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Mining the Land

Artists and the Wild West



James Turrell, *Roden Crater (Blue Sky)* (2009) © James Turrell. Photo credit: Florian Holzherr

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Think of the American West, and what comes to mind? The Rockies, the plains, the deserts or the coast? The frontier or the borderlands? Native tribes, mestizos, or Hispanic settlers? Colonial or environmental exploitation? Urbanization or deforestation? Paradise, or paradise lost?

Maybe all of these things, maybe none. I'll bet that, for many, their primary association with this vast and undefined territory is something like one of the images that Philip Morris has used since the 1950s to sell Marlboro cigarettes, which the artist Richard Prince has selectively re-photographed in his series "Cowboys" (1980-92). Ever since people began to conceive of The West as a *thing* (and what a thing!) it has been an aesthetic issue, imagined, disseminated, promoted, critiqued and undermined by image-makers.

The Promised Land

If you drive into Yosemite Valley from the south, one of the first things you encounter, emerging from a tunnel, is a roadside parking lot crowded with people jostling for space at a low wall. Beneath and beyond them, the magnificent panoply of Yosemite Valley composes itself as if in a painting. It has been guessed that *Tunnel View*—as the panorama from this vantage point is known—might be one of the most replicated images in America.

In the mid-19th century California was widely seen as the Promised Land, and Yosemite was its symbolic heart: a verdant and unspoiled country; a blank check waiting to be cashed. When the self-taught draftsman Thomas Ayres visited Yosemite in 1855 with the destination's first tourist promoter, James Mason Hutchings, an English-born writer and publisher, his mission was to make drawings that could be reproduced in Hutchings' magazine, marketing California to tourists and settlers. Despite the absence of a convenient parking lot, *Tunnel View*—or something close—was amongst Ayres' first drawings.



Albert Bierstadt, *Merced River* (1866). Courtesy The Metropolitan Museum of Art

By the time the painter Albert Bierstadt made his first expedition to Yosemite eight years later, along with fellow artists Virgil Williams and Enoch Wood Perry Jr, there were already two very rudimentary hotels— but the party elected to camp. The monumental paintings Bierstadt subsequently made, describing an Edenic landscape filled with grazing deer and waterfalls turned gold by the ecstatically setting sun, were sensations when exhibited back on the East Coast.

Artists, however, were not only implicated in the promotion and sale of the West, but also in its preservation. Carleton Watkins' photographs were included in a proposal for the safeguarding of Yosemite as California state land, forever freely accessible to its people. The watercolors of Thomas Moran and the photographs of William Henry Jackson were presented before Congress as evidence for the motion—which passed in 1872—to designate Yellowstone a National Park, the world's first. While Jackson's photography was defined by a sober, even scientific, dedication to accurately documenting

Yellowstone's terrain, Moran was bound by no such constraints. "I place no value upon literal transcripts from Nature," he wrote. "My general scope is not realistic; all my tendencies are toward idealization."



Richard Misrach, *San Geronio Pass, California* (1981) © Richard Misrach, courtesy Fraenkel Gallery, San Francisco

The contemporary West—especially the region I know best, Southern California—can be perplexingly hard to see. Often, I find myself driving through exurban low-density housing and strip malls clustered around highways, across flattish terrain that goes on for mile after mile, and the overriding impression is of moving through nothing. Views do not readily announce themselves, as they do in Yosemite, and the land seldom resolves into landscape. At human scale—that is, without boarding an airplane or hiking into the mountains—this part of the West is not easy to picture.

A Man-Altered Landscape

But there *are* pictures of this landscape, and if I try to recall in my mind's eye what the Inland Empire or the Mojave Desert looks like, for instance, I fall back on the photographs of Robert Adams or Ed Ruscha or Richard Misrach or John Divola. Adams was included along with two other influential California photographers, Lewis Baltz and Joe Deal, in the pivotal exhibition that pointed out a fresh direction for landscape photography in 1975: "[New Topographics](#)", held at George Eastman House in Rochester, New York. The [exhibition's](#) subtitle defined its parameters: "Photographs of a Man-Altered Landscape".



Joe Deal, *Hemet, California*, from the series: *The Fault Zone* (1979) © The Estate of Joe Deal, courtesy Robert Mann Gallery, New York

In their black and white pictures of California, Colorado and New Mexico, Adams, Baltz and Deal aligned themselves with 19th-century survey photographers such as Jackson and Timothy O'Sullivan, who saw in their medium a unique potential for realism and objectivity. The New Topographics artists embraced a position of neutrality that allowed for beauty and ugliness to coexist in one frame, and for geometric abstraction to inform compositions that were ostensibly documentary.

In their depictions of the American West, Adams, Baltz and Deal distanced themselves from two titans of the short-lived but long-shadowed Group f.64: Edward Weston and Ansel Adams. The latter, in particular, saw his photographs of pristine landscapes (including many of Yosemite and Yellowstone) as embodying ideal American values, especially during the years of the Second World War.



Robert Adams, *New tracts, west edge of Denver, Colorado, Lakewood, Colorado* (1973-74). Yale University Art Gallery

Adams' worldview was deeply influenced by New England Transcendentalism, especially the writing of Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau, and he ascribed a moral and religious value to the wilderness. He deplored the incursion of human development in the landscape and, emulating the achievements of Watkins and Moran before him, successfully lobbied members of Congress in the late 1930s to preserve Kings Canyon in the southern Sierras as a National Park.

It is hard to imagine such moral conviction emanating from the artistic milieu of Southern California in the 1970s. The gaze of the West Coast New Topographics photographers, as with many of their generation, was ambivalent, dispassionate and cool. One artist who the exhibition's curator, William Jenkins, said he regretted not including was Ed Ruscha, who was well known not only for his inscrutable paintings but also for his photography books, such as *Twentysix Gasoline Stations* (1963), *Some Los Angeles Apartments* (1965) and *Real Estate Opportunities* (1970). In these publications, black and white photographs are captioned with their location and nothing more; the pictures themselves are casual to the point of ineptitude. (In *Twentysix Gasoline Stations*, featuring gas stations along Route 66 which Ruscha regularly drove to visit his family in Oklahoma, it is not even clear whether the artist even stopped his car to shoot the photographs.)

Cowboy-Hatted and Mounted on Horseback

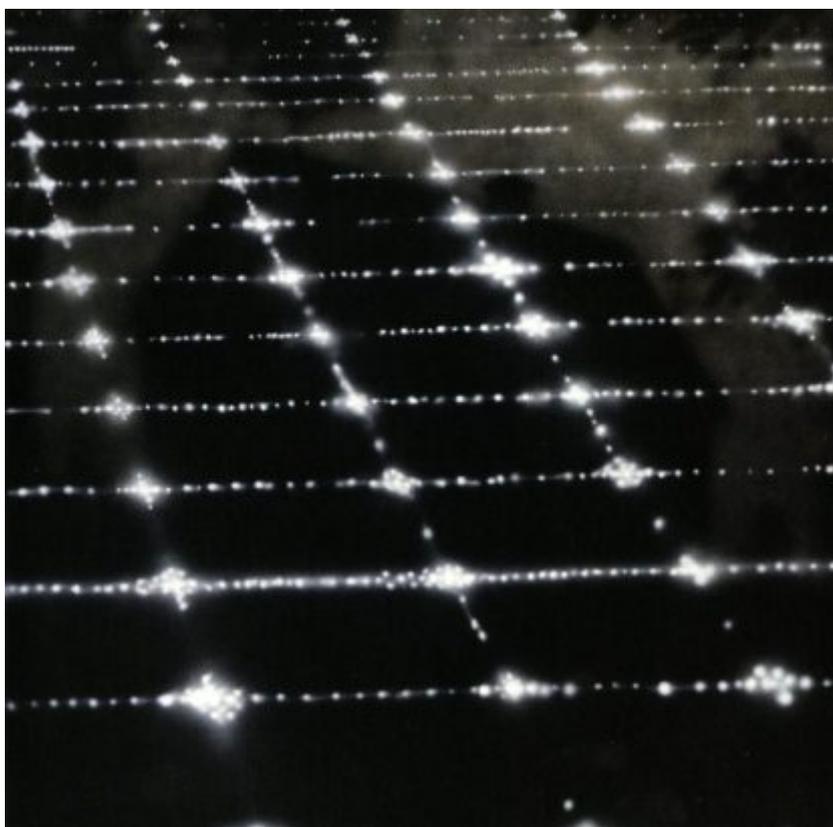
Much has been made of Ruscha's Oklahoman roots, and his retracing in 1956 of the route followed by Dustbowl migrants during the Great Depression 20 years earlier. Indeed, the artist himself has encouraged this narrative, as with the photograph he staged for a 1968 exhibition catalogue showing himself and his fellow Oklahoman, Joe Goode, cowboy-hatted and mounted on horseback.



From Ed Ruscha, *Twentysix Gasoline Stations* (1963) © Ed Ruscha. Courtesy of the artist and Gagolian

Since the 1970s Ruscha has spent much of his time not in Los Angeles, the city with which he is typically associated, but two-and-a-half hours east, at his property in the southern Mojave Desert, near Joshua Tree. Ruscha has bemoaned the fact that when he first started making this journey, the road passed by farms and white picket fences. Now, almost all of that is gone, replaced by the kinds of big box distribution centers and light industry that he described in his series “Course of Empire” (2005).

While he remains best known for deadpan early work such as *Every Building on the Sunset Strip* (1966) in which he surveys the contemporary SoCal urban landscape like a latter-day William Henry Jackson, in recent years Ruscha has grown closer to Ansel Adams’ dismay at the eradication of the Western wilderness.



Ed Ruscha, *Plots* (1986) © Ed Ruscha. Courtesy of the artist and Gagolian

Among Ruscha's most affecting paintings are his "City Lights" series, in which a grid of lights recedes against a jet-black ground, evoking the sublime panorama that air passengers enjoy of Greater Los Angeles as they descend into LAX at night. Entire books have been written about the imposition of the Cartesian grid onto the American landscape, in particular the West where boundless and seemingly unregulated vistas were sectioned first by surveyors and cartographers, then barbed wire fences, railroads, streets and telegraph lines, then by the individual plots of land sold to homesteaders and, more recently, tract housing developers.

Beyond sectioning landscape for profit and administrative control, the grid is also the primary way in which space is turned into images. Native peoples who occupied the West before the arrival of European settlers did not conceive of their environment as rectilinear, nor did they pictorialize it within rectilinear frames. The grid, from an ecological point of view, is an aberration.

In the 1960s and 1970s, a generation of artists emerged from the reductive tendencies of Minimalism—a movement that extensively theorized the grid—and adapted its forms and strategies to art made directly in the landscape, predominantly (though not exclusively) in the American West. In many respects, Land Art constituted a critique of Minimalism, so that when the grid appears, as it does for instance in important works by Walter De Maria or Michael Heizer, it does so ambivalently.

In De Maria's most famous work, *The Lightning Field* (1977), polished stainless-steel poles are arrayed over a New Mexico plateau in a one-mile by one-kilometer grid. Viewers wander amongst the poles, observing the changing effects of the light and (rare) incidents of lightning, which the poles are designed to attract.

The Lightning Field, which was itself plotted through an aerial survey, both ridicules the absurd imposition of the rationalizing grid onto the land, and dramatically enhances one's experience of moving through it in ways that are entirely unempirical, anti-rational. Paradoxically, by intervening into virgin landscape in ways that have been criticized by some as environmentally irresponsible, De Maria has ensured the protection and preservation of the site on which his artwork sits.

Works of Art That Were Designed to Be Seen From the Heavens

Other works made by De Maria and peers including Michael Heizer, Dennis Oppenheim, Robert Morris and Robert Smithson took inspiration directly from ancient and indigenous works of art that were designed to be seen from the heavens, such as the Nazca Lines in Peru.



Walter De Maria, *The Lightning Field* (1977) © The Estate of Walter De Maria. Photo credit: John Cliett. Courtesy Dia Art Foundation, New York

On the surface of El Mirage dry lake bed in California, Oppenheim inscribed a vast cross—resembling a cartographic inscription—in black asphalt, visible in its entirety only from the air. (The temporary mark was designed to be reabsorbed by the earth.) Through the work's title, he acknowledged not only ancient Native earthworks but also the history of forced removal of Native tribes: *Relocated Burial Ground* (1978).

Bring the Vast Space of the Desert Back Down to Human Scale

Perhaps more prevalent within Land Art, however, was the deliberate rejection of the grid, especially by female artists who objected to the exclusionary strictures of Minimalism. In Nancy Holt's *Sun Tunnels* (1973-6), for instance, four large concrete cylinders on the desert floor line up not with the points on a compass but with the rising and setting sun at the summer and winter solstices. Viewers can walk into the tunnels and look out at the night sky and the landscape through specially positioned apertures. Holt wrote of her desire "to bring the vast space of the desert back down to human scale".

James Turrell's *Roden Crater* project (1972-ongoing) in Arizona and Charles Ross' *Star Axis* (1971-ongoing) are two similarly megalithic projects designed, like *Sun Tunnels*, to direct a subject's gaze upwards to the heavens. All three largely eschew the right-angled verticals of Classical architecture, opting instead for rounded and pyramidal volumes that are redolent of non-Western and indigenous structures.



Georgia O'Keeffe, *Purple Hills Near Abiquiu* (1935). San Diego Museum of Art, USA © Artists Rights Society (ARS), NY

Throughout Modernism, artists have developed non-Euclidean visual languages to describe both the Western landscape and the cosmos. The painter Agnes Pelton was a member of the short-lived Transcendental Painting Group (1938-42) founded by Emil Bisttram and Raymond Jonson. In the 1930s Pelton made a remarkable series of desert paintings (she then lived near Palm Springs) that focus almost exclusively on parabolic, luminous abstract forms emerging from the night sky. A student of Buddhism and theosophy, she considered her paintings to be windows onto an inner realm.

Born just six years after Pelton, Georgia O'Keeffe painted the landscape around Taos, New Mexico, in a way that similarly seems to collapse the distinction between herself and the world, between her body and the landscape. Her biomorphic forms reflected her deeply held belief in the importance of living in and on the land she painted. Unlike Pelton, however, O'Keeffe remained devoted to surfaces rather than interiors—the desert soil, the textures of bones and flowers, and the smooth surfaces of the paintings themselves.

Pelton, O'Keeffe, and another famous desert artist, the notoriously reclusive Agnes Martin, all shared something of Ansel Adams' transcendentalism: a faith in individualism and self-reliance, a belief that humans are at their best when removed from society, fending for themselves and living close to the earth. Today, these precepts are weighed down by huge boulders of cliché and stereotype, but they tenaciously endure, remaining vital and true for many of the diverse people who choose to live, and create, in the great American West.