

Julie Bargmann  
Associate Professor of  
Landscape Architecture,  
University of Virginia

## Troubled Beauty

My seminar students settle into their seats. A slide goes up, filling the screen with an amber glow, a stunning composition of earth, light, and shadow. For these devotees to the landscape, this image is heaven. They swoon—then gasp: Within the lovely image is the arresting detail of a horse's head breaching the soil. The photograph is *Dead Animals #327*, one of many in a series by Richard Misrach.<sup>1</sup>

The haunting close-up is a single example of the canon of work by a generation of pioneering photographers who have been recording large-scale environmental devastation in post-industrial America. I use their pictures to my own pedagogical advantage, showing aspiring landscape architects that beguiling beauty often coexists with repulsive reality. I tell tales of super-sized awe with my own photographs of degraded land, inspired by other artists who have brought obscure derelict terrain into plain view. It's a worthy goal, for only after these landscapes enter our consciousness can we imagine a course of environmental action.

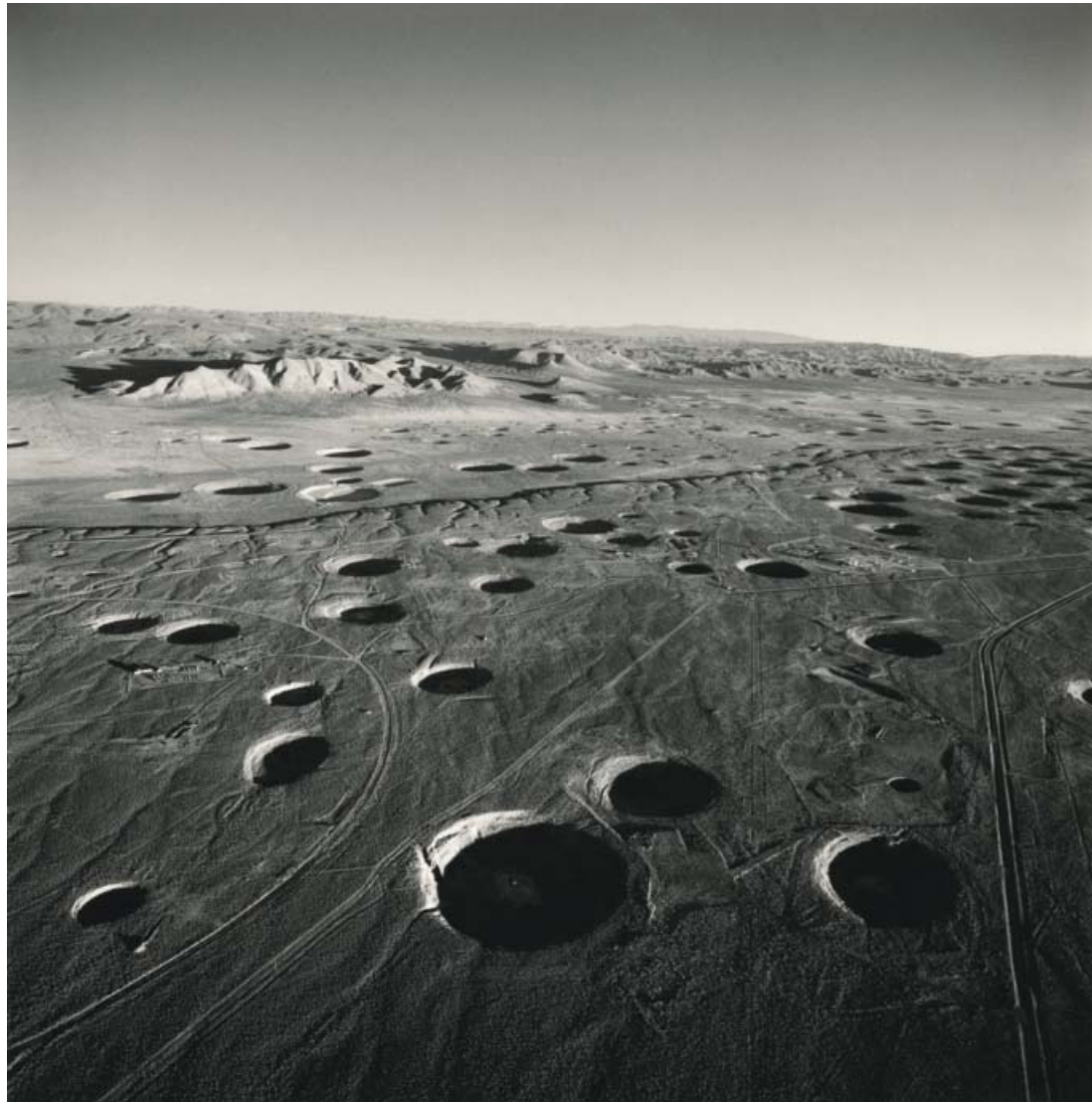
I am less impressed by photographers who dwell on wrecked landscapes for purely documentary purposes. Sure, I get it: The viewer is left to draw his or her own conclusions after viewing the decimation. But there's a reason it's called "ruin porn." It merely titillates; it does not inspire or otherwise have a redeeming value. And it tells an incomplete story, because it lacks the human element. Specifically, it does not tell the story of the people who lived or worked on that land, nor of the people who may continue to dwell there.

Unlike the voyeuristic peep shows of dereliction, the photographs taken by Misrach and his ilk reflect the conviction of serious artists who constructively raise awareness and pointedly pose critical questions about humankind's hand in the evolution of the landscape. Photographer and environmentalist Ansel Adams captured the sublime beauty of pristine nature; photographers of industrialized landscapes replace awe with revulsion, majesty with horror, inspiration with confrontation, and unspoiled scenery with tableaux of toxic beauty. The view is bigger than the frame, but the best of these works are broadly and deeply embedded with social site histories. They ask questions about the lives—human and nonhuman—that are at stake.



Misrach's series entitled *The Pit* depicts decaying livestock that have died suddenly from mysterious (read: industrial) causes, then been dumped in open burial sites spread throughout the Nevada desert. His tactic is akin to that of others whose photographs beguile us with their beauty, but then repulse us with the horror they depict.

**Richard Misrach**  
American, b. 1949  
*Dead Animals #327*, 1987  
Pigment print/Archival pigment print,  
size variable  
Courtesy of Fraenkel Gallery, San Francisco,  
Pace/MacGill Gallery, New York  
and Marc Selwyn Fine Art, Los Angeles  
© Richard Misrach



**Emmet Gowin**

American, b. 1941

*Subsidence Craters, Looking East*

*from Area 8, Nevada Test Site, 1996*

Appears in *Changing the Earth*

Gelatin silver print,

image: 9½ x 9¾ in, 24.13 x 24.45 cm,

paper: 14 x 11 in, 35.56 x 27.94 cm

Signed, titled, dated and annotated

verso in pencil

Courtesy of Pace/MacGill Gallery,

New York

© 2013 Emmet Gowin

**To apprehend gigantic expanses of altered terrain, Gowin captures transcendent abstractions, such as these bombsites, from the air. Like Adams broadcasting a distant America the Beautiful, contemporary photographers disseminate the remote, troubled beauty across our country, some venturing even farther to harrowing landscapes around the globe.**

In fact, many contemporary artists have deliberately followed in the boot prints of Adams and his 19th- and early 20th-century predecessors. But instead of carefully cropping scenes of majestic mountains and regal valleys, the next generation disturbed their depictions of the Wild West by pushing everyday life and ordinary people to the foreground. Sometimes the pictures would not be considered “beautiful” by the traditional definition. For instance, artists included in the *Looking at the New West* exhibit contaminate their compositions with the repulsive splendor of polluted land. While Adams championed preservation of America’s national treasures, the next generation of artists recognizes the landscape not as neutral territory but as contested ground. The details are rendered by human forces, not natural ones.

This body of work gained significant attention in the mid-1970s through the exhibit *New Topographics: Photographs of Man-Altered Landscapes*.<sup>2</sup> The featured photos reflected a range in tactics and motivations. Some were considered cool and detached, almost scientific in their documentation of the landscape. Others were seen as anthropological rather than critical, oblique in terms of their judgments or opinions. In any case, the pictures all had (and still have) moral and political implications, whether overt or obscure. The work, which coincided with the proliferation of environmental-protection legislation, visualized the environmental crisis, which was still invisible to many—or, at least, unacknowledged by some who were unwilling to see their place in these sometimes horrifying landscape portraits. “The issues of landscape extend beyond the frame,” according to Misrach. “The landscape photograph is not an autonomous aesthetic object to be understood on the basis of formal innovation, visceral power, or conceptual insight—it also carries weighty cultural baggage than can no longer be ignored.”<sup>3</sup>

Unsurprisingly, given the number of photographers involved, the points of view were widely varied. Inspired by the exhibit’s way of thinking about the world through photography, Emmet Gowin took to the air to apprehend vast expanses of altered terrain. Advantageous abstraction of the land seen from great heights lures viewers into thinking the artificial patterns and manmade formations are perhaps part of the native geomorphology. But the viewer forms an entirely different opinion with the realization that such things as nuclear bombs and mine tailings have altered the terrain. If beauty is a strategy of persuasion, then these landscape photographers’ attention to environmental awareness may be as convincing as Adams’s photos were for the previous era’s conservation movement.

At lower elevations, contemporary landscape photographers have broken with the Adams tradition of carefully cropping their portrayals of America the Beautiful, editing impurities from



Goin exposes invisible causes of destruction by accompanying his *Nuclear Landscape* series with captions that spell out the insidiousness of radiation. The superimposed text of this site's productive history is coupled with his reporting of its significant contamination as part of the Hanford Nuclear Reservation, filling the gap between what we see and what we know.

**Peter Goin**

American, b. 1951  
*Orchard Site*, 1988, from the book  
*Nuclear Landscapes*, 1991  
 Gelatin silver print,  
 15 7/8 x 19 in, 39.69 x 48.26 cm  
 Courtesy of the artist  
 © Peter Goin

the supposedly pristine scene. In the catalog of another significant landscape photography exhibit, *Between Home and Heaven*, the renowned scientist and natural historian Stephen Jay Gould wrote, "The great images in the romantic age of 'big' nature (dwarfing tiny culture) showed vast landscapes either entirely untainted by human presence or...with the subtlest, smallest, even invisible signs of human activity to show the scale of contrast."<sup>4</sup>

The modern-day realists take the opposite tactic. Their scenery includes us, residing uncomfortably close to belching super-sized industries. The viewer is confronted with an involuntary "'yes' in my backyard." Artist David Hanson's juxtaposition of modest company houses with a gigantic power plant makes you wonder if Erin Brockovich is somewhere in that picture interviewing the next-door neighbors.

Hanson is joined by other photographers, like Peter Goin, who disclose the invisibility of pollution by accompanying images with disturbing captions. Some photos portray innocuous-looking objects and perplexing structures in the vast Western plains. They make you cock your head and wonder. Text that supplements the pictures spells out plain facts about the menacing remains of industrial activity. Other descriptions include sinister statistics and explanations of why the psychedelic colors aren't really that pretty.<sup>5</sup>



Ansel Adam cropped views of extraordinary natural scenery, but another generation of photographers, like Hanson, fills frames with everyday life in the foreground of polluting industrial tableaux. The uncomfortable juxtapositions implicate us all, whether or not we live downwind or downstream.

**David T. Hanson**

American, b. 1948  
*Coal Strip Mine, Power Plant and Waste Ponds*, 1984  
 From the series *Colstrip, Montana*,  
 1982-85  
 Ektacolor print,  
 9 x 11 in, 22.86 x 27.94 cm  
 Courtesy of the artist  
 © David T. Hanson

Similarly, artists like Edward Burtynsky frame giant heaps of stuff that at first glance look like grand landforms. Closer inspection reveals distinctly unnatural scenes: a mountain of tires, the geology of consumption.<sup>6</sup> This tactic of unmasking the environmental consequences and cultural implications of a still frame effectively puts suspect processes into question. Fast-forward to the present: An ever increasing amount of accessible scientific evidence, written exposés, and visualized data charts the industrial flows of the past that are seeping into the future.<sup>7</sup> Like it or not, we are no longer innocent bystanders.

My media-blasted students, born head-on into the environmental crisis, may cling to the memory of a family vacation to Yosemite, yet they also take the polluted earth as a given. As I continue to project images of that difficult certainty, I see their attraction-turned-to-repulsion trigger a range of reactions, from a resigned shrug of the shoulders to a boiling-mad look on their faces. My ploy as a teacher may emulate environmentalist author Terry Tempest Williams, writing about the work of Gowin, who pointedly asks: “Do we now dare to look ourselves in the eye and begin the necessary work of repentance and restoration?”<sup>8</sup>



**Edward Burtynsky**  
Canadian, b. 1955  
*Oxford Tire Pile #8, Westley, California.*  
In *Manufactured Landscapes*, 2003  
Chromogenic color print,  
48 x 60 in, 121.92 x 152.4 cm  
Courtesy of Nicholas Metivier Gallery,  
Toronto/Howard Greenberg & Bryce  
Wolkowitz, New York  
© Edward Burtynsky

**Fast-forwarding from the vast scale of Ansel Adams’s picturesque Nature to the present-day industrial sublime, Burtynsky aims his camera toward the monstrous impact of our earthly desires, whose consequences manufacture otherworldly landscapes. Poignant bodies of photographic work by intrepid modern-day artists frame compelling compositions of consumerism.**

But I—and I suspect some of these photographers—am not ready to force anyone into a confessional. Certainly owning up to our role in ecological devastation and its social penalties is warranted, but how we ask for forgiveness is up for debate. Surely restoration is imperative for the toxic landscapes that are poisoning us. But is there another version, a spin, albeit perverse, on the land-conservation movement championed by Adams? Are these photographers presenting us with an industrial legacy to be internalized, in order to recalibrate our idea of nature? Do the photographs that capture environmental consequences allow us time to contemplate how we may coexist with the troublesome version of our nature? Again, Stephen Jay Gould draws lessons from these photographs: “We have managed to intrude upon nature to the point where an aesthetic of romantic wilderness simply will not do as a philosophy of landscape. But she can wait us out until we do ourselves in.... Let us repay the favor both in our practical dealings and in our search for a new aesthetic. With special good fortune, a successful aesthetic may even inspire due respect in our practices.”<sup>9</sup>

We are indebted to the intrepid photographers who are looking to the new west, as well as to the rust belts and contaminated corridors east of the Mississippi, for adjusting our rearview mirrors forward. For venturing around the globe to expose toxic terrain, to portray distant victims of our consumerist demands and unconscious desires with ingeniously crafted images of sublime horror. We can keep these photographs of troubled beauty in their frames, at a distance. Or we can look closer and with peripheral vision, and wonder: What have we done, and what do we do next?

## Notes

- 1 Misrach, Richard. *Desert Cantos*. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1987.
- 2 *New Topographics: Photographs of Man-Altered Landscapes*. Exhibition at the International Museum of Photography, Rochester, NY; January 1975.
- 3 Brochure for *Between Home and Heaven: Contemporary American Landscape Photography*. Exhibition at the Smithsonian Institution, 1992.
- 4 Gould, Stephen Jay. *Between Home and Heaven*. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1992; 77.
- 5 Ibid. See also Peter Goin, *Nuclear Landscapes* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1991).
- 6 Pauli, Lori, et.al. *Manufactured Landscapes: The Photographs of Edward Burtynsky*. New Haven: Yale University Press, in association with the National Gallery of Canada, 2003.
- 7 For one example of integrating photography with analytical diagrams and text, see *Petrochemical America*, the collaborative work of photographer Richard Misrach and landscape architect Kate Orff (New York: Aperture, 2012.)
- 8 Williams, Terry Tempest. “The Earth Stares Back,” in *Emmett Gowin: Changing the Earth* by Jock Reynolds (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002), 83.
- 9 Gould, Stephen Jay, op. cit.; 131.