

THE UNIVERSITY OF CALGARY

"The Constructed View":

A Written Accompaniment to the Thesis Exhibition

by

David W. Hazel

A PAPER

**SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY OF GRADUATE STUDIES
IN PARTIAL FULFILMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE
DEGREE OF MASTER OF FINE ARTS**

DEPARTMENT OF ART

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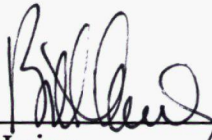


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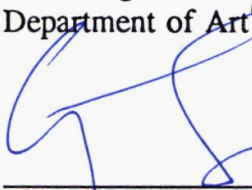
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Date 22 September 1992

ABSTRACT

This paper presents the history of western North American landscape photography as a series of culturally constructed views. I view my own work as the manifest extension of this process because it relies less on the actual experience of landscape and more on its cumulative cultural fabrication.

In the first three parts I have outlined the historic modes of representation constituting the subject of my work and the critical base that supports it. The final part of the paper deals with the growing environmental awareness within all contemporary western photographic landscape practice and its relevance within a fine-art context.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank the University of Calgary, the Alberta Art Foundation and the Association of Universities and Colleges of Canada for their support over the past two years.

I would also like to mention Clyde McConnell and Arthur Nishimura for their generosity and support as supervisors. Finally, my committee, friends and family with special thanks to Sandra Blackburn and Neil Callaghan.

DEDICATION

This paper and my thesis exhibition are dedicated to
Florence and Stanley Hazel.

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INTRODUCTION

The western North American landscape has always been a source of fascination and myth. My own experience of it has been primarily through popular culture, yet its representation by photographic landscape artists remains the most epic, interesting and evocative. In particular, primitive 19th-century views of the west have become a major influence on my own landscape photographs.

The production of my work during the course of the MFA program in Calgary has been linked to the postmodern phenomenon of the fabricated photographic subject. This is categorised by constructive, directorial and staged modes of production. Although landscape as photographic subject remains largely in the domain of the traditionally found view, I was no longer able to engage in the activity; as both landscape and the conventional modes of representing it were, for myself, exhausted.

The expanding critical base surrounding the medium basically consists of an established conservative, modernist paradigm and an aggressive postmodern deconstruction of it. From this conflict I was able to assimilate a working strategy consistent with my own fears, doubts and prejudices regarding the medium and its

representation of land. The great western American landscape, has in the lifetime of the medium, suffered considerable ecological damage. Part one of this paper deals with the early western survey photographers' view of the west, constructed largely from established painting modes and constructed for western expansionism that marked the decline of the wilderness. The second part charts the collapse of classic western landscape photography through increasingly sophisticated photographic discourse and technology, that created the elitist fine-art practice of Pictorialism. These events transformed landscape into a virtual backdrop. This position was reversed by the ascendancy of a *straight* modern style aligning the proposed integrity of photography to the integrity of nature, re-establishing a classic western landscape practice.

The final sections deal with my own and other contemporary landscape practice and considers the ways that photographic history, critical discourse and ecological concerns are shaping the genre.

I

In late September 1839 photography in the form of the daguerreotype was exported to America after its sensational introduction into Europe the year earlier. Although several negative/positive paper processes emerged around the time of Daguerre's discovery, all paled in comparison with the clarity of rendering the daguerreotype offered. The new medium was quickly assimilated into American culture, primarily as a mode of portraiture, requiring controlled studio conditions to achieve a commercially viable success rate. When the camera was taken outdoors, nature as subject was used in a secondary role as the slowness of the medium prevented photographers from rigorously exploring the active landscape. As the primitive photographic medium engaged in an urgent technical metamorphosis the painted representation of nature was enjoying a remarkable success.

Although Barbara Novak proposes scholarly investigation can "delimit the main activity of landscape painting in America from about 1830 to 1865",¹ an interest in landscape painting had been evolving since the turn of the century. This was reinforced by the arrival of minor English painters who carried with them an eclectic English romantic style derived from various European sources. European

influence had always exerted a compulsive power to American painters who often travelled to the main European artistic centres to "extend their talents and undergo a ritualistic initiation into the artists life".² Compared with the manicured landscape of Europe, America was rich in areas of wilderness although a growing industrialised base had already begun to deplete its vast resources.

The Pre-Raphaelite writings of Ruskin and Emerson's transcendentalism were adopted by painters proposing a democratic view of nature in which all things should be perceived and rendered equally to form a unified landscape vision. This democratic vision was already inherent in photographic representation although the medium lacked the aesthetic framework painting had historically acquired. America's first recognisable landscape movement in painting, the Hudson River School, was born out of a sophisticated cultural import grafted to a more utilitarian view of nature that was inclusive of science, religion and the cult of the "new". The American bias towards fact affected the continued use of the daguerreotype long after it was eclipsed by the wet collodion process in Europe. This new process was the most successful of the negative/positive types that unlike the daguerreotype could produce an unlimited number of prints from a single negative. As the economic ramifications of the process were realised in America its ascendancy enhanced an already thriving photographic industry.

The new process was less complex and more reliable than the daguerreotype making it easier to remove the operational base of photography out of the studio

and into the urban environment. With the public's increased interest in landscape painting, photographers began to realize the possible market for landscape photography. Owning a painting was financially impossible for most people who usually paid an entrance fee to view the major works of leading American painters like Church, Cole and Bierstadt. A landscape photograph, although lacking the status of painting, was affordable. Because of the civil war the genesis of serious American landscape photography was located on the West Coast, largely detached from the conflict and centred around the port of San Francisco. Despite its isolated position the city was "surprisingly cosmopolitan"³ and a strong photographic base was quickly established there, fuelled by the economics of the gold-rush.

The western topography was more expansive and intensely dramatic than the gentler eastern lands. In particular, the Yosemite valley recently discovered 150 miles east of the city, had attracted the attention of several photographers eager to supply views of its rumoured outstanding beauty. In 1861 Carleton E. Watkins, a commercial photographer, made the arduous trip to the valley laden with fragile equipment, which included a purpose-built mammoth plate camera using 20" x 18" glass plates. The camera's scale was ideally suited to the valley's grandeur and after overcoming enormous difficulties inherent in wet-plate field work, Watkins made a series of eloquent and dramatic images. Photographically, Watkins did not intuitively respond to the valley's obvious beauty, but carried into

the valley a cultural construct of nature derived from European Romantic painting modes. The claim by Barbara Novak that "Watkins particularly reinstated the Claudian sublime, by literally finding it"⁴ is valid as the valley was projected as a garden in the wilderness, imbued with an unruffled pastoral calm (see fig.1). Although Watkins' framing was unable to imbue the heightened sense of the sublime, that a painter like Church was able to instill into his images, they gave a truer picture of how the American wilderness actually appeared. When the images were exhibited in a New York gallery the eastern vision of the mythical western lands was verified.

In the east the most intensive outdoor photographic activity was instigated by the Mathew Brady Studio. Brady undertook to document the war and acquired the services of several workers to cover the conflict effectively. Fieldwork was "slow, exacting and bothersome"⁵ and to produce wet plates a worker required a wagon or tent to work in. Obviously unable to capture the swiftness of conflict, Brady's only available strategy was to document the aftermath of battle. In the course of the work, the photographers began to dwell on landscape, no matter how ravaged or corpse-laden. The primacy of composing an upside down, laterally reversed image was to form a coherent image from the chaos. This formalization of a chaotic view was the fundamental necessity for a landscape photographer. The pictures produced of the civil war were the broadest foundations of an American landscape tradition in the sense of overcoming the intense problems of

field work and establishing a logistic model for landscape practice.

During the Polk administration, the United States had been involved in the acquisition of land that increased the physical mass of the country by 1,204,000 square miles.⁶ The expansionist policy of Manifest Destiny had led to the annexation of Texas and pushed the southern boundary of the U.S. to the Rio Grande. War with Mexico had also brought California and New Mexico into the Union. The acquisition of Oregon up to the 49th parallel left an image of the country as an immense tract of land that ran west, clear through to the Pacific, ready to accept the rapidly growing population and supply the raw materials to fuel a similarly expanding industrial base. Tentative pre-war expeditions had already been sent west using painters to supply the major source of visual information and although photographers had been included in the parties they were only able to supply primitive and unclear records. The end of the civil war heralded a renewed ambition by both the Government and private sector to chart the western lands extensively and to locate areas of natural resources. This strategy would not only boost the economy but also stimulate a movement westward to consolidate the tentative settlements founded by the pioneers. Funding for a series of geographical and geological surveys was therefore made available. Both governmental surveys and railroad companies engaged experienced photographers fresh from civil war duties to document the progress of their ventures. The activities of this small band of photographers would build an enormous body of work which has been

ahistorically labelled the "golden age of American landscape photography".⁷

Early photographic survey work involved a battle with the elements, a harsh pursuit acted out in a land filled with monumental natural phenomena. European photographers, notably English and French, had extensively engaged in landscape photography before the Americans, travelling throughout Europe, the middle east and beyond on long-established routes. In the American west landscape photography remained a harsh odyssey of discovery, the antithesis of the decadent European activity of touring. Early survey images were constructed from raw materials; each print was a unique crafted artefact due to the primitive nature of photographic production. Without enlargement, the contact prints displayed both the rich detail and early technical blemishes contained in the negative. The work produced was used in a variety of cultural contexts, appealing to a variety of economic classes. While some prints languished in government archives other work was exhibited in salons, sold in lavish album form, and mass-produced in the increasingly popular stereograph format. Prints were also appropriated by engravers and lithographers, disseminating a specific view of landscape to an ever-increasing audience. The eastern American image of the west as a space of epic proportions was verified as photographic representation was, at the time, largely unchallenged as fact.

The surveys brought the photographers into direct confrontation with primitive land barely marked by centuries of sparse aboriginal habitation. They

encountered vast plains and deserts, treeless and arid, that were the antithesis of the romantic and painterly vision they carried into the west. Armed unwittingly with a modernist representational tool the minimal view they confronted was embellished with the sign of human habitation. Figure and artefact were used to impose scale and perspective on a view the camera's frame denied them. Timothy O'Sullivan in particular appeared to recognise this camera vision and showed a strong conceptual bias to allow the non-hierarchical idiosyncratic vision of the lens to be perceived within a landscape context (see fig.2). Although little is known of O'Sullivan's personal philosophy, the images have prompted Robert Adams to propose that O'Sullivan:

was our [America's] Cézanne, repeatedly creating pictures that were, while acknowledging the vacancy at the center (a Paradoxical symbol of the opacity of life), nonetheless compositions of perfect order and balance".⁸

Since the 1970s there has been a tendency by prominent photographic artists, historians and curators to attribute modernist fine-art qualities to 19th-century documentary landscape photographs. This has allowed their entry into photographic art history and the space of exhibition. These events have led to accusations by some postmodern critics that the fine-art photographic establishment had constructed a false aesthetic paradigm for the images, inflating both their artistic importance and commercial value. The debate is indicative of the problems created by a medium that has permeated all cultural boundaries. My own

landscape photographs are themselves constructed from the elliptical issues surrounding the medium. The main issues being photography's position within a fine-art context and the control of its defining parameters. For 19th-century landscape photography these parameters were shifted when the ever changing technology of photography was revolutionized with the introduction of the dry plate in 1878.⁹ The new gelatin silver emulsion did not require the elaborate equipment needed for the immediacy of the wet plate. It could be processed at a later stage, dispensing with the need for a mobile darkroom. This afforded a new freedom and speed to the landscape photographers' working practice. The major post-war surveys had ended the same year as the introduction of the dry plate, returning the photographers to the highly competitive field of mainstream commercial photography. The increased transportation routes over the west, coupled with the new plate technology, led to a proliferation of landscape photography that began to acquire a postcard aesthetic. Without the financial security of the survey work, the photographers had to conform to the new popular market forces that demanded picturesque tourist views. The elitist work they had been able to indulge in under government patronage was by then commercially redundant as photography began to consume all aspects of western nature and culture. The shift from apparent alchemy to increasingly streamlined technological processes also served to demystify the medium and project it into a broadening cultural base. The prevailing aesthetic issues photography had evoked since its

import into America began to erode the notion of a straight photographic landscape art fuelled by the ideology of European pictorialism.

II

America imported Pictorialism from Europe where a debate had raged for a number of decades regarding how photography should render nature. The idea of photographic pictorialism was defined by Peter Bunnell as:

A concept which originated in the latter part of the nineteenth century as an attempt to differentiate at least one approach to photography from others.¹⁰

An inherent and problematic decision all photographic artists face is, whether to retain or reject the verisimilitude the medium is capable of producing. For the early American landscape photographers this decision had not become an issue as the process of discovery they were involved in required the maximum recording ability of the medium. In Europe the landscape was familiar and contained a solid artistic tradition. Because of this, a debate quickly arose regarding the roles of photography and photographic art. Workers quickly realised that in order to gain status as photographic artists they should distance themselves from the applied photographic fields. Photography in the hands of an artist should be an interpretative process not a descriptive one. In 1896 Henry Peach Robinson, the founder of the Pictorialist movement, expressed his distrust of the representational power of the medium when he stated:

...now photography gives incomparably the greatest amount of power of minute imitation or copying with most ridiculous ease and it has lost the power of surprising us with its fidelity, for the detail of a photograph is one of the most ordinary objects of civilised life.¹¹

Paradoxically, when photography had fully realised what Ruskin had required from artists struggling to represent nature in its infinite detail, it was considered too easy and vulgar because it was machine-based. The *hand* of the artist was made invisible by the process. The pictorialists' strategy was to introduce and make visible the artist's physical intervention with the medium. Credibility as a photographic artist required an alignment with painting and sculpture achieved by slowing the speed of the medium through elaborate subject and image fabrication. High degrees of image sophistication were produced by complicated printing processes that denied the conventional surface of the photographic print. Most importantly, the mechanics of sharp focus were subverted to reject the detail that photography was capable of rendering. This critical transformation of the medium had removed it from the almost infinite detail of the daguerreotype to the multimedia-induced ambiguity of high Pictorialism. Representation was then transferred from fact to the aesthetically constructed views of romantic and idealist allegory (see fig.3).

Alfred Stieglitz, a frequent European visitor, introduced the concept of Pictorialism to America where it was quickly adopted as a movement that echoed the modernist notion of individual expression. Pictorialism had become a

cosmopolitan activity when the New York photo-session and showcase "Camera Work" magazine were instigated by Stieglitz at the turn of the century. Landscape in and around large urban centres served only as sets for pictorialists to engage in their elaborate activities. The immense western spaces, where the idea of a frontier was by now a myth, remained largely unaffected by the sophistication of this fin-de-siècle phenomenon. Although landscape photography was by then unfashionable, unelitist and reduced to a pedestrian activity by the dry plate, the myth of the west was imbedded enough into the national consciousness to rekindle a renewed interest in its vast spaces.

The fragmentation and demise of American Pictorialism came ironically from within the movement itself and more importantly from its founder, Stieglitz. Although dedicated to an autonomous photographic modernism, he had also championed modernist painting and sculpture imported from European sources. From within such works he had divined a growing concern for formalist aesthetics and a rejection of Romantic and Idealist modes of expression. While rigorously supporting pictorialist artists such as Clarence White and Edward Steichen, his own work began to display a form of picture-making that contained a less flamboyant use of the medium. European influences, notably post-impressionism, would eventually turn him against the very strategies that he earlier encouraged, steering American photography towards a *straight* aesthetic discipline. By sanctioning the camera's verisimilitude he "explored the straight photograph's

internal and metaphorical possibilities" to which he attached the term "Equivalents".¹²

This process attached a personal metaphorical reading to the straight photograph that was also perceived in the first landscape photographs, except that then, all meanings were pantheistically centred. In the increasingly pluralistic and modern society of the early twentieth-century America, meanings attached to nature went beyond a singular reading. The notion that a level of artistic sophistication now existed that could read a straight photograph in such a perverse way, generated a renewed enthusiasm for the medium as an autonomous and authoritative modern fine-art practice.

The deepening influence of European modernism and the notion of the avant-garde with its sense of purpose began to erode a pictorialist practice that was linked to a more genteel time. In his plea for straight photography, Sadakichi Hartmann directed photographic artists to:

Rely on your camera, on your eye, on your good taste and your knowledge of composition, consider every fluctuation of color, light and shade, study lines and values and space division, patiently wait until the scene or object of your pictures vision reveals itself in its supremest moment of beauty.¹³

This photographic philosophy was gradually digested into the medium and became the "correct" strategy for over half a century. Photographers discarding the pictorialist mode and artists new to the medium adopted the purism proffered by the pictorialist critique. What Hartmann had expounded was to become known as

the process of previsualisation used by many *straight* western landscape photographers including Edward Weston, Ansel Adams and the Buddhist influenced Minor White. The Previsualisation of a sharp landscape image on a large ground-glass camera screen created a conceptual link with the first western landscape photographers in the quest for revealment and form. It also explained succinctly their working methods as they set up their cumbersome equipment and waited for hours for the right wind velocity and light that would allow every detail to be clearly rendered in the emulsion. The western spaces which seemed inappropriate to the intimacies of a pictorialist aesthetic began to attract landscape photographers carrying a renewed enthusiasm for a medium being reinstated as a method of authoritative representation.

The western lands, no longer a frontier or true great wilderness, contained a topography that acted as a lure to an American society who viewed nature as an increasingly recreational resource. The landscape was undergoing a continuing process of categorisation that divided it into complex economic and social structures. Land that conformed to the romantic notion of the sublime was more likely to survive the growing ravages of industrialisation. This idea of a sublime landscape still remained foremost in the popular view of nature and beauty as the growing infrastructure and mobilisation of America allowed greater physical access to a landscape primarily experienced in paintings and photographs. The representation of nature, abandoned by artists increasingly fascinated by urban

newness, had become a popular amateur activity centred around the picturesque. Although technological advances satisfied the growing demand for a cheaper, portable and more convenient photography, they seemed inappropriate as a tool to reveal the rich and infinitely detailed landscape.

The new miniaturised photographic technology was even initially used by a young Ansel Adams, who was later to become the most extolled American landscape photographer. Adams' photographic philosophy has become the paradigm for a still vibrant and modern *straight* photographic practice that remains riddled with paradoxes. He constructed a practice founded upon Stieglitz's plea for a photographic art that embraced the brutal directness of the medium. The "view" camera, a large and unwieldy tool used by the early survey photographers, became an elitist and thoroughly unmodern instrument through which he could reveal the virtues of a *straight* vision. Adams, however, represented perfectly the continuing dilemma regarding photography's fragile position within a fine-art context. Lacking the cosmopolitan and intellectual base from which Stieglitz operated, Adams appropriated a modernist position which he adapted to suite his particular technical approach to landscape photography. This became a stance from which he never deviated during his long career. Dismissing Pictorialism he stated:

I detested the common pictorial photography that was in vogue and also questioned the more sophisticated work of some San Francisco photographers because it clung to those pictorial skirts. There was nothing I

responded to in this mannered style of photography.¹⁴

His vision of a photography autonomous from the influences of painting and unsullied by overt manipulative techniques was naively utopian. Geologically detached from the radical European formalist avant-garde that was experimenting with a variety of manipulative photographic techniques such as collage and montage, Adams, Edward Weston, and the other west coast modernists explored a rigorous *straight* approach to landscape that largely protected it from the excesses that Surrealist and Constructivist photography was undergoing. The result was a distinctly western Romanticism that reaffirmed and re-established an American classic landscape practice. While extolling the virtues of straight photography their images were produced using highly complex and expressive printmaking techniques. These were rendered in the smooth emulsion of the photographic paper and therefore seamlessly concealed within the monochromatic representation. Ansel Adams' The Tetons and Snake River, Wyoming, 1941 (fig.4) displays the dramatic treatment given to western views with an accentuation of tonal values usually found in the 19th-century paintings of Moran and landscapes of the pictorialist, Edward Steichen.

In his 1940s photographs of the south-western Sonoran Desert, Frederick Sommer realised the limits of the *straight* photographic ideal. The territory of artist as photographer was fully explored by Sommer who instilled a conceptual vision and rigour to his photographs, reducing the landscape to a non-hierarchical

and unemotive grid (see fig.5). This was the physical limit to Stieglitz's *straight* photographic philosophy and later provided the conceptual link to a 1970s minimalist photographic landscape art. This austere view of land would in turn lead to an ecological critique by a new wave of photographic landscape artists. They confronted Adams' romantically enhanced view of the American landscape as Edenic myth which Charles Sandford cites as "a narcissistic symbol of conservative retrenchment",¹⁵ proposing a new image of the American west as nature under seige.

III

The New Topographic school that emerged in the 1970s was the first serious alternative to an established western landscape practice personified by Ansel Adams, who was at that time recognized as the authoritative vision of western America. Although for sixty years Adams' catalogue of images selectively represented the west as a series of sublime uninhabited spaces, the landscape itself had drastically changed. The modernist *straight* photographic ideology was the basic tool engaged to image what they termed the "man-altered" west. Once-pristine wilderness had become the site of military ranges, industrial wastelands, agricultural and urban developments made possible by sophisticated water management. A growing highway network had made once remote terrain more accessible and inevitably the human mark had been left on even the remotest desert basin or mountain peak. It was in that disturbed area where nature and culture confront each other the New Topographics photographed. They lived in and perceived the west as a totally different space offered by Adams and his contemporaries.

The formalism that had dominated much of modernist photography was heightened by the group's alignment with late minimalist-conceptualist painting and

sculptural concerns. This seems contrary to William Jenkins' statement that viewed the group's central purpose as an investigation into what it means to produce an objective document.¹⁶ Certain romantic painting devices, the most common being the strong foreground used by the early landscape photographers to create deep space were also appropriated. This signified a concern for a new stylist hybrid rather than an ecological critique achieved by a neutral vision. Their vision was in fact as expressive and narrow as Adams' yet the masks of ecological concern and a forced neutrality proved effective in disguising their contribution to an ongoing concern to align photography with other media aesthetics and again establish the medium as a credible and authoritative fine-art practice.

The activity of the group coincided with and contributed to, an increased market interest in fine-art photography stimulated by the medium's integration with other media. An early 1970s "photography boom" had developed that not only raised photography's profile as a credible medium but increased academic and curatorial interest. Central to this activity were the two powerful genres of landscape, documentary and the growing connoisseurship for vintage prints. The initial energetic market for photographs, however, slowly began to wane as the decade ended. Although academic interest was sustained, the sales needed to continue vibrant growth began to diminish. Following the market crash of the 1981 season the demand for modern photography plummeted as photographic galleries diversified or closed. Carol Squires suggests the boom was "built on an

armature of pictures too weak to withstand the pressures of either intelligent scrutiny or the marketplace".¹⁷ In a historical context, fine-art photographs could never sustain a stable market position because they were always financially suspect as art objects. The medium has always been resuscitated by a series of revivals linked closely to favourable economic climates and its stylistic proximity to the more prestigious painting and sculpture.

Most landscape photographs had always been contained within a small monochromatic image that was either a contact print or moderate enlargement subconsciously reflecting the medium's marginal cultural position. The early mammoth plates of Muybridge and Watkins seemed the only examples of an exuberant celebration of the genre. As modernist photography progressed into the late '70s "an aura of banality and redundancy began to permeate photography exhibitions".¹⁸ The ascendant large scale expressionist painting eclipsing late minimalism began to influence a new generation of photographers interested in transforming the medium into a larger and more assertive mode. Younger artists interested in the representational authority of the medium began to produce large-scale colour works sharing none of historical lineage and craft of established fine-art photographic practice. The integrity and aesthetics of the print were exchanged for huge photolab enlargements more appropriate to advertising and other industrial photographic applications. More significantly, the traditional search for the subject in landscape and documentary photography was being replaced by a

desire to stage, alter or appropriate the subject. The precedents of this strategy can be located in surrealist photography, the appropriated pop imagery of Rauschenberg and Warhol and the photographic documentations of ephemeral activities such as performance, land and installation art. Photography was beginning to evolve as a multi-functional artists' tool; its role in fine-art practice began to acquire less defined parameters. This marked its move from the periphery to the core of fine-art practice.

In the late 1970s, there seemed little interest surrounding the phenomenon of fabrication as photographic criticism was firmly locked into modernist issues. However, in 1980 an exhibition was held at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art entitled Fabricated to be Photographed. The show's curator, Van Deren Coke, had recognised and legitimised the growing number of photographic artists who were abandoning the "found" subject in favour of a constructed one. Although fabrication of the photographic subject had been a constant activity throughout the medium's history, it seemed appropriate then to acknowledge the rapid acceleration of the practice. Simultaneously, artists involved in the growing post-modern debate began producing photographic works exclusively fabricated or appropriated from existing images. The romantic notion of roaming the environment with camera in hand, waiting for a picture to present itself in a 'revelatory' instant, was replaced by a need for total control and articulation of the subject.

Landscape photographers remained detached from these events as they dealt with complex urban cultural problems that had ironically been generated by the medium's ubiquity and influence. There still remained a strong late-modernist landscape practice that resisted any form of intervention other than passive observation through the camera's viewfinder. While postmodernist photographers constructed the subject to gain an authoritative and explicit power to their ideological predilections, landscape photography remained locked into a search for a view that primarily conformed with the late-minimalist aesthetic of rigorous formalism. This particular cultural construction was neatly packaged, carried into the landscape like a camera and unfolded at a specific moment.

The fabric of nature remained an autonomous and passive photographic subject resisting physical intervention. Fabrication or alteration of the subject would deny a direct spiritual association with land and propose the alternative postmodern condition in which it seems "impossible to claim in this day and age that one can have a direct unmediated experience of the world".¹⁹

The new photographic dialogue began to clearly articulate the problems I encountered when making conventional landscape photographs. My experience of the western North American landscape had already been shaped by generations of landscape photographers, film-makers and the advertising media. The terrain had already been claimed and belonged to photographic history. The history of photography underwent expansive construction during the 1970s boom and gained

a "heightened prestige" that attracted an increasingly diverse critical base. Barthes, Derrida, Sontag and others wrote about the medium in a broader cultural context, inducing a strong anti-modernist argument that gave credence to the new wave of postmodern artists. As photography became central to postmodernist art practice it soon acquired a high critical and market profile that swept modernist landscape and documentary photography into the margins of the medium. The linguistic philosophy of Post-Structuralism was appropriated into the visual arts and illustrated by photography, it became a deconstructive tool, splitting the medium into modernist and postmodernist camps.

With a heavy Marxist-Feminist slant certain postmodern critics began an assault of modernist photographic practice and history. This assault was particularly vicious. Collectors, curators and historians were attacked for their male-orientated canonization of certain photographers and the alleged constructed aesthetization of the medium. The problem was, and still is, photography's limitless use within our culture and its ability to transcend how it is critically defined. The obvious contextual boundaries that painting and sculpture had acquired within our society were harder to impose on the ubiquitous photographic image. The main accusation that the photographic establishment had fabricated a fine-art aura for many historic photographs taken initially as documents, was particularly vehement. Their anger was intensified by the failure of an earlier prediction by Walter Benjamin in his seminal essay of 1936, Art in the Age of

Mechanical Reproduction, that photography would remove the aura of the art object by the process of infinite replication.²¹ Secondly, seminal postmodern works like the photographic appropriations of Sherry Levine intending to critique the notions of authorship, originality, style and genius were immediately consumed into the market acquiring the qualities of the work they critiqued. They were also seamlessly assimilated into photographic art history and exhibited as neo avant-garde works chronologically tagged onto modernist history. The postmodern critics' utopian vision of a socially healing, democratic medium autonomous from the conservative and capitalist evils of the traditional art market, seems as naive as the photographic purism expounded by modernist critics. The critical tribalism that continues to engulf the medium is for me ineffectual, as both systems of critique seek to establish a concrete paradigm for fine-art photography.

By using a strategy of inclusion, my work is stimulated by and transcends both positions within the narrow framework of landscape. The historical photographic landscape models, created by a discourse that had been largely hermetic, appeared to me increasingly inappropriate and indulgent when confronted with a landscape that had become a ruin during the timespan of the medium. Although I remained attracted to the appearance of historical western landscape styles, I grew increasingly sceptical of the doctrines that had accompanied them. A strategy for the acceptance of this discord seemed an appropriate way to generate landscape photographs. My experience of nature had become a complex,

fragmented and often dissonant one, devoid of a lucid philosophical underpinning. The fabrication of landscape models in the studio created an arena in which I could construct views transcending the process of exclusion associated with a photographic landscape art functioning within narrow stylistic and philosophical parameters since the chastisement of Pictorialism. In my opinion, Pictorialism merely accentuated and clearly defined the reciprocal relationship between photography and painting.

Through the medium's representational authority, modernist landscape photographers remain subordinate to the illusion of fact that functions as a camouflage to their conceptual concerns. By constructing landscape and abandoning any objective pretext in the work I can present an image of nature that fully reveals the processes involved in its production. The passive encounter of camera and land is transformed from the mental mark-making activity of gazing to one that becomes physical. This strategy allows an overview of photographic landscape history contained within a singular conceptual base. Views of Romanticism, Pictorialism and Modernism can be evoked in a non-hierarchical and holistic way. The material activities of drawing and sculpture are used to construct the views acting as subservient and ephemeral processes, reinforcing the primacy of the photographic image. The traditional role of the photograph as a notational aid or primary source in painting and sculpture is reversed; the construct only retaining its validity until it is photographed. The use of water as

the primary drawing material intentionally establishes a hierarchy for the photographic activity as the subject is volatile, allowing the camera to engage it in a time-based mode. Photographic notions of the decisive moment and the snapshot are engaged as the installation literally evaporates before the camera, simulating the fleeting aspects of landscape. In the fabricated landscape work of artists Richard Long and Robert Smithson the photograph was evidence of a remote earthwork or a record of a unique gallery installation; its role was subservient. Richard Long's photograph from his piece Thirty Seven Campfires, Mexico, 1987 (fig.6) is an adequate photographic document of his presence in the landscape. Although great care has been taken to create a formal image structure conducive to his gallery installations, the photographic quality conforms to the conceptual-minimalist strategy of producing *cool* machine-grade prints that primarily transmit information. Again, by a process of reversal, my work assigns greater value to the photographic image rather than the installation. The camera is used to change, rather than document the construction. At the precise point of its exchange into a two-dimensional representation the construction is rendered void. The minimalist photographic strategy of affirmation is replaced by a transformatory one.

Because of the fabricated nature of the work, the viewer is not confronted by an image that directs the imagination to a specific time and location. Instead there is a presentation of an ambiguous space that reveals both the landscape and

photographic construct. Sharp focus, differential focus, image grain, the expansion and contraction of tonal scales, are all employed to subvert the viewer's impulse to ignore and travel beyond the materiality of the photograph. The main activity of viewing becomes contained within the image. Rather than an illusionary window on nature the image becomes a space in which the viewer affirms an experience of nature through culturally constructed representations.

The myth of objectivity that has obsessed modernist landscape movements is replaced by the desire to objectify the photograph. The passivity of viewing an image of actual landscape is exchanged for increased participation in decoding the constructed image. Loss of focus changes our perception in defining space. Through signification, crude gestural lines, blobs and splotches of tonality gain currency as landscape. They are assigned meaning by the viewers' need to imbue them with acquired and natural landscape experiences. Using our cultural belief in the photograph, integral to our experience of the world, I am able to photograph small studio landscape installations and drawings to evoke phantoms of nature. As in theatre, the viewer is suspended between illusion and disbelief. The problems faced by landscape photographers whose concerns for objectivity and truth that have been constructed from elaborate and subjective personal credos, are dissolved. For me there are no absolutes regarding how photography should render matter. The subject is not confined to the search for a landscape which conforms to a narrow set of expectations. The fabricated landscape can be an

appropriation of a specific historical view, a landscape icon or any other cultural representation of landscape that mediates our visual link with nature.

My increasing desire to objectify the photograph has led me to reject the rectangular format traditionally designated with the photographic terms of "portrait" when vertical and "landscape" when horizontal. In 17th-century Europe the idea of nature as a horizontal space had replaced the medieval concept of a vertical cosmos with a "flat non-rotary segment of nature called landscape".²² The horizontal rectangle has become culturally acceptable, a neutral container for the majority of photographic landscape images. Abigail Solomon-Godeau links the rectangle with economic constraints noting:

...the Photographer's aspirations to formal invention, individual expression, and signatural style are perpetually circumscribed by industrial decisions. Indeed the very size and shape of the photographic image are the result of such decisions.²³

Neither a natural container of the circular projection of the lens or reflection of human vision, the rectangle remains as constant and unobtrusive as the form that carries written text. My use of the oval, arch and in particular the circle, all embraced in 19th-century work, seeks to activate the images frame, emblematically accentuating the representational nature of the photograph and its fabrication. More importantly, they act as signs whose significance shifts in relation to their content and how they are contained. This containment in the form of frames augments the physical objectification of the work. Mounted, matted and glazed,

the images are archivally encased in sombre wooden museum frames that recall the traditional presentational authority found in the space of exhibition. The structure of the work could readily be identified with the postmodern devices of masking, unmasking and pastiche used to deconstruct the photographic modernist values of veracity, authorship, aesthetics and commodification. Indeed, it would be simple to adopt what Andy Grundberg perceives as the "pessimistic tenets of Post-modernism".²⁴ The work in fact acknowledges many of the shortcomings of current modernist landscape work but also rejects the anti-modernist argument that the medium has acquired a fine-art aesthetic it inherently lacks. If one ignores its representational difficulties, the photographic medium as a mark-making process has the capacity to achieve the ocular beauty of other fine-art media. Most postmodern photographic work eschews the high degree of image sophistication the medium can achieve, choosing instead the adequate, unexpressive industrial qualities of the print to "lay bare the ideology of representation".²⁵ Only a few postmodern artists, notably Joel-Peter Witkin and the Starn Twins, have self-consciously incorporated the physical beauty photographic processes are capable of rendering. Both evoke the romantic and pictorialist alchemy of 19th-century imagemaking, employing image-destruction devices to simulate the patina of vintage daguerreotypes and prints (see fig.7). The result transgresses both modern and postmodern critical territories, ignoring the sanctity of the *straight* print and critique of cultural aesthetic values. I have also adopted this middle-

ground by using the sombre tonality and toner induced colouration associated with the essential 19th-century romantic landscape images. This particular pastiche however, is constructed to affirm and celebrate the aura of the photographic object.

In this context the landscapes deal with a nostalgia for pristine wilderness using the alluring iconic forms of the waterfall, mountain and seashore. Present and future ecological scenarios are also evoked, mirroring the environmental situations we are all embroiled in. The celebratory and terrible romantic vision of the sublime in both celebrated and subverted into an elegiac role. In Emission Field III (fig.8), the classic 19th-century domed-top format usually reserved for tranquil scenes is used to contain a destructive image reminiscent of the infamous oilwell fires recently caused by Iraq. I have employed the once-decorative dome to accentuate the upwards emission. This is an ongoing strategy to use various image formats and framing to integrate with the constructed narratives of the images.

IV

Issues surrounding the ecology of western America that were tentatively introduced by the New Topographics now form the core of western landscape photography. Initially, there was resistance to the new critical reasoning that was reshaping the medium. As the assault on modernism continued unabated, landscape photography shifted in response to the pressures of the debate. The myth or indeed dream of a practice that could evade the cultural complexities being assigned to photographic representation was rapidly fading. A landscape philosophy that aspired to the unemotional communication of fact, was gradually replaced by one acknowledging the possibility of landscape as both symbol and metaphor.

The methods used by various landscape photographers for dealing with the changes were diverse. By adopting an increasingly fervent ecological position some photographers hoped to divert critical attention from a late modernist vision of landscape they could not abandon. Their views shifted from general urban sprawl to the specifics of nuclear dunes, missile silos and areas of overt pollution. For others, a more chaotic subject was sought that resisted conforming to a late modernist aesthetic like the architectural patterning of tract housing and industrial

parkland encroaching on a minimal western landscape. The urban garbage dump was a subject well-suited to this purpose. Lewis Baltz, perhaps the most rigid formalist in the group, began to switch his attention from the heavy building construction sites of his early work to the ragged illegal dumping grounds surrounding all large cities. In No.55 San Quentin Point, 1986 (fig.9), Baltz uses an almost forensic style of imaging to portray environmental abuse in microcosm, his large-format camera revealing candidly the clandestine environment crimes we generally drive by. The most sensitive reconstruction of landscape art however, could be discerned in the work of Robert Adams. Moving from the edges of suburbia to a more desolate location, he began to reconstruct the hierarchy of his images in favour of the trees, rocks and earth that constitute natural landscape. This culminated in the bookwork Los Angeles Spring. Adams used the ravaged trees in the city's outskirts to symbolise how nature can endure the most extreme abuses of urbanism (see fig. 10). In a statement as mournful and romantic as his images, Adams notes that:

...even now we can almost extrapolate an Eden from what has lasted - from the architecture of old eucalyptus trunks, for example, and from the astringent perfume of the tree's flowers as it blends with the sweetness of orange blossoms.²⁶

The image structure conformed strongly with the Claudian romantic model that had informed the 19th-century photographers but the tranquil garden had been replaced by a smog-shrouded landscape bearing the scars and debris of intensive urbanism.

The radical stylistic rendering of landscape projected as ruin became a strong influence to other photographers engaged in western landscape photography. To comment on ecological matters, John Pfahl began to use the juxtaposition of power plants framed within a colourfully picturesque and romantic setting (see fig.11). Pfahl replaces the optimism of early survey photographers who embraced the ideals of industrial pastoralism and the technological sublime within their photographs with irony. Richard Misrach also began to view the land in the same way with a series of large, sumptuous colour photographs of the western desert that seem at first glance the established camera practice of commercial landscape photography. Prolonged viewing of the images however, reveals discreet traces of power lines, roads, dune buggy tracks and dumped roadside garbage usually avoided by commercial views. Pfahl's and Misrach's subtly ironic picturesque studies unfortunately lacked the emotional rawness of Robert Adams' sombre and elegiac imagery and are as ultimately attractive and consumable as the images they mask. The strategy to comment on the misuse of the land by the subversion of idealised, pictorial space is a seductive one. However, by addressing the problem in such a specious way, Leo Marx's view that "the machine's sudden entrance into the garden presents a problem that ultimately belongs not to art but to politics"²⁷ raises many complex questions regarding landscape photography's new role as environmental watchdog. As a growing number of photographers scour the west for the once largely ignored sites of wanton destruction, a caustic critical base is

simultaneously developing to deal with the photographer's methods and intentions. For example, Deborah Bright views the new environmental photographers with suspicion, stating "the ongoing resistance to using narrative captions or text with their images has inhibited the effectiveness of photographers at getting their messages across".²⁸ She also criticizes the photo-artists who "claim to purposely court "visual ambiguity", which, in light of the urgency of the issues at hand, seems perversely irresponsible".²⁹

The mix of concerned reportorial investigation and fine-art aesthetics to communicate the ecological despair of western America, although well meaning, seems discursive when a prolonged and saturated environmental debate situated outside a fine-art context has failed to engender any real solutions or political initiatives. The paradoxes involved in an environmental critique mediated by aesthetics which is limited to the spaces of exhibition and artist book are obvious. These are further aggravated by the toxicity and ecological damage caused by the manufacture, use and disposal of photographic materials employed to produce environmentally concerned work. This particular issue remains virtually ignored in the current dialogue that surrounds the medium because it threatens the entire role of landscape photography.

Because of these contradictions, my work relinquishes the illusion of fact and burden of overt political positions now being established in mainstream landscape photography. A sufficiency of meaning is instead directed within the

cultural territory and understanding of art. The proposed translucency of the medium is exchanged to construct a more cultural relationship with nature that is increasingly detached, fragmented and distorted. In a sense it is strongly linked to the pictorialism of a century past with a "withdrawal from the phenomena of texture, weight and space",³⁰ by again severing representational links with the natural world beyond art.

CONCLUSION

There was a time when art actually prompted political decisions in the west. Thomas Morans' epic paintings and Carelton E. Watkins' equally eloquent photographic studies of nineteenth century unspoilt wilderness promoted a political desire to conserve important areas of land for posterity. Although still common, the celebration of nature through art is becoming an increasingly dubious practice. The subtleties of fine-art applied to a strategy to promote environmental awareness now seems futile in the face of the ecological problems occurring at an increasingly alarming rate, and our inability to address them in an adequate political way. The complexities and choices inherent in the post-modern age assures a lack of focus that enhances the decline of nature as we generally perceive it. Surprisingly, the culturally constructed view of nature as the "picturesque" remains a strong motif of how we continue to perceive and judge landscape.

To be involved in the production of photographic landscape art involves important choices of how to represent nature and for what motives. The notions of discovery and harmony have all but evaporated leaving a sense of individual helplessness as the paradoxes of living in our culture erode the ecosystem. A major land artist, Richard Long, takes a brutally damaging jet journey across the

world to erect a circle of stones that he then photographs and dismantles, claiming an environmental sensitivity and *spiritual* relationship with the land. Another photographic artist, probably the most poetic and nostalgic writer on the western landscape, publishes many books; contributing to the clear-cut, burn and the other tree abuse he bemoans in his images and texts. Our fine arts, like our western culture, are becoming increasingly decadent, involved in the recycling process of post-modernism in order to preserve their own infrastructure. My own photographic work becomes part of this process, no longer reflecting upon nature but on the medium's cumulative history. The construction of my landscapes therefore rely less on the physicality of nature and more on its cultural fabrication. It would be pleasing to imagine that the subtlety of my work could engender some response beyond the space it inhabits. Yet my own cynicism regarding the ability of art to reach beyond the territory it occupies within our culture, makes this notion fanciful.

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FIGURE 1



FIGURE 2



FIGURE 3



FIGURE 4

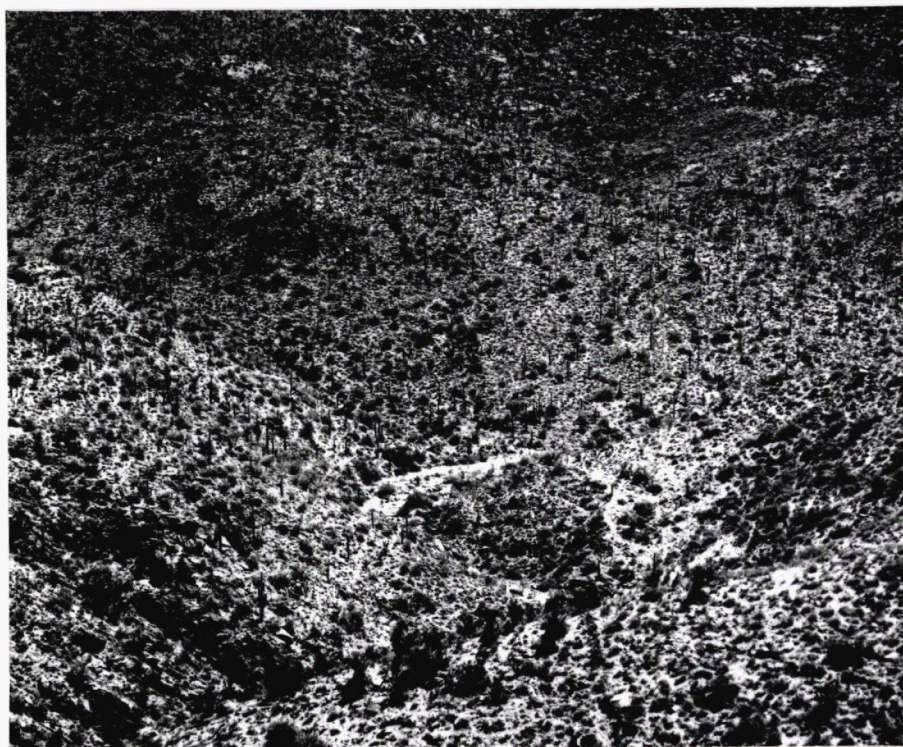


FIGURE 5



FIGURE 6



FIGURE 7

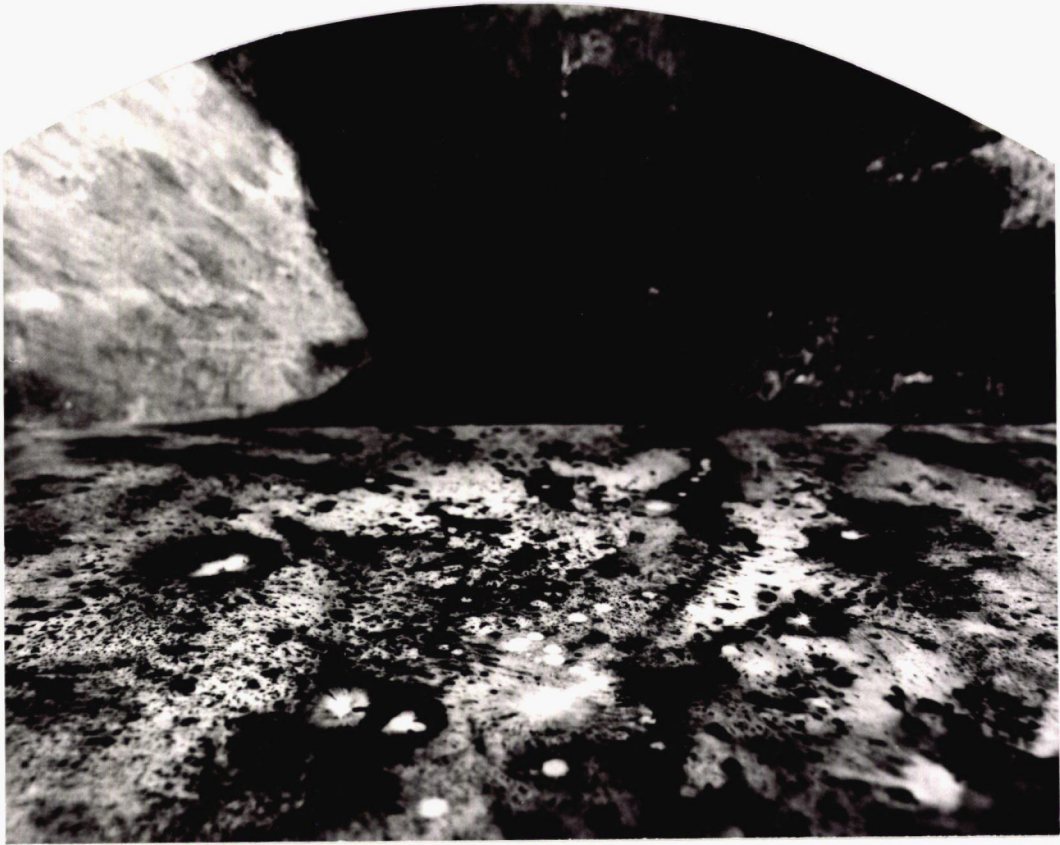


FIGURE 8



FIGURE 9



FIGURE 10



FIGURE 11

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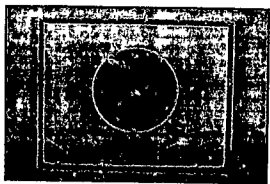
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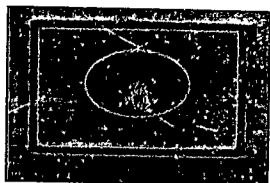
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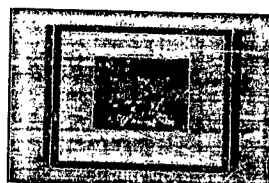
Pass I
Toned gelatin silver print
33" x 42" 1.

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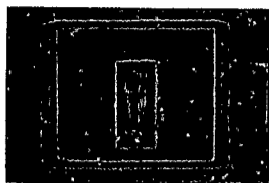
Gulf II
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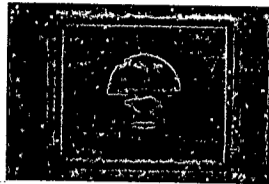
Drying Bed II
Toned gelatin silver print
18" x 21" 3.

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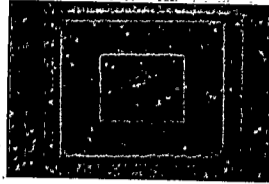
Fall II
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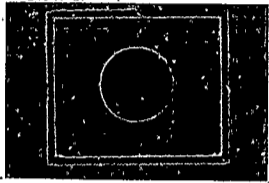
Crater
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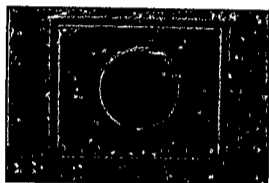
Channel
Toned gelatin silver print
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Storm Pool I
Toned gelatin silver print
21" x 25" 7.

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Visual Field
Toned gelatin silver print
23" x 27" 8.

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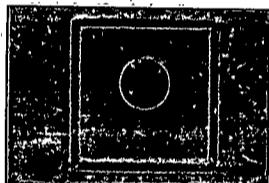
Fumarole
Toned gelatin silver print
33" x 42" 9.

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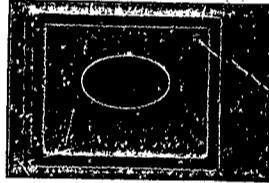
Afterglow
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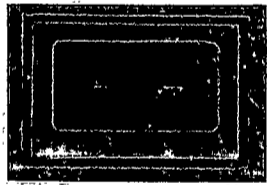
Seapool
Toned gelatin silver print
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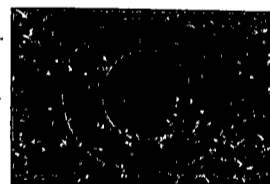
Spiritual Path II
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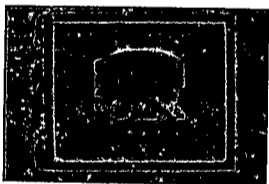
Double Golden Emission
Toned gelatin silver print
15" x 23" 13.

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Storm Pool III
Toned gelatin silver print
10" circle 14.

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Emission Field III
Toned gelatin silver print
18" x 21" 15.

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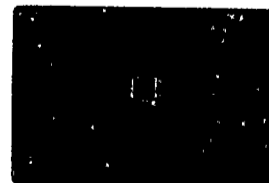
Fault
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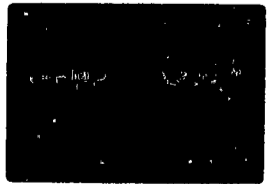
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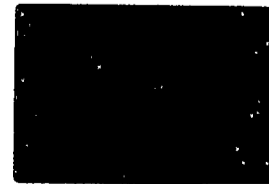
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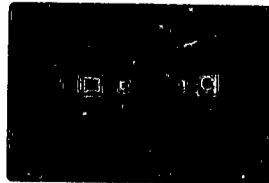
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