, 356-8; Adams, letter to Richard Misrach 18 August 1978. Following Robert Kaufman, I am distinguishing use of "the aesthetic" in the Kantian sense of the word, in contrast to "aestheticization" in the Marxian sense of the word as "a deformation of "the material, the real, the sociopolitical [and] the historical," 682.

14. The phrase "man-altered landscape" is from the subtitle of the 1975 exhibition (Jenkins 1975).

15. I borrow this marvelous phrase from Liberatore.

16. Significantly, in her images of the American Southwest and abroad Connor emphasizes the spiritual significance of land formations and indigenous inscription. See, for example, *Spiral Petroglyph, Canyon de Chelly, Arizona* (1978). <https://collections.artsmia.org/index.php?page=detail&id=2830>; *Petroglyphs, Bishop, California* (1978) <https://collections.artsmia.org/index.php?page=detail&id=2829>; and *Design Petroglyph, Wupatki* (1989) <http://americanart.si.edu/collections/search/artwork/?id=32007>. For a broader perspective on these works, see *Marks in Place*. Cf Bright (1993) 138.

17. Compare Johns.

18. Significantly, the Battlefield was designated a national monument early in the Cold War, during which the site became one of many nuclear family tourist destinations to the American West. On post-war tourism West, see Bright 1991. I am indebted to conversations with photographer Nicole White.

19. See Snyder and Salvesson.

20. Klett refutes the "topographical" objectivity claimed by the "New Topographics" exhibition, but credits the show with influencing his own interest in the "man-altered landscape" (Nordström 72).

21. Unlike *Second View*, the *Third View* incarnation of RSP disappointingly includes no female members.

22. On the relation between military technologies and later consumer adoption, see Dennis 2009, chapter 5.

23. Useful primers on the US National Security Agency's use of GPS and cellular data include Greenwald 2006 and ACLU 2013.

24. For an especially astute interpretation of the implications of the shift from military to civilian control of the surveys West, see Snyder.

25. Albert Boime cited in Johns 1993.

26. Myren notes that the Official Prime Meridian coordinates vary widely if defined through the various Datums used since the 1830s, and forms the basis of a further project.

27. Cf. Michael Fried, 2008. It is worth noting that Struth and Gursky are of a generation of photographers who studied with Bernd and Hilla Becher, whose work was included in the 1975 *New Topographics* exhibition.

ABSTRACTS

Although Ansel Adams's (1902-84) photographic legacy remains indisputable in mass culture and among museums and collectors, the nature of that legacy has been in contention among contemporary artists, scholars, and theorists of photography. For some by the end of the 20th century, Adams's iconic mid-century landscapes of the American West colluded with Cold War-era US western expansion, even as his name was synonymous with aestheticized and depoliticized landscape photography. For their part, contemporary photographers remain beguiled by landscape aesthetics if additionally beset by political and environmental concerns. This essay analyzes some of the tensions in Adams's ongoing legacy for Western landscape photography, and investigates the transformation of landscape photography by artists who negotiate contemporary political and environmental concerns of the global West.

Bien que l'héritage photographique d'Ansel Adams (1902-84) reste incontestable dans la culture de masse, dans les musées et parmi les collectionneurs, la nature de cet héritage fait débat parmi les artistes contemporains, les chercheurs et les théoriciens de la photographie. Pour certains, à la fin du 20^{ème} siècle, les paysages typiques de Adams représentant l'Ouest américain au milieu du siècle désignaient une connivence secrète avec l'expansion américaine vers l'ouest durant la guerre froide, même si dans le même temps, son nom était associé à un type de photographie de paysage esthétisée et dépolitisée. Pour leur part, les photographes contemporains sont attirés par l'esthétique du paysage, si en plus ils sont animés de considérations politiques et environnementales. Cet article analyse certaines des failles qui se font jour dans l'héritage d'Ansel Adams dans le domaine de la photographie de paysage par des artistes qui prennent en compte les problèmes politiques et environnementaux de l'Ouest global.

INDEX

Mots-clés: L'Ouest américain, photographie de paysage, surveillance, Ansel Adams, la Nouvelle Topographie

personnecitees Deborah Bright, Linda Connor, Mark Klett, Bruce Myren, Timothy O'Sullivan, Trevor Paglen, John Pfahl, Rephotographic Survey Project

AUTHOR

KELLY DENNIS

Associate Professor of Art History
University of Connecticut, Storrs, USA
Kelly.Dennis@UConn.edu