

MFA Thesis: Hybrid Landscapes

Ethan Ross

My work focuses on humankind's complex physical and metaphysical relationship with the Earth. We live on the Earth, on top of and within the surface; we dwell here in the environment we've created for ourselves. Over generations of dam building, mining, agriculture, forestry, and the vast multitude of other physical interventions within the land, we have constructed for ourselves an environment that is at once both synthetic and natural, what I call hybrid landscapes. It is with the blending of the two that a new definition of nature begins to emerge.

Culture's perception of land and land use has changed as much, if not more, than the physical changes enacted upon the Earth. We have realized that our environment is not infinite yet at the same time humankind continues to expand more than it ever has, thus creating deeper complexity in how we reconcile land use with environmental preservation. With the disturbing reality that the trajectory of human influence cannot be sustained indefinitely we, as benefactors of technological advancement, are bound to the paradox created by living with the conveniences of modern life while simultaneously attempting to reduce our impact on the Earth. The dialectic created by this paradox has begun a paradigm shift that is changing the images we make of the natural world.

It is important at this time to define what is meant by landscape. For many, landscape is synonymous with the natural world but the actual definition proves to

be much more slippery. According to the Merriam-Webster dictionary, *landscape* is defined as follows: (n) a portion of territory that can be viewed at one time from one place. This seemingly simple definition reveals that *landscape* is only constituted when it is observed, presumably by a human presence. The phrase “viewed at one time from one place” implies the field of view most commonly associated with humans. Certainly, landscape photographs would not exist without human intervention but it seems that landscape itself would also not exist without humans.

Interestingly, the origins of the word landscape reveal it as a cultural construct. The first recorded use of “landscape” was in the late 16th century and specifically referred to a style of painting being practiced by the Dutch that focused on the depiction of natural scenery. *Landschap* meant a region or tract of land. It would be approximately 30 years before the word would be used to describe a view of the natural world outside of painting.¹ This reveals that it was only after nature was aestheticized in art that it began to be aestheticized in the real world thus forming the beginnings of the culturally constructed landscape image. This becomes even more obvious when one thinks about the language that we employ to describe nature. Visitors to the Grand Canyon might say that it is a “beautiful” or “rugged” landscape, referring to nature’s aesthetic qualities. The systematic act of altering the topography of certain small areas in pursuit of greater aesthetic appeal is called *landscaping*, directly referencing the alteration of nature to create landscape. We even go so far as to separate the human and non-human by differentiating between

¹ The American Heritage® Dictionary of the English Language

the *urban landscape* and the *natural landscape*. It should be noted that landscape is *not* synonymous with nature. While landscape often incorporates nature, nature exists independently of human influence; humans are a part of nature but do not constitute nature's existence in the same way as landscape.

My work fits into a long line of culturally constructed landscape photographs. The work is not free of its history, in fact it is aware of its history. There have been many shifts in landscape aesthetics since the invention of photography in 1839, many of which corresponded to shifts in cultural perception of human impact on nature. At the beginning of the 20th century, John Muir advocated for the sectioning off of large tracts of land – particularly in the Yosemite Valley – to go untouched by the timber industry. He wrote in 1903, “let everyone read [Sargent’s] book, travel, and see [the redwoods] for himself and while fire and axe still threaten destruction, make haste to come help these trees, our country’s pride and glory.”² Muir’s philosophical leanings at the time focused on the interconnectedness of the human and natural sphere much like transcendental writers like Henry David Thoreau.³ Thoreau himself wrote, “In Wildness is the preservation of the World,”⁴ stating that without some form of “pure/untouched” nature mankind would inevitably lead itself to ruin. Muir’s writings about the collision of nature and mankind would be the foundation of the Sierra Club’s “Wilderness Campaigns” of the 1960s. They would also help form the concept of ecological citizenship: as citizens we must take responsibility

² Michael B. Smith, pg. 1

³ Smith, pg. 2

⁴ William Cronon, Pg. 69

for the environment and our affect on it.⁵ The photographs of Ansel Adams would come to typify the Sierra Clubs notion that by teaching people how to understand and appreciate wilderness, they could change the cultural perception of all forms of land and all forms of land use.

However, the Sierra Club's use of wilderness as a sanctuary where peace, tranquility, and transformation can be found shows us that the definition of *wilderness* is as slippery as the definition of landscape and just as culturally constructed. William Cronon points to the use of the word *wilderness* throughout history as "anything but positive", often being described as barren, savage, desolate, and deserted. *Wasteland* is its nearest synonym.⁶ Wilderness – as it turns out– was not a place one went to find meaning, peace, or happiness, as Transcendentalists and the Sierra Club would have it. It was in fact a place "one came only against one's will, and always with fear and trembling."⁷ Before America stretched from sea to shining sea, wilderness was something to be conquered, not preserved. This can be seen in the images created by Timothy O'Sullivan and other photographers sent out into the western United States during the King Surveys of the west that sponsored by the US Geological Survey.⁸ They were not concerned with the preservation of the wilderness that they encountered but with quantifying the economic potential these new territories offered.

⁵ Finnis Dunaway, pg. 17

⁶ Cronon, pg. 70

⁷ Cronon, pg. 71

⁸ "The Four Great Surveys"



Figure 1: Ethan Ross, *It's a Nice Place to Raise a Family*, 2013

The diptych *It's a Nice Place to Raise a Family* (Fig. 1) explores this concept. Taken as separate images they both reveal different aspects of human interaction with the Earth. The left hand image shows a fresh, violent and ongoing interaction – the conquered landscape – in which humans have all but reduced nature down to nothing, while the right hand image presents the viewer with a small house surrounded by trees. In this image, though the evidence of humanity is still present, nature has much more control. Together the two images reveal the true condition of our constructed habitat. The small house surrounded by trees appears to be a good place to live, but the man-made mountains of discarded roofing and gravel nearby dwarf the house. The trees provide little to no protection and the mounds of refuse spill over into the right hand image as if they cannot be contained within one. The ground in front of the camera is crisscrossed with tire marks, an indicator that this place is very much an active site. Having grown up in a city where construction and change were common place, I felt a particular connection with this place and an irony in the thought that someone could potentially live in that house, so close to such a violated space. I was surprised when not too long after the photos were taken

I drove by once again and discovered that someone did indeed dwell there. That place perfectly illustrates the dichotomy between the places we as humans inhabit and the places we consider nature. Roland Barthes once wrote, “Photographs of landscape (urban or country) must be *habitable*, not visitable.”⁹ With this image I question whether or not all places can or should be inhabited. There is very little concern shown for actual living spaces, while nature – the nature that needs to be preserved and protected – is sequestered far away in remote areas that we humans rarely venture. This breeds the idea that nature is inherently *other*, an idea that if left to propagate can threaten the environment it aims to protect. Architect Peter Blake states very plainly in his book God’s Own Junkyard: The Planned Deterioration of America’s Landscape, that nature parks only “elevate us on Sundays and holidays, rather than enrich our lives year round.” He goes on to say,

“Our suburbs are interminable wastelands dotted with millions of monotonous little houses on monotonous little lots and crisscrossed by highways lined with billboards, jazzed-up diners, used car lots, drive-in movies, beflagged gas stations, and garish motels.”¹⁰

Written in 1964, this accurate, albeit dystopian, view of the emerging suburban culture and its effect on the land can be seen as an appropriation of the previous descriptions given to wilderness. No longer does nature need to be conquered but rather suburban expansion and human impact on the environment are what must be curtailed.

⁹ Roland Barthes, pg. 38

¹⁰ Peter Blake, pg. 7-8

The 1975 exhibition *New Topographics: Photographs of a Man-Altered Landscape* signaled the beginning of a shift in landscape imagery away from the pristine wilderness of Ansel Adams to a more industrialized landscape image. The photographs in the exhibition were a reaction to a paradigm shift that was occurring within the larger society.¹¹ Greg Foster-Rice cites the “highway system, tract housing, declining industrial production, and the erosion of legible city centers as the new monuments to what cultural critic Fredric Jameson has called the “cultural logic of capitalism.”¹² The photographs made by Lewis Baltz and Robert Adams reflected this “cultural logic” while also serving as a critique of it. This critique is often peppered with irony as seen in the titles of Baltz’s images such as *Sunflower Condominiums During Construction, Looking West* (1978).¹³ Baltz makes reference to the cardinal directions etched into the plates of O’Sullivan and others as a means of directing the viewer to what is no longer present in the landscape and with what it has been replaced. Though well intentioned, both the Sierra Club’s and New Topographic’s attempts to reconcile human environmental impact were inherently flawed. Both focused almost exclusively on one side of the debate leaving very little room for any possible compromise. Cronon, referring again to the words of Thoreau writes, “*wildness* (as opposed to wilderness) can be found anywhere...in the cracks of a Manhattan sidewalk, even in the cells of our own bodies,” furthermore that

¹¹ Greg Foster-Rice, pg. 50

¹² Foster-Rice, pg. 50

¹³ Kelly Dennis, pg. 4

creating a place for ourselves on this planet allows us “no escape from manipulating and working and even killing some parts of nature to make our home.”¹⁴

My chosen medium – large format, B+W landscape photography – has a long history of documenting the changing landscape and serves as the perfect vehicle for expressing the dawn of a new natural age. My images capture this new nature by directing the lens toward both the human and non-human elements of a landscape. We are currently in a transitional period and I am exploring how various levels of interaction between the natural and synthetic spheres bare out this transition. I maintain a connection to history through the medium thus subverting landscape photography’s claim to documenting the permanence of the land. My photographs pick up where Baltz’s and Adams’ ended. Like the landscape photographers who came before me, I too use a large format camera as well as black and white film to render the landscape. This means of capturing photographs in a very traditional style serves as a connection to history in the work. It also serves as an equalizer of sorts. While in color the distinction between what *is* and *is not* natural may be obvious, black and white allows both natural and synthetic elements to be rendered as equally distorted – having been deprived of their respective color hues.

The images created by Baltz and Adams contain a particular sense of loss and nostalgia for the land that is being covered over by tract homes and industrial parks. While my images do contain a certain amount of nostalgia directly related to my

¹⁴ Cronon, pg. 89

working method, it is a different sort of nostalgia. Like all members of my generation – having been born in 1987 – I have no visual reference point outside photographs of a world without human structures. This means that the world as I have always known it is a world containing man-made objects thus the nature that I have always experienced is a mediated one. The image *Dam on the Muskegon River,*



Figure 2: Ethan Ross, *Dam on the Muskegon River, Ravenna, MI, 2013*

Ravenna, MI Fig. 2) depicts the only remaining evidence of a dam that once blocked the river's flow. Presumably, the dam provided power for a mill or perhaps electricity and water for nearby towns but has since been partially demolished. All that is left is a large concrete wall and run off channels. In much the same way that Ansel

Adams' photos of Half Dome show the monolith rising above the tree line as testament to eons

of geologic activity, the remnants of the concrete wall emerge out of the dark river like a rock formation eroded over millennia of the river's flow. As the structure rises toward the sky it seems to grow along with the trees surrounding it – in some places it is even difficult to discern what parts are tree trunks and which parts of are concrete. The dialectic between the human and non-human in this image provide a window into understanding the evolution of human influence on nature that is integral to the work. Once abandoned, the structures that we have built don't simply disappear, they become a part of the landscape in which they are built and are

engulfed by the natural world, in many ways transcending their original purpose. The remnants of mankind and continual transgression of nature by humans develops into the foundation of the new nature.

Now, perhaps more than any other time in human history, society lives in a highly mediated environment comprised of both synthetic and natural elements. Some parts of that composition are much more obvious than others. For instance, the highway system, which Blake described as “concrete spaghetti,”¹⁵ is more obviously constructed than are the drainage ditches or grassy and wooded medians on either side of the road. In the same way, the farmlands that make up much of Midwestern United States were once covered by trees and swamps that were clear-cut and drained to make room for fields of grain. When they are observed today, they are simply considered part of the natural landscape.

Humans have explored all but the most remote parts of the Earth and even those places that we haven't seen are being affected by other human-created environmental problems. The landscape aesthetic will continue to change as culture changes its perception of the land but we must first realize that the world we live in is the world we have created for ourselves. This body of work is an attempt to discern the varying levels of our constructed landscape and is an exploration of the landscape as a human/non-human hybrid.

¹⁵ Blake, pg. 30

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Ethan Ross Grad Thesis
Image List

01. Dam on the Muskegon River,
Ravenna, MI
30"x40"
Inkjet Print
2013
02. Towers, Grand Rapids, MI
30"x40"
Inkjet Print
2013
03. Dominican Sisters, Grand
Rapids, MI
30"x40"
Inkjet Print
2013
04. It's a Nice Place to Raise a
Family
30"x84"
Inkjet Print
2013
05. Windows and Mirrors
30"x40"
Inkjet Print
2013
06. Snack Shack, Saugatuck, MI
30"x40"
Inkjet Print
2013
07. No Outlet, Saugatuck, MI
30"x40"
Inkjet Print
2013
08. Hillside, Grand Rapids, MI
30"x40"
Inkjet Print
2014
09. WFWA, Fort Wayne, IN
30"x40"
Inkjet Print
2013
10. Johnny Appleseed, Fort Wayne,
IN
30"x40"
Inkjet Print
2013
11. Septic, Cannonsburg, MI
30"x40"
Inkjet Print
2013
12. Lake, Allendale, MI
30"x40"
Inkjet Print
2013























