

Western Landscape Photography

Then and Now

by Rachel McLean Sailor

PHOTOGRAPHS ARE — and have always been — complex objects. Their power to command our attention lies not in the direct gaze of a camera lens, but in the ability to embody accumulated content. Contemporary landscape photographs contain an essential sense of the here and now but are also, always, a unique repository of deep cultural heritage. Creating and sharing photographs are acts of place-making, insightfully defined by Keith Basso as “a way of constructing history itself, of inventing it, of fashioning novel versions of ‘what happened here.’”¹ Although defining place happens in a variety of ways in all cultures, place-making reached a fevered pitch with the advent of photography in America in 1840. The medium accompanied exploration and immigration, playing an important role in making landscapes familiar to newcomers and faraway populations.² Contemporary

western landscape photographers create nuanced and thoughtful images that are not only savvy responses to these traditions but also expand our understanding of how place and photography are ever new.

In the contemporary photography of Oregon, the act of place-making is alive and well. The works shown in the Oregon Historical Society’s exhibit, *Place: Framing the Oregon Landscape*, demonstrate the reinvention and recycling of notions of place while at the same time engaging the history of photography. The most amazing aspect of this exhibit is the way that it can respond anew to a singular moment, and a singular place, while simultaneously encompassing the deep history of its subject matter, its medium, and the cultural history of all who have attempted such representation in the past. Each photograph is a deeply layered palimpsest of meaning.

* *Place: Framing the Oregon Landscape*, curated by Laura Valenti, is on display at the Oregon Historical Society from November 8, 2014 to May 17, 2015.



William Henry Jackson's and others' photographs populated U.S. Geological Survey reports for Congress and were eventually marketed to the public in various forms. Jackson's image of the Mountain of the Holy Cross, for instance, became a widely popular and sought-after image for its ideological implications.

Historical photography has too often been understood as indexical and documentary, because of its association with the growth of industry and territorial expansion. United States Geological Survey (USGS) photographers were ostensibly hired to “record” the western findings of the surveys, but they produced artfully persuasive and ideological photographs.³ Photographers across the West pictured logging and mining operations, ranch work and the development of towns and cities, and landscapes. With all of these subjects, photography “was always grounded

in the capacity of the medium to transform chaos to order, entropy to information.”⁴ Through various means, contemporary photography exposes the complexity of this kind of past photography. The most obvious manner in which contemporary photography connects to the history of western photography is through explicit reference to the frontier past.

Chris Bennett's and Joseph Glasgow's photographs respond to western heritage in a direct, almost confrontational manner, while also provoking investigation of image making. Bennett's image of the Lewis and



Chris Bennett, Portland, Oregon (from the series Along the Way), St. Johns, 2011, Archival Pigment Print

Clark sign is an explicit example of how the American narrative of the Corps of Discovery's adventure is embedded in the vernacular landscape. It also acts as a signifier for the deeper, less visible narrative of how photography and image making in general accompanied immigrant exploration of western lands, and how words and icons continue to recall those older images and the larger narratives that attend them. Although Lewis and Clark's adventure took place pre-photographic technology and they notoriously did not have

artists who could adequately render their adventure in visual form, we can visualize the journey through historical illustration, markers of cultural geography, and even cinematic and theatrical pageantry and recreations.⁵ The exploration that still defines the Columbia River Valley, Oregon, and the American West is visually manifest in the signs that locate the expedition and signal its importance to a contemporary understanding of place, and in the photography that gives visual shape to the landscape of the adventure. Ben-

nett's work not only participates in this shaping of meaning and knowledge through visual production, it also reveals the operations of that shaping — in his use of American heritage, his acknowledgement of the potential multi-purpose quality of a photograph (as document or persuasive work of art), and the relationship between aesthetics and those purposes.

Joseph Glasgow's *Lewis & Clark Reenactor* provides a second example of an explicitly embedded reference to the frontier past. This character reminds viewers of a prevalent cultural interest in America's era of exploration, but also recognizes that fictional narrative was

possible and likely from the moment of photography's invention. In some ways, all photography can be understood as "re-enactment."⁶ During the early years of photography, for example, European photographers such as Henry Peach Robinson and Julia Margaret Cameron — who created "fictional" photographic narratives — seemed to grasp the medium's representational liberties much more so than American photographers, perhaps because Americans valued the quality of veracity as they moved into western places. This insistence on the truth-telling capabilities of a photograph — as a "mirror with a memory," as coined by Oliver Wendell



Joseph Glasgow, Lewis & Clark Reenactor, Rooster Rock, 2008, Hand-Coated Archival Pigment Print



Holmes — has obscured how meaning is created in historical photographs through acts such as framing, choosing subject matter, and defining focal points.⁷ Nineteenth-century photographers knew, as do contemporary artists of the medium, that a good photographer “is by no means a mere machine following a certain set of fixed rules” and that “success in this art requires personal skill and artistic taste to a much greater degree than the unthinking public generally imagine.”⁸ Indeed, the recreation and representation of history is illuminated in this exhibition.

Steven Beckly’s image of Mount Hood falls into the kind of “sacred places” imagery that the American West is known for, and that promoted western places to tourists and settlers alike.⁹ Beckly’s photograph is not an explicit reference to a particular image, but it harnesses the cultural meaning of historical subject matter tropes. His photograph highlights the sublime grandeur of the volcanic Oregon landscape, recognizing that the sublime in the American West is a cultural application of aesthetic value.¹⁰ Western landscapes are grand and important, and even aesthetically pleasing, because we collectively agree that it is so and not because of an inherent aesthetic value. Beckly’s image allows viewers to access and track embedded meaning in the historical conventions of pictorial landscape traditions and cultural landscape values. The ide-

als of the Picturesque, the Beautiful, and the Sublime were well defined aesthetic tropes in western culture of the nineteenth century that prescribed the manner in which people not only represented the western landscape but how they saw and experienced it as well.¹¹ The self-conscious nature of Beckly’s image as one that both points to history and is thoroughly modern is partly achieved through the artist’s use of vantage point. The photographer created a modern point of view by embedding Mount Hood against the terrain of the region and not against the sky; historical photographers would have framed it from below. Despite the modernity inherent in the image of Mount Hood, both of Beckly’s images are reminiscent of the tradition of travel photography in the way he captures the memory of an “I was here” moment — one of exploration and discovery.

Although there is the connection between Beckly’s photograph of Mount Hood and the types of “monument” imagery that we often associate with past western photography, most nineteenth-century regional images were not taken of icons of grandeur such as the Grand Canyon or Yosemite Valley. Local landscapes, rural places, and bucolic settings were the subjects of a majority of photographs. Even the most quotidian landscape subjects are therefore intimately tied to place-making in the West.¹² While those “straight

Steven Beckly, untitled, Above Mt. Hood, 2013, Archival Pigment Print

Steven Beckly, untitled, Sauvie Island, 2013, Archival Pigment Print

portrait jobs; group pictures of lodges, church societies, and political clubs, and outdoor shots that gratified civic pride . . . shop fronts and, occasionally, interiors . . . pictures of [a] new house or [a] big barn, and along with it the livestock” were by far the most common types of photographs, they were made almost exclusively for a local clientele and not for commercial distribution in the East and Europe.¹³ Just as the photographs in this exhibition respond to a history of place-making in Oregon, they also respond to a complex history of image making that

may or may not highlight monumental landscape — a choice with significant counterparts in the nineteenth century.

HISTORY OF IMAGERY

The photographers in this exhibit shrewdly employ historical techniques for framing a view. Bobby Abrahamson’s *Looking Upstream From Hells Canyon Dam* and Thomas Homolya’s *Maupin* for example, subvert photographic traditions by framing scenes that lead viewers to landscapes that do not deliver the expected picturesque tropes, but rather, compromised



Thomas Homolya, untitled, Maupin, 2012, Digital C-Print



Yale University Art Gallery, purchased with a gift from Sandra B. Lane, a grant from the Trellis Fund, and the Janet and Simeon Braguin Fund

Robert Adams reconceptualized the West when he made photographs that did not conform to the traditional frontier narrative or the aesthetics of the picturesque or sublime, such as in this 1968 photograph of newly occupied tract houses in Colorado Springs, Colorado.

landscapes that carry ecological and political debate. During the nineteenth century, a photograph of industry, aesthetically pleasing or not, likely carried a positive message about development and progress.¹⁴ Today, these broken aesthetic conventions purposefully and directly ask viewers to question

the beliefs we have about place, and the meaning of progress in western lands, much in the manner of Robert Adams's and Frank Gohlke's reconceptualizations of western tropes during the 1970s and 1980s. The depictions of landscapes as compromised by progress also help viewers recognize the



Bobby Abrahamson, Looking Upstream from Hells Canyon Dam, Hells Canyon Dam, 2011, Silver Gelatin Print

complexity and divisiveness of cultural understandings of place as well as the ways photography continues to shape those beliefs.

In another example, Christine Laptuta offers a panoramic view that subverts the traditional format

of this type of image by obstructing our view, rather than providing the seamless omniscience that historical, painted panoramas have taught viewers to expect. That magisterial gaze and all-seeing point of view, which emphasizes a conquering



Christine Laptuta, #205, Near Sisters, 2007, Archival Pigment Print



While painted panoramas were much more popular in the nineteenth century, various photographers attempted the format, inevitably struggling with the limitations of their equipment and methods of display. An unknown photographer framed six daguerreotype images, titled San Francisco, 1853, to create a panorama of the city.

vantage point, is disrupted by both Laptuta's choice of scenes and her self-conscious delineations between segments.¹⁵ Her overlapping panorama looks curious compared to those earlier bird's-eye views. Nevertheless, they share the type of fragmentation exhibited in other photographic panoramas, such as the 1853 daguerreotype of San Francisco reproduced here.¹⁶ Joseph Glasgow's *Grand Coulee Dam*, as well, offers a prospect view of a manufactured landscape. Traditionally, the prospect view was a pictorial convention that gave viewers a wide, overlooking view of a landscape that was meant to symbolically imply future potential for industry, agriculture, mining, or other acts of commercial progress. It was a view that presupposed a "virgin land" or *tabula rasa* interpretation of the West. Glasgow's image, however, is controversial and politically fraught, a prospect of regret rather than of unlimited opportunity.

In addition to subject matter, framing and other formal choices within

the photographs carry content. Some of these photographers, for example, use the rückenfigur's (an intercessing proxy for the viewer) relationship to the view to thwart expectations that a mediating figure historically implied in American — especially western — imagery. Thomas Homolya used this intermediary figure not to look across the land with a magisterial gaze, but rather as one who is embedded within the landscape and not quite the trope of a lone figure against a sublime landscape. This rückenfigur acts as a proxy for the viewer but also obstructs our view through a narrow canyon, not allowing the type of normative, shared vision that was so important to images of the nineteenth-century West.

Like historical photographs, the photographs in this exhibit reflect personal interests and passions, relationships to others, and individual journeys of discovery and reflection. As Susan Sontag has so aptly stated, "picture taking is both a limitless technique for appropriating the objective world and an unavoidably solipsistic



Joseph Glasgow, Grand Coulee Dam, Columbia River, Oregon/Washington Border, 2008, Hand-Coated Archival Pigment Print

expression of the singular self.¹⁷ Although many of these works conjure images from the western past, they also demonstrate a uniqueness that we must recognize was at the heart of earlier journeys as well. These photographs recall the history of making western photographs in that a newness always attends personal interaction with the landscape. While William Henry Jackson and Carleton Watkins, for instance, took photographs of western places for a wide audience, these current photographs remind us to imagine that those historical photographers also had a personal relationship with their subjects.

Such a self-conscious narrative of the making of the photographs was an important subtheme in nineteenth-century photography of the American West. Photographers wrote and spoke about the difficulties of making photographs in the field so much so that early-twentieth-century photographers co-opted the earlier practices and rhetoric of challenge and adventure in order to seem more authentic.¹⁸ Jackson, for example, made his journey as a USGS photographer a significant sub-narrative of his oeuvre. Strikingly, he and other nineteenth-century photographers often had photographs taken of them-



In this 1872 photograph titled “Photographing in High Places,” William Henry Jackson and his assistant examine photographic equipment in the Grand Teton Range in Wyoming. Nineteenth century narratives of photographers as daring western adventurers were common enough that the trope lasted well into the twentieth century.

selves in the act of taking photographs — an approach that continued into the twentieth century. An even more subtle way that photographers inserted themselves in their work was to cast their shadow on a scene as they sought to get the brightest, most direct light on their subjects. Even without the tricks of self-placement within photographs, images of landscape are deeply about the photographer as much as about place — due to aesthetic, subject matter, narrative, and technological choices.

HISTORY OF PHOTOGRAPHIC TECHNOLOGY AND STYLE

The history of western photography is also a history of technology. The rapid progression of photographic technology in the nineteenth century continues today unabated, from daguerreotypy, collodion (wet plate and dry plate), stereo cameras, and tintypes to the advent of Kodak roll film, digital, and cellphone cameras. The images by Jody Ake clearly demonstrate how choice of technology can carry significance within photography. The vintage



Jody Ake, Oregon Hillside, Philippi Canyon, 2006, Ambrotype



Susan Bein, untitled, Sauvie Island, 2008, Archival Pigment Print

look created by Ake's use of ambrotypy in *Oregon Hillside*, for instance, with its over-exposed sky and rough collodion edges, reminds viewers not only of the past but of how we envision the past. Although ambrotypy was a short-lived collodion process of the late 1850s, the re-emergence of myriad collodion techniques in the past decade signals the nineteenth century more generally. It demonstrates an aesthetic of an era, bringing dissonance to such photographs of the contemporary world. The increased interest in historical processes and techniques as a response to digital technology, moreover, is tantamount to questioning the ideals of progress and advancement that emerged simultaneously with photog-

raphy. Such looking back and moving forward in contemporary photography is fraught with a complexity that is mind boggling.

Susan Bein demonstrates this complexity as well, albeit through different technology and a different aesthetic era. Her photographs are taken with an iPhone — a use of *au courant* technology of which entrepreneur photographers of the nineteenth century would have approved. Rather than brandishing a contemporary style, however, Bein subverts the expectation for an aesthetic of the present and instead creates photographs that recall the early-twentieth-century Pictorialist approach.¹⁹ The heightened aesthetics



Stu Levy, Ice, Oneonta Gorge, Oregon, Oneonta Gorge, 1985, Silver Gelatin Print

of beauty and artfulness of the Pictorialists is an odd pairing with such modern technology, ultimately suggesting the smorgasbord of technique and stylistic approach that confronts contemporary photographers.

While Bein conjures the world of Pictorialism in her images, Stu Levy's photographs represent the historically opposite style. Levy's work evokes the modernist clarity of Ansel Adams and Group *f/64* in the way he exemplifies the deep intimacy one can have with a place.²⁰ He does not just co-opt the aesthetic of clarity, extreme depth of field, and photographic craftsmanship that characterized that modern movement in photography, however; Levy's work encompasses it, taking the past into account to create a newer twenty-first-century view that gives reference, perhaps homage, but does not simply appropriate.

CONCLUSION

My comments here have briefly touched on the many ways that the artists in this exhibit are responding not only to place, but also to the histories of landscape and attending theories of the picturesque and sublime, of the development of photography and how the medium was used in conjunction with immigration and exploration, and of photographic styles and conceptual approaches as they have rapidly transformed in America from the 1840s to today. In addition, these photographs, sometimes explicitly and sometimes

even perhaps unwittingly, respond to narratives and counter-narratives of the American West and of the frontier myth and its subversion. The habit of tracing the components of an image back to their historical roots is very much part of what it means to understand how contemporary images are conversant with myriad aspects of the past. But these photographers are not simply looking backwards into the past. Rather, these contemporary images of Oregon *change* the way we understand the past — by challenging the paradigms, tropes, and conventions of western historical photography. By not conforming or by conforming in pointed ways, these artists shape the way we see history, perhaps revealing what we tend to miss when looking at photographs. Overall, these photographers engage historically constructed expectations for viewing the land, often by being the exception that proves the rule. The artists in this exhibit reveal, through their use of technology and stylistic formal qualities, that photography is about choices and cultural as well as personal perspectives; photographs are not objective realities of place and identity. In historical and contemporary photographs, the places depicted and depicted again carry faint whispers of a geological time. They carry a deep history of human experience, as well, that extends long before the advent of photography for the thousands of years that people have been place-making in Oregon.

NOTES

1. Keith Basso, *Wisdom Sits in Places: Landscape and Language Among the Western Apache* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1996), 6. Even though Basso was discussing the Western Apache and their relationship to ancestral places, his conceptual approach reverberates widely in place studies.
2. The list of scholarship that supports this notion is extensive; see, for example, Alan Trachtenberg, *Reading American Photographs: Images as History, Mathew Brady to Walker Evans* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1989), 119–63; and Martha Sandweiss, *Print the Legend: Photography and the American West* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004).
3. See, for instance, Joel Snyder, “Photography on the Western Surveys,” in *One/Many: Western American Survey Photographs by Bell and O’Sullivan* (Chicago: University of Chicago and The David and Alfred Smart Museum of Art, 2006), 22.
4. Peter Bacon Hales, *Silver Cities: The Photography of American Urbanization, 1839–1915* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1984), 292.
5. See Joni Kinsey, “‘I Wished for the Pencil of Salvator Rosa’: The Artistic Legacy of Lewis and Clark,” *South Dakota History* 34 (2004): 28–61; and James P. Ronda, “Counting Cats in Zanzibar, or, Lewis and Clark Reconsidered,” *The Western Historical Quarterly* 33:1 (Spring, 2002): 4–18.
6. Mary Ann Doane writes that “the index is never enough,” that it “stops short of meaning, presenting only its rubric or possibility.” Here, she stresses the cavernous distance between the subject in a photograph and the representational object of a photograph, questioning the indexicality of a photograph as inseparable from what it represents. Doane, “Indexicality and the Concept of Medium Specificity,” in *The Meaning of Photography*, Robin Kelsey and Blake Stimson, eds. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008), 12.
7. Oliver Wendell Holmes, “The Stereoscope and the Stereograph,” *Atlantic Monthly* 3:20 (1859): 739.
8. Edward Anthony to H.H. Snelling, February 1, 1849, reprinted in Snelling, preface to *The History and Practice of the Art of Photography* (New York: G.P. Putnam, 1849).
9. See John F. Sears, *Sacred Places: American Tourist Attractions in the Nineteenth Century* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1889), 3–11.
10. For an example of how the process of aesthetic valuation takes place, see Stephen Pyne, *How the Canyon Became Grand: A Short History* (New York: Viking, 1998).
11. See, for instance, W. Rhys Roberts, ed., *Longinus on the Sublime* (New York: Garland, 1987). For later contributions on landscape aesthetics, see Edmund Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (London, 1757); William Gilpin, *Three Essays: On Picturesque Beauty; On Picturesque Travel; and on Sketching Landscape* (London, 1792); Uvedale Price, *An Essay on the Picturesque, as Compared with the Sublime and Beautiful; and on the Use of Studying Pictures, for the Purpose of Improving Real Landscape* (London, 1796); and Richard Payne Knight, *An Analytical Inquiry into the Principles of Taste* (London: T. Payne, 1805). See also E.L. Magoon, “Scenery and Mind,” in *The Home Book of the Picturesque* (New York: Putnam, 1852); and William Cullen Bryant, ed., *Picturesque America* (New York: Appleton, 1872).
12. Rachel Sailor, *Meaningful Places: Landscape Photographers in the Nineteenth-Century American West* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2014), xvii–xxviii.
13. William Henry Jackson, *Time Exposure: The Autobiography of William Henry Jackson* (New York: G.P. Putnam’s Sons, 1940), 173.
14. Peter Bacon Hales, *Silver Cities: The Photography of American Urbanization*, 122–24.

15. See Albert Boime, *The Magisterial Gaze: Manifest Destiny and American Landscape Painting c. 1830–1865* (Washington and London: Smithsonian Institution, 1991).

16. See Snyder, “Photographic Panoramas and Views,” 31–53; and Josh Ellenbogen, “Inhuman Sight: Photographs and Panoramas in the Nineteenth Century,” in *One/Many: Western American Survey Photographs by Bell and O’Sullivan* (Chicago: The University of Chicago and The David

19. For information on Pictorialism, see Christian A. Peterson, *After the Photo-Secession: American Pictorial Photography, 1910–1955* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1997); and Peter C. Bunnell, *Degrees of Guidance: Essays on Twentieth-Century American Photography* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 1–12.

20. Ansel Adams’s stylistic development and his connection to western places is described in Mary Street Alinder, “The Limits



Raymond Meeks, Springwater Corridor (Apples), Portland, 2011, Silver Gelatin Print

and Alfred Smart Museum of Art, 2006), 55–73.

17. Susan Sontag, *On Photography* (New York: Picador, 1973), 122.

18. See Sailor, “Performing the Pioneer,” *New Mexico Historical Review* 84:2 (2009): 233–61.

of Reality: Ansel Adams and Group f.64,” in *Seeing Straight: Group f.64*, ed. Therese Thau Heyman (Oakland: Oakland Museum of California, 1992), 42–50; and John Raeburn, *A Staggering Revolution: A Cultural History of Thirties Photography* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2006), 30–47.