

# View Finder:

## Landscape and Leisure in the Collection

Photography plays a vital role in our understanding of the outdoors, allowing us to view natural spaces without being physically present in them. Parks play a similar role, as they provide institutional access points and infrastructure into wild, natural spaces. In his book *Our National Parks* (1901), John Muir, cofounder of the Sierra Club, wrote: “Thousands of tired, nerve-shaken, overcivilized people are beginning to find out that going to the mountains is going home; that wildness is a necessity; and that mountain parks and reservations are useful not only as fountains of timber and irrigating rivers, but as fountains of life.”<sup>1</sup> Presenting a selection of historical and contemporary works from the MoCP’s permanent collection and the Midwest Photographers Project, ***View Finder: Landscape and Leisure in the Collection*** considers the varied ways these designated outdoor spaces enhance human experience—from allowing for rest and refuge, to their ability to meet other, more subliminal needs.

Nineteenth-century photographer **William Henry Jackson (American, 1843–1942)** created some of the first photographs of the American West as part of a federally funded expedition in 1871 with geologist Ferdinand Hayden and a group of approximately thirty-five men, including renowned painter Thomas Moran. Jackson’s pictures and Moran’s paintings were included in a comprehensive report Hayden presented to the US Congress to prove the beauty of the unexplored West and to argue against its sale at public auction. Their efforts were effective, and in 1872, President Ulysses S. Grant signed the Act of Dedication, establishing Yellowstone as the first National Park and protecting 2,219,789 acres of land as “pleasuring ground for the benefit and enjoyment of the people.”<sup>2</sup> Decades later **Ansel Adams (American, 1902–1984)** depicted many of the same areas, capturing the parks before the influence of heavy tourism and making some of the most well-known landscape images in history. Beyond making iconic pictures, Adams sought to address the effects of land development and was an ardent environmental activist. He worked tirelessly with the Sierra Club to successfully advocate for the government expansion of many national parks, including Yellowstone and Yosemite, and often brought his photographs to countless meetings with politicians and policy makers to fight for the land to remain undeveloped and wild.

Not having regular access to the expansive mountain regions and forests that Jackson and Adams documented, city dwellers rely on local and state parks to experience wilderness. **Terry Evans (American, b. 1944)** depicts residents of Fort Worth, Texas, engaging in activities along the shores of the Trinity River. Though the surrounding metropolitan area looms with construction projects and urban development, Evans focuses on the many ways the riverbed is a staple for local residents’ recreation and respite. The photographs by **David Avison (American, 1937–2004)** that were included in the large-scale, multi-artist 1987 documentary project *Changing Chicago* depict the scope and density of Chicago’s beach-going crowds along Lake Michigan. Like Evans’s images, Avison’s pictures show how communities naturally form when people are outdoors.

**Justin Kimball (American, b. 1961)** and **Greg Stimac (American, b. 1976)** portray the role of parks as destinations or vacation spots for travelers, tour groups, and families. Both artists humorously illustrate people eclipsed by or at the mercy of the environment. An image by Kimball features a young girl wedged in a crack between two granite walls nicknamed

“Fat Man’s Misery” located in Purgatory Chasm State Reservation in Massachusetts. Her family members stand over her, and it is not quite clear whether the child is in the rock by intention or accident. A photograph by Stimac shows a group of tourists edging dangerously close to the side of a cliff in the Badlands, South Dakota, not noticing a fallen fellow traveler as he scrambles to return to safety.

**Jonas N.T. Becker (American, b. 1982)** conveys how parks, access points, and guideposts are characterized by the limited semantics and specific perspectives of early pioneers. His film *End(s) of the World* (2013) documents all the locations on Earth named, in some iteration or language, “The End of the World.” Covering points such as *Valle del fin del mundo*, in Argentina, to “End of the World Turn,” in rural West Virginia, Becker points to the human limitations inherent in our efforts to traverse and understand the immense global landscape. **Marilyn Bridges (American, b. 1948)** similarly ponders historical land use, providing aerial views of some of the world’s oldest monuments and landmarks. Her extraordinary vantage point—captured by extending a six-by-seven-inch medium-format camera out of the window of a small plane at altitudes between 200 and 1,000 feet—portrays Earth from the perspective of the gods, as she explains it, and questions how earlier civilizations framed nature with enigmatic monuments and landmarks.

In her “Leisure Time in Israel” series, **Orit Siman-Tov (Israeli, b. 1971)** photographs people enjoying public leisure sites that have been stripped of cultural and natural markers and intentionally designed for universal appeal. Only slight traces of the country are evident around the edges of the frame. Though depicting leisure, the images convey an uncomfortable tension, as the act of establishing any park in a politically contested area is itself a marking of territory.

The works presented in *View Finder: Landscape and Leisure in the Collection* show just a few of the many ways that parks function: from mammoth expanses of beauty to populated sites filled with tourism and recreation. As conserved and protected land masses, parks mirror the support they receive from their governments and advocates. Both in their initial days of establishment and today, they are vulnerable to our changing political beliefs. If developed, they disappear, and only pictures remain.

— Kristin Taylor, Curator of Academic Programs and Collections

---

<sup>1</sup>John Muir, *Our National Parks* (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin and Cambridge, MA: The Riverside Press, 1901), 1.

<sup>2</sup>Hiram Martin Chittenden, *The Yellowstone National Park, Historical and Descriptive* (Cincinnati: Stewart & Kidd, 1915), 345.