

Landscape and Place

This print viewing addresses various approaches to the genre of landscape photography from the late-19th Century to the present. Viewers will be exposed to numerous ways photographers have imaged the land, its use, and its place within the popular imagination. A K-16 curriculum guide on additional landscape photographs held in the MoCP collection can be found [here](#).



Barbara Diener, *Smoke*, 2012

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Ansel Adams (American, 1902-1984)



Bridalveil Fall, Yosemite National Park, CA, 1927



Moonrise from Glacier Point, Yosemite National Park, California, 1959

Ansel Adams's documentation of the western landscape has taken on iconic significance as one of the defining purist visions of both the American West and of the photographic medium. His images have frequently been used to promote tourism and preservation of the landscapes they portray. As an ardent environmental activist, Adams worked tirelessly with the Sierra Club to successfully advocate for the government expansion of many national parks, including Yellowstone, Kings Canyon, and Yosemite. He often brought his photographs to countless meetings with politicians and policy makers to fight for the land to remain undeveloped and in its wild state.

Compositionally, Adams frames monuments of nature so that their iconic character and sublime beauty is evoked, and to this aim, he avoids including people and signs of habitation that surround the sites. Known as a master of camera and darkroom technique, Adams usually photographed with an 8x10 view camera and meticulously worked on his prints in the darkroom to accentuate the beauty and grandeur of the scenes he photographed.

Questions for looking:

- Looking carefully at the images, what pulls your attention? Why?
- How do choices made by the photographer such as use of light, time of day framing, composition, or vantage point, contribute to your perception of these places?
- Think of when or if you have seen Ansel Adams photographs in the past. Has his imagery shaped your perception of the American West, with or without you having been there in person? If so, how?

Robert Adams (American, b. 1937)



Expressway Near Colton, CA, 1982



South From the Rocky Flats, Jefferson County, Colorado, 1977; printed 1989

Robert Adams's photographs offer views of natural landscapes transformed by their intersection with civilization. Adams was one of many photographers to challenge the grand and romanticized view of landscape photography dominant in the first half of the 20th century. His images take notice of human impact on the landscape and often finds beauty at that juncture. Often depicting beauty in the Western landscape, the beauty is always interrupted or marred by things such as the telephone poles and roads visible behind a grove of trees. In a 1974 statement accompanying his series, *The New West*, Adams says, "Many have asked, pointing incredulously toward a sweep of tract homes and billboards, why picture that? The question sounds simple, but it implies a difficult issue—why open our eyes anywhere but in undamaged places like national parks? One reason is, of course, that we do not live in parks, that we need to improve things at home, and that to do it we have to see the facts without blinking." Calm and somber, Adams' images are an aesthetic articulation of a concern regarding man's shifting conception of place and environment.

Questions for looking:

- Is there evidence of human presence in this photograph? If so where?
- Consider these Robert Adams images in contrast to Ansel Adams's more romanticized or idyllic portrayals of the land. What potential negative or positive effects could both types of imagery have in representing the land?

Deeper Reading: New Topographics

Robert Adams was included in the landmark exhibition, *New Topographics: Photographs of Man-Altered Landscape*, at the International Museum of Photography, Rochester, New York in 1975. Curator William Jenkins noted a shift in a new generation of landscape photographers who often used a seemingly detached or ironic approach to show the complex human relationship to the landscape. Rather than presenting heroic views of grand mountain ranges and unspoiled nature, they photographed every day locations, such as suburban developments where the interests of man and nature frequently appear to collide. Works by other artists in this seminal exhibition included in the MoCP's permanent collection are [Lewis Baltz](#), [Nicholas Nixon](#), [Henry Wessel, Jr.](#), [Stephen Shore](#), [Joe Deal](#), and [Frank Gohlke](#).

Marilyn Bridges (American, b. 1948)



Farmer's Edge, Badlands,



Argos, Greece, 1984



Windmills, Tehachapi, CA, 1991

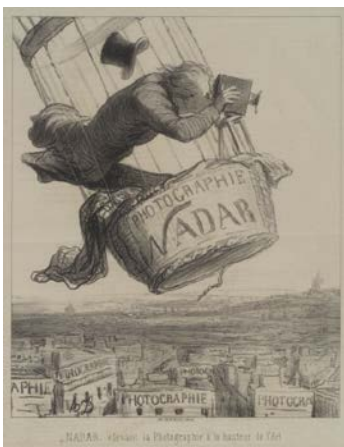
Marilyn Bridges ponders historical land use, providing **aerial** views of some of the world's oldest monuments and landmarks. Her extraordinary vantage point—captured by extending a six-by-seven-inch medium-format camera out of the window of a small plane at altitudes between 200 and 1,000 feet—portrays Earth from the perspective of the gods, as she explains it, and questions how earlier civilizations framed nature with enigmatic monuments and landmarks. She contrasts images of ancient ruins with depictions of contemporary land use, considering how people relate to the land and the lasting effects of those relationships.

Her process is technically demanding both in terms of flying—the plane must slow down to just a notch above stalling even at a shutter speed of 1/1000th of a second—and in terms of photographing. Unable to slow the plane any more than she does, Bridges extends the speed of her Tri-X film by pushing it (a development technique). She usually shoots with a 6×7 Pentax medium-format camera, sometimes a Leica 35mm, and always from an open window.

Questions for looking:

- What can you tell about how these images were made? Why would the artist choose this **vantage point**? How does the lack of a horizon line impact your perception of the place?
- Considering that Bridges was taking these pictures out of an open window of a low flying plane, how much control do you think the artist has over creating her compositions? How do her compositions compare to other landscape photographs in this print viewing?

Deeper Reading: Aerial Photography



Beginning with the practice of photographing from kites and hot air balloons in the mid-19th century, aerial photography is the practice of capturing images from an aircraft or flying object. Many artists in the MoCP's collection make photographs from the aerial perspective, including [Terry Evans](#), [Frank Gohlke](#), [Mark Abramson](#), and [Alex S. MacLean](#).

Image credit: Honoré Daumier, "Nadar élevant la Photographie à la hauteur de l'Art" (Nadar elevating Photography to Art), published in *Le Boulevard*, May 25, 1862.

Barbara Diener (German, b. 1982)



Farmhouse, 2012



Smoke, 2012



Fire, 2012

Barbara Diener's series, *Sehnsucht* (2012–14), combines photography's unique capacity to render the world in high detail with the medium's ability to reveal complex human stories that lie beneath those surfaces. The project's title is a German word for an unfulfilled and unattainable desire. With no English equivalent, it describes "one of life's longings, for someone or something, that cannot be fully defined and will not be realized." The title encapsulates Diener's experience as a German immigrant who moved to the United States in early adulthood. Initially motivated by her longing for rootedness and the comfort of home, she began photographing in rural towns throughout Illinois that reminded her of her hometown in Germany. Those first pictures spurred Diener's long-term photographic investigation of the complex meaning of "home" and the human need to feel deeply connected to a particular place. Her work is at once an examination of her own complicated identity and a document of the communities she encounters as she travels and photographs. Diener's longing for the incomparable comfort of a place she can no longer access, only recollect, informs her understanding of a rural way of life found here in the United States, the spiritual and emotional undercurrents of which resonate in her photographs.

Questions for looking:

- Do you consider these representations of rural Illinois—as well as Adams and Jackson's representations of the American West—true, fictionalized, or romanticized? Describe.
- Does the title of this series fit the feeling of the work? Explain.

Activity: Depict 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?
- Are there distinctive features to the natural or built environment of this place? Describe.
- Have significant events happened there?
- What scenes, places, structures, or objects might you show to teach others about the place? What moods, feelings, or histories do you associate with that location?
- How could you show those things in photographs? Consider how you might use light, time of day, vantage point, framing and composition, etc. to render your subject in an interesting way.

Jon Horvath (American, b. 1979)



Eldon



Cowboy Boot



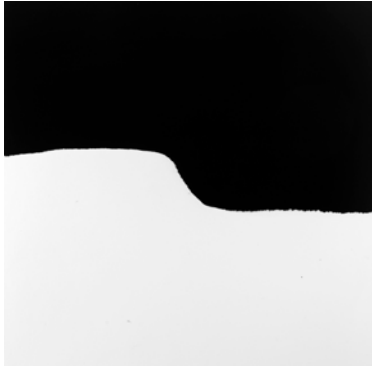
Easter Vase

For his multi-media series, *This is Bliss* (2014-2018), Jon Horvath documents a small town named Bliss, Idaho, to consider historical romanticized depictions of the American West in contrast to contemporary realities. A native of Wisconsin, he was initially drawn to the location while on a road trip and noticing an exit sign on the highway with its idyllic name. Working in his signature fashion, Horvath wanders the area, closely investigating everyday surroundings, collecting artifacts, and getting to know people he meets along the way. He uses several different tools and cameras to create the series. For one set of images, he gathers discarded beer bottles and tumbleweeds near the town's main highway to use as the subjects of tintypes, a 19th century process, calling reference to the town's location on the Oregon Trail. For a video piece, he documents his attempts to skip stones across a gorge where Evel Knievel famously crashed his motorcycle in a failed stunt. Altogether, the series is a poetic study of the past, present, and collective identity of place.

Questions for looking:

- What do you think the artist is trying to communicate about this place? Why?
- What word would you use to describe the mood of these pictures? What choices has the artists made with light, composition, and framing to create this mood?
- Consider William Henry Jackson's images of the American West in the early days of westward expansion. How do Horvath's images of a small town near a railroad differ from the west Jackson experienced? What socio-economic changes have caused this change over the years?

Joseph D. Jachna (American, 1935-2016)



Snow'Water, 1965



Door County, Wisconsin, 1970



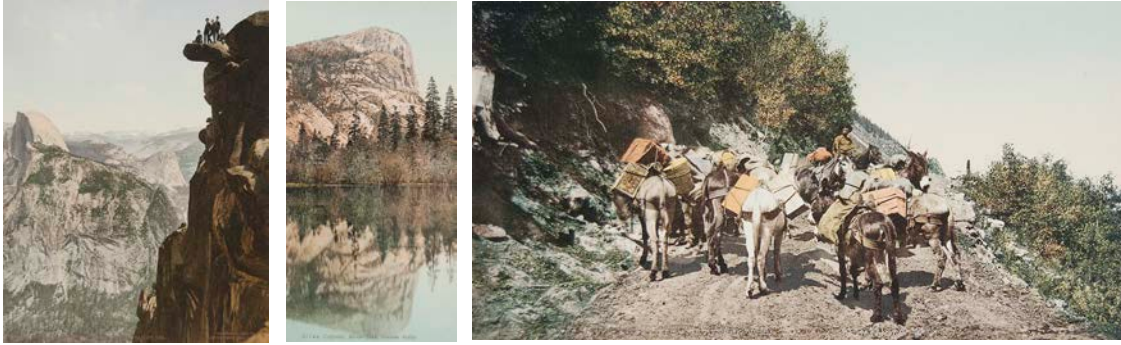
Near Keshena Falls, 1965

Born in Chicago in 1935, Joseph Jachna attended the renowned **Institute of Design** (ID), where he studied with both Harry Callahan and Aaron Siskind. Their influence is evident in many of Jachna's black and white photographs, particularly those in which he portrays the landscape as an abstracted composition with a graphic impact or a refined sense of formal order. Nevertheless, Jachna pursued many distinctive interests of his own throughout his career, both in terms of subject matter and experiments with form. In the late 1960s and 70s, he made meditative, atmospheric photographs of black expanses of water or the motion of river currents. In other cases, a tightly framed composition makes for pronounced juxtapositions of light and dark shapes. In a substantial body of work created in Door County, Wisconsin, Jachna takes a more idiosyncratic direction. Using held mirrors to disrupt the photograph's depiction of a landscape, he inserts his own body into the image or uses the mirror's reflection and the camera's lens to elegantly rearrange the natural environment into a view unavailable to the naked eye. While these images are often highly formal, they also touch on ideas ranging from the relationship of man and nature to the ways in which the camera mediates how we see.

Questions for looking:

- Are there clues in the image that suggest when and where these photographs might have been made? What tools has the artist used to create **abstraction**? Describe.
- Why might this artist choose to make minimal images in nature instead of a studio environment where he can have more control?
- How are these images different than the other photographs in the print viewing? What are three words you would use to describe these images?
- Why might the artist have chosen to create these images in black and white versus color film? How would they look in color?

William Henry Jackson (American, 1843-1942)



Left to right: *Glacier Point and South Dome, Yosemite Valley, California*
Mirror Lake, Yosemite Valley
Colorado Pack Train on Mountain Road

William Henry Jackson created some of the first photographs of the American West in 1871, when he participated in a federally funded expedition with geologist Ferdinand Hayden and a group of approximately thirty-five other men, including renowned painter Thomas Moran. The expedition covered areas in present-day Wyoming, Oregon, Colorado, and Utah that had previously remained unexplored by non-Native people to dispel claims that the West—rich with bubbling hot springs and spouting geysers—was hellish and to be feared. Jackson’s photographs and Moran’s paintings portrayed the remarkable beauty of the land and were included in a comprehensive report Hayden presented to the US Congress 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, protecting 2,219,789 acres of land as “pleasuring ground for the benefit and enjoyment of the people.”

Using eight-by-ten-inch glass plate negatives, Jackson’s equipment weighed around three hundred pounds and after exposure had to set or dry for forty-five minutes in his portable darkroom. Photochrom prints, as seen here, are created by using lithographic limestone plates to add color to black-and-white negatives with each color requiring its own plate. Photochrom prints—the world’s first postcards—were cheaply sold, collected, and mailed, primarily from the late nineteenth century until the end of World War I.

Questions for looking:

- Compare the popular modes of reproducing images of the parks for the public: photography and painting. Does one seem like a more “accurate” or “true” mode of representation than the other? Why or why not? What aspects of Moran’s painting of the same area (right) could be considered overly exaggerated or romanticized?
- Does the inherent frame of a camera’s viewfinder limit or expand the human perception of our place in the natural world? Would other types of media function differently?
- Imagine if Jackson and Moran had not joined the expedition to picture the landscape and the area was sold at public auction. What could Yellowstone and the American West look like today?
- Think about how images of a newly explored American West circulated through photochrom postcards and other reproductions. How has photography, and art more broadly, contributed to the ways humans understand the environment?



Thomas Moran, *The Grand Canyon of the Yellowstone*, 1872,
Collection of the Department of the Interior Museum

Mark Klett (American, b. 1952)



Panorama of San Francisco, from the "California Street Hill" portfolio, 1990

Trained as a geologist, Mark Klett established his artistic perspective on the Western American landscape as the chief photographer for the *Re-Photographic Survey Project* (1977-1979), which re-photographed scenes visited by the first photographic surveys of the West in the 1860s and 1870s. In 1878 Eadweard Muybridge climbed to the top of California Street in San Francisco with his cumbersome wooden view camera to make a 360-degree panorama of the city. In 1990 Mark Klett revisited the idea with *Panorama of San Francisco*. Klett's goal was to match Muybridge's photographs—something no longer possible in 1990 from the same spot because of the skyline created during the century spanning the two projects. These two carefully planned San Francisco panoramas, presented together in the accordion-fold book *One City/Two Visions* (1990), reveal the evolution of a city.

Questions for looking:

- Look at the accordion-fold book *One City/Two Visions* and compare Klett's **panorama** closely with Muybridge's (below). What changes have occurred in the city, country, and landscape in the 112 spanning the images? What changes have occurred that are not evident?



Panorama of San Francisco by Eadweard Muybridge, 1878

- How can photography differ from other artforms in documenting the changing sociopolitical and cultural landscapes of generations past, present, and future?

Michael Kolster (American, b. 1963)



Riverbank, James River State Park, Gladstone, Virginia, 2012p

In his *Take Me to the River* series, Michael Kolster photographs four American rivers that have been heavily polluted for the past two centuries by surrounding industry. Since the establishment of the Clean Water Act in 1972, the water quality is improving, and the natural beauty of the rivers are again emerging. Kolster creates ambrotypes of the landscape using the wet plate collodion process—a photographic process that was invented and used in the mid-19th century and utilized by Civil War photographers—exposing the negatives on-site using a portable darkroom. Working with this time consuming and unwieldy process both references the history of the landscape and its demise, while also visually mirroring the contamination of the river as seen in the flaws of the glass plates.

Questions for looking:

- William Henry Jackson, also represented in this print viewing, utilized the wet plate collodion process that we see in Kolster's ambrotype here. How are flaws evident or not evident in Jackson's prints also made from wet plates? Why do you think Kolster choose to celebrate the flaws on the negative?
- Why would Kolster choose to use this antiquated and cumbersome process to photograph the landscape in the 21st century with more accessible technologies available?

Henry Wessel, Jr. (American, b. 1942)



Santa Barbara California, 1977
from "The New California Views" portfolio



Untitled #2, n.d.



Untitled, from the "House Pictures" series, 1990

Originally from New Jersey, Henry Wessel, Jr. fell in love with the California light on a visit in 1970. Immediately afterwards, he moved to San Francisco, immersing himself in the sights and spaces of the state. Photographing intuitively, Wessel uses his camera as way to remain “actively receptive” to the large and small details of his immediate environment. He states: “At the core of this receptivity is a process that might be called soft eyes. It is a physical sensation. You are not looking for something. You are open, receptive. At some point you are in front of something that you cannot ignore.”¹

In the 1990s, Wessel created his *House Pictures* series in Southern California from the armrest of his truck. The images appear as a survey of playfully candy-colored bungalows that suggest a human presence only in details, such as a modest cooler left curbside or a garden hose coiled against the side of a house. Although different in color, the structural similarities of the bungalows—as well as the similar compositions of the photographs themselves—imply both the futility of originality and the manufactured quality of the American dream of home ownership.

Wessel's work was included in the landmark exhibition, *New Topographics: Photographs of a Man-Altered Landscape*, at the International Museum of Photography in Rochester, New York in 1975. The exhibition ushered in the new era of landscape photography and it showcased the ideals of the new approach: landscape could not be artificially separated from cultural and social counterparts, and landscape photography had to abandon the limited and idealized sense of style it had inherited from the previous half century.

Questions for looking:

- Wessel has only ever used one camera and one type of film throughout his entire photographic career: a Leica with a 28-millimeter lens and Tri-X film. Is this consistency evident in the images? How or how not?
- After photographing, Wessel waits one year before looking at his contact sheets and deciding which images to print. Why might the artist take this approach?
- Consider Wessel's images in relation to Robert Adams, who was also included in the *New Topographics: Photographs of a Man-Altered Landscape* exhibition in 1975. Both were breaking away from the romanticized depictions popular at the time. How has landscape photography changed or remained the same since this seminal exhibition?

¹ Gefter, P. (2006, May 21). Henry Wessel: Capturing the Image, Transcending the Subject. Retrieved from https://www.nytimes.com/2006/05/21/arts/design/21geft.html?pagewanted=all&_r=0

Glossary of Terms:

abstraction: in relation to art, Oxford Dictionary defines as “freedom from representational qualities.”²

Institute of Design (ID): What is now the Illinois Institute of Technology (IIT), this was one of the most important schools of design and photography in America during the twentieth century. Founded in Chicago in 1937 by László Moholy-Nagy, the ID aimed to train “the perfect designer” through a modernist and multi-disciplinary curriculum that encouraged experimentation and broke down the hierarchy between fine and applied arts and industry.

panorama: also known as “wide format photography,” this refers to photographs made with cameras or lenses outfitted to picture long horizontal lines to expand the image in length and scope.

vantage point: where a photographer stands in relation to the subject he or she is photographing. It can also refer to the photographer’s view or opinion of that subject.

² "Abstraction | Definition of Abstraction in English by Oxford Dictionaries." Oxford Dictionaries | English. Accessed August 16, 2018. <https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/abstraction>.