

## Viewer's Guide



Victoria Sambunaris  
*Untitled (Distant Steam Vents, Yellowstone), 2008*

# Victoria Sambunaris: *Taxonomy of a Landscape*

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**January 11 – March 31, 2013**

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This guide was produced as a viewer supplement to the exhibition *Victoria Sambunaris: Taxonomy of a Landscape* by Corinne Rose, MoCP manager of education and contains information about the work on view, questions for looking and discussion, and suggested readings. You may download this guide from the museum's website at [mocp.org/education/resources-for-educators.php](http://mocp.org/education/resources-for-educators.php). A PDF with images that can be projected for classroom use may also be found there. Aimed at high school and college age students, this resource is aligned with Illinois Learning Standards for English Language Arts Incorporating the Common Core and can be adapted for use by younger students and integrated into a variety of fine arts and humanities curricula. To schedule a free docent-led tour of this exhibition see [mocp.org/education/viewings](http://mocp.org/education/viewings). To learn about public programs related to this exhibition see [mocp.org/events/](http://mocp.org/events/).

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# Victoria Sambunaris:

## *Taxonomy of a Landscape*

### Introduction

For more than a decade, Victoria Sambunaris (American, born 1964) has traversed the United States equipped with a five-by-seven wooden field camera and sheets of color negative film. Covering seemingly every road and freeway between the coasts and beyond, she has captured the vast American landscape and terrain, and its intersection with civilization. Sambunaris has said that she has “an unrelenting curiosity to understand the American landscape and our place in it.” While humans are in awe of the power of nature, we are also energetic and domineering diggers, builders, and settlers. Sambunaris’s photographs thus strikingly record our ongoing, uneasy relationship with the natural world.



Victoria Sambunaris

*Untitled (Santa Elena Canyon, Big Bend National Park, Texas), 2010*

Through straight-on framing, precise focus, and uniform lighting, Sambunaris uses consistent photographic methods to depict diverse subject matter—from trains in Nebraska and Texas to trucks in New Jersey and Wisconsin, the oil pipeline in Alaska, uranium tailings in Utah, and steam vents in Yellowstone National Park. Her photographs at once convey the grandeur of the American landscape and the subtle, yet sometimes overpowering, cues to the country’s capitalist mentality. As she explains, “It is the anomalies of an ordinary landscape that have become the locus of my work: massive warehousing, infinite distribution facilities, and systematized shipping terminals. These numerous paradigmatic structures, I sense, portend the future of landscape and our relationship to it.”

Since October 2009, Sambunaris has photographed along the nearly 2,000 miles of territory that make up the border between Mexico and the United States. She has traveled from Brownsville, Texas to San Diego, California and back, attempting to convey a unity within the landscape, regardless of where one happens to stand. Her photographs refer to the border’s political drama through conceptual references, as in her photograph of the Rio Grande River in Big Bend National Park, where dramatic deep canyon river walls physically divide the US and Mexico, or by documenting tangible evidence, such as the contentious border fence that separates an otherwise seamless landscape. Both photographic methods reflect the topographic beauty and the political tensions that exist along the border.

As a first-generation Greek-American with immigrant parents who came to the United States in search of the American dream, Sambunaris sympathizes with the tension along the border. Her memories of her family’s tradition of driving through the Amish countryside of Pennsylvania, and recollections of marveling at the farms, highways, and structures they encountered have also profoundly influenced her life and work as an artist. Sambunaris’s collected ephemera—the essential, and incidental, elements of her work as a photographer and researcher—are also included in this exhibition along with a video documenting her travels and work processes. Books on geology and history, maps, and artifacts collected on her journeys, such as mineral specimens, journals, road logs, and personal gifts, as well as over 1,500 of her small photographic sketches together form an intimate view of the artist’s life on the road. Sambunaris photographs the landscape as a document and metaphor for the American experience, bringing into view with photographic precision the vast, open-ended mystery and unease of a country where human intervention and natural beauty inspire wonder in equal measure.

## American Landscape Photography: Historic Context



Timothy H. O'Sullivan  
*Cañon de Chelle. Walls of the Grand Cañon about 1200 Feet in Height, 1873*



Joel Sternfeld  
*McLean Virginia, 1978*  
From the collection of the Museum of Contemporary Photography  
Columbia College Chicago

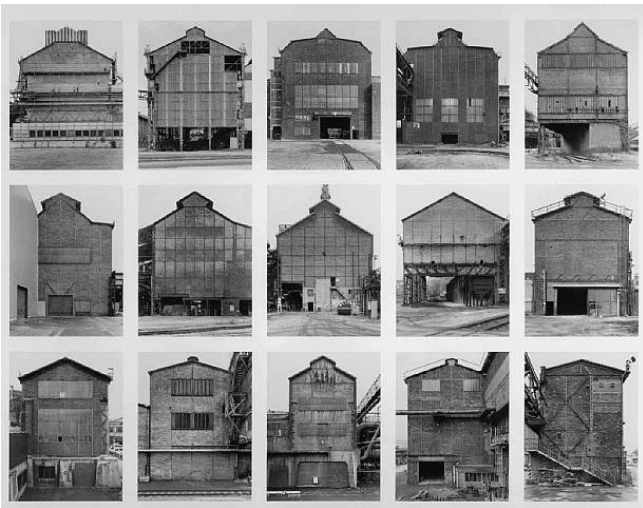
### Nineteenth Century Expedition Photography

In the middle to late nineteenth century photographers including Timothy O'Sullivan, William Henry Jackson, and Carleton Watkins traveled on survey expeditions for the US government and the Union Pacific Railroad exploring and documenting the vast and unsettled American west. Their works were also sent back east and sold as mementoes that often emphasized the **sublime** grandeur of the landscape as a symbol of national pride and strength and exposed Americans to this vast new territory to encourage the adventurous to uproot and settle the west. In the early to mid-twentieth century photographers including Ansel Adams and Elliott Porter also emphasized the natural beauty of America, but often by avoiding evidence of what had become by then pervasive human presence in the landscape. In an era of rapid development, their idealized views were often circulated by environmental organizations such as the Sierra Club in efforts celebrate the American landscape and show the public what might be lost if we don't protect and preserve our natural resources.



## The New Topographics

In the second half of the twentieth century, photographers including Robert Adams, Lewis Baltz, Frank Gohlke, Joel Sternfeld, and Richard Misrach began creating images that directly showed human impact on the American landscape. Rather than grand mountain ranges and unspoiled nature, they often photographed in every day locations such as suburban developments where the interests of man and nature frequently appear to collide. In the 1975 exhibition, *The New Topographics: Photographs of a Man-Altered Landscape*, at the International Museum of Photography at George Eastman House, curator William Jenkins noted this shift in a new generation of landscape photographers who often used a seemingly detached or ironic approach to show our complex relationship to the landscape. The influence of these histories and traditions can be seen in the work of Contemporary landscape photographers, including Victoria Sambunaris.



Berndt and Hilla Becher  
*Industrial Facades*, 1984-1994

## The Düsseldorf School

Sambunaris says she has also been influenced by what has come to be known as the “Dusseldorf School” of photography. Included in the New Topographics exhibition was the work of German photographers Berndt and Hilla Becher. While studying painting at the Kunstakademie **Düsseldorf** in the late 1950s, the Bechers began collaboratively photographing German industrial architecture. In time they became known for their seemingly detached style that favored straightforward and descriptive documentation of structures that deemphasized the perspective of the photographer. The Bechers often displayed their works in grids of like structures that they described as “**typologies**.” They were also influential teachers at the Kunstakademie **Düsseldorf** from the 1970’s-1990s. Their influence can be seen in the work of their students including Thomas Ruff, Andreas Gurskey, Thomas Struth, and Candida Höffer many of whom also achieved great success photographing a range of subject matter with a similarly descriptive and straightforward style.

## Additional Information on the Works on View



**Victoria Sambunari**

*Untitled, (Red Containers, Wet Ground, Fort Worth Texas), 2000*



**Victoria Sambunaris**

*Untitled, (Alaskan Pipeline at Atigan Pass, Brooks Range, Alaska, 2003*

In 1999 Sambunaris graduated from the Yale MFA photography program, where she created works related to the American Dream and ideals of suburban living. From 2000-2002 she created more minimal works that focused on the presence of trains and trucks—vehicles that transport the products of American consumption—in the landscape. These works are presented on the museum's mezzanine level in the MoCP's exhibition. Since creating that work, Sambunaris has continued to photograph the American landscape, but has pulled further back so that evidence of human presence can often be seen, but the land itself dominates most of the frame. In 2003 Sambunaris traveled to photograph the vast wilderness of Alaska. The Alaskan oil pipeline can be seen in some of these images and while it appears to be a small thread running through the terrain, it is actually five feet in diameter, which gives the viewer a sense of the immense scale of these scenes.

In 2005-06 Sambunaris photographed the subterranean landscape of caves and volcanos including the dramatic large-scale works presented on the MoCP's first floor in the darkened north gallery along with cases that hold personal objects that she collected or carried during her travels and several of the detailed journals she writes while on the road. Sambunaris camps and lives out of her car for the many months of the year that she travels to make her work. She uses video camera mounted on her car's dashboard to casually record scenes and people she experiences along the way. The thirty-minute long video, also on view in the north gallery, is comprised of snippets culled from many hours of recordings she has made since 2003.



Victoria Sambunari  
*Untitled (Tomato Pool, Yellowstone), 2008*



Victoria Sambunari  
*Untitled, (Wendover Utah), 2007*

In 2007-08 Sambunaris traveled and photographed along Interstate 80, a main artery of travel and commerce that roughly follows historic routes west and bisects the US from Teaneck, New Jersey to San Francisco, California, connecting many points of cultural and geographic interest along the way. Wendover Utah, and West Wendover Nevada are small towns seated at the border of Utah and Nevada along I 80 that are of particular interest to Sambunaris. Nevada has much more permissive laws than Utah controlling things like alcohol, gambling, and exotic dancing. By walking a few feet across the street in Wendover, crossing from Utah to Nevada, one can encounter a very different cultural landscape. Sabunaris photographed the distinctive terrain and geothermal features of Yellowstone National Park in 2008-2009.



**Victoria Sambunari**

*Untitled (Farm with workers, Jacumba, California), 2010*

Since 2009 Sambunaris has photographed along the border that separates the US from Mexico, which at nearly 2,000 miles in length, is comprised of many types of terrain. At some points the divisions between the two nations happens at natural features in the landscape such as along the Colorado River and the Rio Grande. At other points the border has been heavily fortified by US officials, while in more remote locations it is often not marked at all. In the image *Untitled (Farm with workers, Jacumba, California) 2010*, we see a massive wall built along the border that extends up a mountain but stops where the steep terrain made it too difficult to continue to build.

Sambunaris says she tries to not be directly political in her work. But given the close relationship she has developed to the land and with the many different people she encounters on her journeys, including those on both sides of the US/Mexican border, she is very aware of how divisions in the land and other decisions made by people in power can impact the land and humankind.

## **Technical Notes**

Sambunaris travels and photographs with a field camera, which is more compact and portable than a traditional view camera. She says that she spends much of her time scouting the locations she shoots and uses a medium format camera to create photographic sketches of locations she is interested in photographing. When she is ready to photograph, Sambunaris generally only shoots two sheets of film of each scene. The consistency in the color and mood of her images is in part due to her consistent use of light. Sambunaris says that she might wait as much as two weeks for the weather to change to provide the neutral and diffused light she prefers for her work.



## Questions for Looking and Discussion and Activities

**Note to Teachers:** Use the questions below as you guide your group through the exhibition or to consider the artist, artworks, traditions and questions explored in the show in your classroom. Start with the simple looking protocol at the beginning of this list of questions to encourage students to slow down, look carefully, and be concrete in their interpretations.

1. Look carefully at an individual image. Describe what you see.
2. What is the mood or feeling of the image? How is that conveyed?
3. What do the images have in common?
4. What do we learn about the place in this picture? What details reveal that information?

### Other Questions

5. How would you describe Sambunaris's **style**? How does her use of techniques such as **framing, composition, point of view**, and color through weather and **time of day**, contribute to your perception of the places depicted?
6. People are seldom directly represented in Sambunaris's photographs. In which images do we see evidence of human presence? How is it suggested?
7. What do you notice about how this work is displayed?  
How do the choices Sambunaris made in the presentation of her photographs including the print size, mounting, and sequencing of the works impact your perception of the images?
8. What information does Sambunaris provide in her titles? How does that information add to or change your perception of the places depicted?
9. What items did Sambunaris choose to include in the gallery that contains **ephemera** and artifacts that she collected and created on her journeys? What does this gallery add to the rest of the exhibition?
10. Sambunaris says that she tries to not be directly political in her work, but given the close relationship she has developed to the land and to the many different people she speaks with on her journeys, she can't help but have political opinions.
  - What political issues do you think might relate to this exhibition? Why do you think that?
  - Can you tell how Sambunaris might feel about those issues? If so, how?
11. Considered as a whole, what do you think this exhibition says about the American landscape and our relationship to it?

## Vocabulary

<b>ephemera</b>	Items intended to be used only for a short period of time and discarded such as tickets or pamphlets.
<b>framing/composition</b>	How the photographer composes an image in the camera's viewfinder. The organization of elements within the image.
<b>point of view</b> (vantage point)	Where a photographer physically stands in relation to the subject he or she is photographing such as close, far, above or below. It can also refer to the photographer's view or opinion of that subject.
<b>style</b>	The way something is said, made, done, or expressed. A combination of distinctive features.
<b>sublime</b>	To elevate or exalt in a way that inspires awe.
<b>taxonomy</b>	The science or technique of ordering organisms or objects into a system that indicates similarities and natural relationships.
<b>time of day</b>	The time of day in which a photograph is made using natural light can affect many factors within the image including the rendering of color, the appearance of shadows, and the appearance of space and depth.

## Activities

### 1. Research and Compare

Research the work of landscape photographers from traditions mentioned in the earlier paragraphs on historic context. Select at least one photographer from the 19th century and a few contemporary artists.

Look at and read about their work.

- Compare and contrast the work of those artists to that of Victoria Sambunaris.
- What connections and differences do you see among the work of these landscape photographers?
- Where in Sambunaris's work do you see influence of these traditions?

### 2. Create Photographs that Depict a Sense of Place.

**A.** Landscape photography is a form of documentary photography that describes the geography of an area or conveys and evokes a sense of place. Create a series of photographs that depict a place that is important or interesting to you.

- What place will you photograph? Why?
- What natural and man-made features do you see in this location? Describe.

- What moods, feelings, experiences or histories do you associate with that place?
- What scenes, places, structures, or objects might you show to teach others about that place?
- B.** Consider how you might use light, time of day, vantage point, framing and composition, etc. to create visually pleasing photographs from this list.
- C.** Photograph that location using the strategies you describe above. Critique your images.
  - Which are the most successful visually? Why?
  - Which images contain details that you feel are important to describing this place?
  - If you were to assemble a series of five to ten images to tell the story of this place, which images would you include? Which would you leave out? Why?
  - Are there any images you wish you had made? Are there any scenes you would like to reshoot?
- D.** If time allows, reshoot and critique again. Reedit your images and continue shooting and editing until you feel your series is successful both visually and in telling the story of this place.
  - Play with sequencing the images. Do you think they should be presented in a particular order? Why or why not?
- E.** Critique this series with your peers and have them describe what they learned about that place through your images.
  - Did your images convey what you intended?

### 3. Writing about Landscape and Place

Much of the work of writer Barry Lopez is inspired by places he knows well and those that he comes to know and experience through his extensive travels. In (see suggested readings) Lopez describes how the environment he grew up in, the Southern California Valley, shaped him as a person and a writer. He says:

*My imagination was shaped by the exotic nature of water in a dry southern California valley; by the sound of wind in the crowns of eucalyptus trees; by the tactile sensation of sheened earth, turned in furrows by a gang plow; by banks of saffron, mahogany and scarlet cloud piled above a field of alfalfa at dusk; by encountering the musk from orange blossoms at the edge of an orchard; by the aftermath of a Pacific storm crashing a hot, flat beach.*

*Added to the nudge of these sensations were an awareness of the height and breadth of the sky, and of the geometry and force of the wind... I became intimate with the elements of that particular universe. They fashioned me. I return to them regularly in essays and stories in order to clarify or explain abstractions or to strike contrasts. I find the myriad relationships in that universe comforting. They form a "coherence" of which I once was a part... My comfort, my sense of inclusion in the small universe I inhabited, came from an appreciation of, a participation in, all that I saw, smelled, tasted, and heard.*

Whether it is the main subject of a written piece or the setting where a narrative unfolds, place plays an essential role in story-telling. Select a place that is important to you.

- Begin by listing words that describe what you might see, smell, taste, or hear in that place. Write freely without stopping to edit.
- Continue to list moods, feelings, memories and events that you associate with that place.
- What do you know about the history of that location? What can you learn?
- Why did you select this place to write about? Why is it significant to you?

Look over the notes you have made so far and circle the words and events that you think are most important in describing and evoking this place. Select a few specific details or a particular moment as a frame to tell others about that location. Use concrete sensory details in your writing as Barry Lopez does above to create an image in the mind of the reader.

### **Suggested Readings**

Robert Adams, *Beauty in Photography: Essays in Defense of Traditional Values*. New York: Aperture, 1989.

Robert Adams, *Robert Adams: The New West*. New York, Aperture, 1974.

Greg Foster-Rice and John Rohrbach, *Reframing the New Topographics*, University of Chicago Press (Center for American Places), 2011.

Allison Hawthorne Deming, *Genius Loci* (Poems); New York: Penguin, 2005.

Allison Hawthorne Deming, *THE COLORS OF NATURE: Culture, Identity and the Natural World* edited with Lauret E. Savoy. Minneapolis: Milkweed Editions, 2011.

Allison Hawthorne Deming, *Writing the Sacred into the Real*. Milkweed Editions (Credo Series), 2001.

Patricia Nelson Limerick, *The Legacy of Conquest: The Unbroken Past of the American West*. W. W. Norton & Company 1987

Barry Lopez, *A Literature of Place*. Portland Magazine. Summer 1997. [http://arts.envirolink.org/literary\\_arts/BarryLopez\\_LitofPlace.html](http://arts.envirolink.org/literary_arts/BarryLopez_LitofPlace.html)

Barry Lopez, *An Intimate Geography*, Portland Magazine. Summer. 2010.

John McPhee, *Annals of the Former World*, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2000.

Liz Wells, *Land Matters: Landscape Photography, Culture and Identity*. I.B.Tauris & Co Ltd. London UK, 2011.

Lucy Lippard, W. J. T. Mitchell; Ann M. Wolfe: *The Altered Landscape: Photographs of a Changing Environment*. New York, Rizzoli, 2011.



## **Illinois Learning Standards for English Language Arts Incorporating the Common Core: Standards Addressed in This Guide:**

**CC.K-12.L.R.3** Knowledge of Language: Apply knowledge of language to understand how language functions in different contexts, to make effective choices for meaning or style, and to comprehend more fully when reading or listening.

**CC.K-12.R.R.1** Key Ideas and Details: Read closely to determine what the text says explicitly and to make logical inferences from it; cite specific textual evidence when writing or speaking to support conclusions drawn from the text.

**K-12 R R.2 CC.K-12.R.R.2** Key Ideas and Details: Determine central ideas or themes of a text and analyze their development; summarize the key supporting details and ideas.

**CC.K-12.L.R.6** Vocabulary Acquisition and Use: Acquire and use accurately a range of general academic and domain specific words and phrases sufficient for reading, writing, speaking, and listening at the college and career readiness level; demonstrate independence in gathering vocabulary knowledge when considering a word or phrase important to comprehension or expression.

**CC.K-12.R.R.6** Craft and Structure: Assess how point of view or purpose shapes the content and style of a text.

**CC.K-12.R.R.7** Integration of Knowledge and Ideas: Integrate and evaluate content presented in diverse formats and media, including visually and quantitatively, as well as in words.

**CC.K-12.R.R.9** Integration of Knowledge and Ideas: Analyze how two or more texts address similar themes or topics in order to build knowledge or to compare the approaches the authors take.