

Composed Perception: Landscape as Aesthetic Process

Selections from the Comer Collection

Curated by Amanda Dunbar, PhD graduate student

March 29–April 22, 2022

Reception Friday, April 1
6:30–8:30 p.m.

SP/N Gallery

3020 Stewart Dr.,
Richardson, TX 75080

"For nature consists not only in itself, objectively, but at least just as much in its subjective reflection from the person, spirit, age, looking at it, in the midst of it, and absorbing it—faithfully sends back the characteristic beliefs of the time or individual..."

Walt Whitman

In his text *Landscape and Power* (1994), W.J.T. Mitchell writes: "landscape (whether urban or rural, artificial or natural) always greets us as space, as environment, as that within which 'we' (figured as 'the figures' in the landscape) find—or lose—ourselves" (2). Indeed, Mitchell urges the term landscape best be expressed as a verb—"to landscape"—as a reminder of how human agency imposes a particular order upon the natural environment. The term "landscape" underscores the social uses and transformation of space into *place* through some level of human cultivation. Following such an insight, this selection of works from the Comer Collection aims to explore landscape as a cultural practice and as an aesthetic process, exploring not what landscape "is" or "means," but what it *does*, how it *works*, and how the human being crucially shapes and is shaped by this cultivation. As a medium that bears a particular element of documentary "reality" and "unmediated truth" (whether this is truly the case or not), photography often offers itself as a substitute for a direct, human encounter. These contemporary landscape photographs explore how the human being cultivates the environment, what the environment, in turn, does to the human being, how we "naturalize" such a phenomenon, and how "landscape-as-verb" comes to manifest specifically in photographic representation.

Figuring first as a genre of painting and as a mode of human subjectivity, landscape features a long tradition that has been well documented by such eminent art historians as Ernst Gombrich and cultural geographers as Denis Cosgrove. In her text *Land Matters* (2011), Liz Wells explains, "landscape is a social product; particular landscapes tell us something

about cultural histories and attitudes. Landscape results from human intervention to shape or transform natural phenomena, of which we are simultaneously a part" (1). The human being forms "landscape" as much as she is formed by it.

As such, "landscape" as a genre does not escape artistic processing and offers perhaps one of the most enigmatic relationships of the human being to the world in which they abide. Indeed, as a deeply established category of pictorial convention, we rarely consider the relationship between the artist (and the beholder) to the aesthetically processed land as one mediated by a long and intense tradition. When we designate natural scenery as "landscape," we are not using an innocent term but rather a visual metaphor formed by the pictorial conventions associated with the original landscape-as-picture. Landscape—even the photographic landscape—ties intimately to painting convention and demonstrates the pivotal role of representation, and how the words "landscape" and "image" are inseparable terms. Vittoria di Palma (2016) explains, "Landscape never exists independent of representation.... without image there is no such thing as landscape, only unmediated environment" (47). Veritably, 'landscape' refers simultaneously to a view or delimited area of ground and its representation. The oscillation, ambivalence, and overlap between land—understood as an actual view—and its *representation* becomes fundamental to both the theoretical richness of the term and the variety of possibilities such a term offers.

Perhaps more than any other image category, what defines "landscape" for the viewer becomes the frame—the confines

of the image—which indicates what does and does not belong. Literally and figuratively, the frame limits the landscape, both in the sense of determining its outer boundary and in the sense that the frame *constitutes* the landscape—without the frame, the space remains an undelimited expanse. The landscape may also be internally focused and organized by its relation to “non-landscape”—generally, the human figure.

Mark Klett’s gelatin silver print *Standing before the Solitario Mountains, Fresno City, Texas* (below) offers one clear example that both documents the intervention of the human figure upon the environment while highlighting the boundary of the

frame and draws a clear distinction between “landscape” and “non-landscape.” In Klett’s image, the frame does not act as an amputation of a larger, more “complete” scene. Rather, the framing suggests a way of seeing the human figure as an integral—though only transitory—element of the natural landscape, examining the way people have occupied and experienced this land while limiting the evidence of their presence. In keeping with Mitchell’s imperative to think of landscape as a verb, Klett’s photograph “landscapes” the Solitario Mountains by transforming the vast uninhabited space to an accessible and graspable place while simultaneously figuring the human agency that creates “image.” Further, the cast shadow of the photographic apparatus connects to the shadow of the human figure—its scale featuring as prominently as the human who wields it—adding yet another dimension to the separation of “land” and “human being” while also crucially noting the mechanical process that records this interaction.

Below

Klett, Mark, *Standing before the Solitario Mountains, Fresno City, Texas*, 89/94, Gelatin silver print, 10.75 x 12.5 in.





Above

Pfahl, John, *Bethlehem #25*, 1988, chromogenic print, 10 x 10 in.

Klett follows in a tradition that includes such nineteenth-century photographers as William Henry Jackson, whose photographs in the 1880s of the Grand Canyon and the American West pointedly include the makers of the image, albeit dwarfed or silhouetted by vast expanses of rugged nature. In these photographs, like Klett's *Solitario Mountains*, the viewer becomes aware that the pictures themselves result from a complex comingling of technological factors, specific narratives, intellectual aspirations, symbolism, and aesthetic composition. In their particular cropping, the place of the human being within the scope of the environment offers a specific commentary on where—or if—we belong while also consciously documenting the aesthetic process of photographic “landscape-ing” itself. Such a photograph reminds the viewer that their place in front of the image has been mediated by the camera, the photographer, and questions what they bring to understanding place, nature, environment, and belonging.

The bounds of an image can prove fundamental to the way we come to read a photographic landscape. In John Pfahl's *Bethlehem #25*, the image omits the human figure and the larger scope of the referent—ostensibly the town of Bethlehem—but also the ground upon which we might orient ourselves. However, the traces of human intervention become evident, even while lacking the inclusion of an explicit human figure. In Pfahl's photograph, the erect smokestacks of human industry act as a surrogate for the human figure while the gaseous byproduct of refining power fill the bound space in much the same way as cloudscapes painted by J.M.W. Turner's paintbrush. Such a “landscape” in our contemporary view offers perhaps

foremost a pointed statement about the environmental impact of industrialization but does so while consciously adhering to Romantic ideals of the picturesque or sublime. The cloudscape offers a particular human (or non-human) perspective that fuels our reading of the environment; it destabilizes the notion of a fixed, stable arrangement of natural forms ordered at some distance—both literally in the sense of a studio (this is a photograph taken in the environment), and figuratively in terms of a fixed, grounded viewpoint and an adherence to a Claudian landscape composition¹.

Pfahl's engagingly complex framing of the noxious clouds of emissions that reflect warm, ambient light offers an ambiguous commentary on human interventions to the land. Pfahl's work features several collections that have dealt expressly with power plants—both nuclear and coal—focusing on their environmental impact, though always with an eye towards an enigmatic beauty that enthralls even while it threatens. Pfahl's photographs of smoke clouds follow in the Pictorialist tradition whose imaging of mists, fogs, and clouds offered a means to rescue "aesthetic" considerations of photography from "mere mechanical documentation" by modeling mediations on those of nature, while making commentary on the rapidly changing urban landscape. Indeed, Pfahl's industrial cloudscape pays homage to late nineteenth-century Pictorialist photographers like Peter Henry Emerson, who idealized traditional rural life through modern, and largely industrial means. This idealization, however, does not entirely disguise the aesthetics

of sublime melancholy; Pfahl's landscape acknowledges that photographs of human industry are often coupled with environmental destruction, while remaining alluring and almost transcendental of their subject. In keeping with the painterly tradition that informs these photographs, we might also consider a parallel to Claude Monet's *Gare St. Lazare* series (1877), which prominently features the sublime steam of the new locomotives as a harbinger of human industry, change, while also hinting at the anxiety of increasing urbanization and the loss of direct encounters with Nature.

Both Klett and Pfahl's photographs offer intimate engagements with environment that sustain a modified language and meaning to landscape photography as sites of constant energetic movement and change. Both feature explicit human intervention that block our most immediate impulse to consider "landscape" as only an unmediated view of an expanse of environment. These images invite the viewer to consider how landscape photography offers a composed perception of the natural world, and how such images come to be processed by the viewer. Ideas about nature, art, and the photographic practice inextricably combine in landscape photography, and demonstrate a variety of ideologies, aesthetic concerns, and human preoccupations with our relationship to the environment. The inclusion or exclusion of the human figure, the choice of framing, and the treatment of aspects of the phenomenological world all factor as often unconscious presuppositions when considering landscape imagery. I invite you to consider the rest of the collection of photographs in this exhibit in terms of how the depiction of nature results from a conscious composition by the photographer, and what you, as a viewer, bring to these images in the relationship as part of the aesthetic process. **Amanda Dunbar, 2022**

¹ Based on the compositional devices utilized by influential landscape painter Claude Lorraine (1600–1682), who introduced a "classical" aesthetic or picturesque view to landscape art by emphasizing a clear fore, middle, and background.

ah.utdallas.edu

The University of Texas at Dallas
School of Arts & Humanities
800 West Campbell Road, JO31
Richardson, TX 75080

Gallery Hours

Tues., Weds., Sat. | 11 a.m.–4 p.m.
Thurs. and Fri. | 1–6 p.m.

For more information, call 972-UTD-ARTS or visit ah.utdallas.edu.
For assistance, call 972-883-2982 or Texas Relay Operator 1-800-RELAYTX.
UT Dallas is an equal opportunity/affirmative action university.

Works Cited

- Jussie, Estelle, and Elizabeth Lindquist-Cock. *Landscape as Photograph*. Yale University Press, 1985.
- Mitchell, W. J. T. *Landscape and Power*. University of Chicago Press, 1994.
- Palma, Vittoria Di. "Is Landscape Painting?" in *Is Landscape ...?* 1st ed., Routledge, 2016, pp. 44–70, doi:10.4324/9781315697581-4.
- Wells, Liz. *Land Matters: Landscape Photography, Culture and Identity*. I.B. Tauris, 2011.
- Whitman, Walt. Excerpt from "Poetry Today—Shakespeare—The Future," in *Prose Works 1892, Volume II: Collect and Other Prose, Volume 2*. NYU Press, 2007, p.485.