

LANDSCAPE AS STAGE

Jan Howard

Joe Deal's Kite, Chino Hills, California, 1984 (fig. 25), captures an adult and child flying a kite in a bit of open space left in a new development. The driveway already in place makes for a convenient drive-up recreational area. Off in the distance to the right the residential growth that will soon cover this piece of land is visible through the atmospheric smog; off in the distance to the left are still untouched hills. Deal often found his picture, as here, at the edge of the built and unbuilt landscape. He was among ten artists included in *New Topographics: Photographs of a Man-Altered Landscape*, the influential 1975 exhibition that identified a tendency among photographers to acknowledge rather than deny the reality of development in the landscape.

Inspired by conceptual art, Deal generally developed his work in series, choosing a particular location and adhering to a strict visual formula. For the first ten years of his career his landscapes were square format, viewed from above, lacking a horizon, and empty of people (see pages 4, 12, 44, 90, and 91). *Kite, Chino Hills, California*, from the series "Subdividing the Inland Basin," marks a shift to the 4 × 5 camera's rectangle framing a sky and horizon. The series also includes people—evidence of a rapidly exploding community near the intersection of the Pomona and Orange freeways. As ordinary as these figures seem, they are exceptional. While photographers associated with *New Topographics* recorded the impact of humans on the landscape, the vast majority of their pictures are devoid of people. Deal, who often said he never wanted to see the pile of a particular kind of picture grow too large, continually explored ways to expand the definition of landscape photography. Placing people at the center of his landscapes did just that, opening up his pictures to a narrative reading and infusing them with an air of theatricality.



Such an approach had been used sporadically in photography throughout its history, perhaps most commonly in the Pictorialist era, when Anne Brigman choreographed nudes in the High Sierra, creating liberating gestures that countered the restrictions in women's lives at the time (see fig. 26).¹ In the 1980s theatricality took center stage, so to speak, as artists such as Cindy Sherman and Laurie Simmons—born into the first generation raised in a camera-based world of television, advertising, and film—situated obviously staged figures (real and surrogate) in charged settings. At the same time, artists such as Tina Barney, Philip-Lorca diCorcia, and Jeff Wall created photographs in which the featured people might have been staged in the site but still bore a plausible, if sometimes ambiguous, relationship to reality. Recent landscape photography with dramatic or narrative ends, in keeping with shifts in contemporary photography more generally, often explores this tension between fiction and reality.² *Kite, Chino Hills, California*, is not at all fabricated, but that doesn't mean its driveway is not a stage. Deal understood the tension at the edge of development well enough to be prepared for the scene that played out in front of him. The exhilaration of kite flying and the promise of a new home juxtaposed with a road to nowhere under a polluted sky offered a compelling narrative with no need for intervention. Whether fabricated or not, contemporary American landscape photography, when it places figures on the stage of the outdoors, reflects our complicated relationship with both authenticity and the landscape, telling compelling stories about nature, artifice, and life as we know it—or seek to understand it—today.

Gregory Crewdson, among the most prominent artists associated with fabricating photographs, has described himself as an "American realist landscape photographer" even though he creates pictures with characters, crew, and equipment one would expect on location for a major film. Scouting for a place to stage local people is a key step in the construction of his photographs, in which the physical characteristics of the landscape are essential to suggesting psychological states.³ The large-scale color photographs in his series "Beneath the Roses," for example, were made in and around beleaguered small

fig. 25 Joe Deal *Kite, Chino Hills, California*, 1984, from the series "Subdividing the Inland Basin," gelatin silver print, RISD Museum: Gift of the Artist 2003.104.2

fig. 26 Anne Brigman *Soul of the Blasted Pine*, 1908, from *Camera Work*, no. 25, January 1909, photogravure, 6½×8¼ in., Collection Susan Ehrens



fig. 27 Gregory Crewdson *Untitled* (Cement Canal), 2007, color inkjet print, 58½×89½ in., Courtesy Gagosian Gallery, New York



towns under a darkening, portentous sky. In *Untitled* (Cement Canal), 2007 (fig. 27), the iconic New England church steeple is still a focal point of the town, but a trash-strewn storm culvert rather than a bucolic stream runs through it. In the distance a couple holding hands walks through the canal, spotlit in an incongruously idyllic vignette. A man looks out from a balcony above them. Each element foretells ill fate, reflecting the disquieting narrative within once-thriving small-town America.

A similar rust-belt landscape provides the context for Justine Kurland's narrative series "Runaway Girls."⁴ Rooted in historical landscape painting and photography, Kurland's narratives are suggested by the landscape itself.⁵ The artist drove cross-country in search of settings for her fictive story about fugitive teenagers. Once she chose her location, she recruited local adolescent models, asked them to envision how the picture would play out, and documented their unpredictable responses. The neglected space under a New Jersey highway overpass was an ideal spot for three girls to act out *Smoke Bombs*, 2000 (pl. 47). The figurative grouping recalls paintings of pastoral scenes, and the danger of the girls' pursuit in this dicey no man's land is temporarily suspended in the hazy romantic fantasy of escape. The strong light streaming across the scene and the overall beauty of the composition suggests a desire to pursue the sublime even in the most degraded landscapes.

Like Kurland, Alec Soth develops a narrative storyline that often stems from exploring a particular place or kind of landscape. For his "Broken Manual" series, which centers on individuals who have dropped out of society to live in the wilderness, Soth traveled across the United States in search of their incredibly challenging off-the-grid environments.⁶ Many of the images in this series picture inventive dwellings, but where Soth was able to find the inhabitants he coaxed them into the compositions. In 2008_08z10031, 2008 (fig. 28), a small figure silhouetted within a crudely made geodesic dome atop a boulder stands overlooking a vast surreal desert landscape of rock, cactus, and a bare tree. The eccentricity, harshness, and beauty of the California desert, where this man had lived for many years when Soth photographed him, speak to the complexity of his alternative existence. With his back toward the viewer, he recalls the awe-inspired figures overlooking the vast and unknowable landscapes in Casper David Friedrich's 19th-century paintings, and yet perhaps this brutal landscape is more reassuring than the "civilized" one he left behind.

Intermingling portraits and still lifes with landscapes, Laura McPhee connects place to individual lives and personal stories. Her series "River of No Return," set in Idaho's Sawtooth Valley, addresses complex environmental questions about living in an area



fig. 28 **Alec Soth** 2008_08z10031, 2008, from the series "Broken Manual," color inkjet print, 32×40 in., RISD Museum: Mary Ann Lippitt Acquisition Fund 2012.39

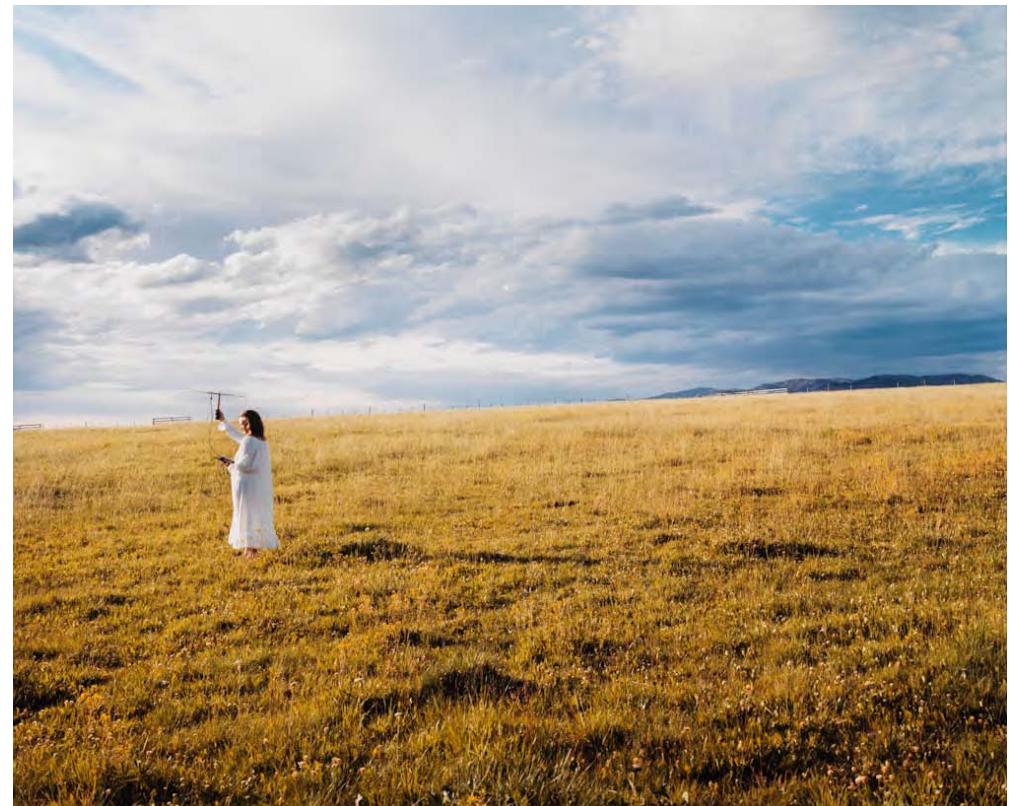


fig. 29 **Laura McPhee** Judy Tracking Radio-Collared Wolves from Her Yard, Summer Range, H-Hook Ranch, Custer County, Idaho, 2004, from the series "River of No Return," color chromogenic print, 30×40 in., RISD Museum: Purchased with funds donated by Donald Stanton and Helen M. Danforth Acquisition Fund 2008.54

where human occupancy is barely sustained. *Judy Tracking Radio-Collared Wolves from Her Yard, Summer Range, H-Hook Ranch, Custer County, Idaho, 2004* (fig. 29), gives away the mystery of the image in its title, but on first encounter one still imagines that McPhee must have invented this mystical woman in a white nightgown, standing alone in a golden field and raising an instrument to the expansive sky. Rather, Judy is entirely real, part of a family of scientists McPhee got to know and photograph. The pictured ritual is Judy's regular morning chore—it keeps the family and animals safe from wolves, which were controversially reintroduced to the area. Struck by the enigma and drama of this act, McPhee had Judy restage it for her camera.⁷ While the image speaks to daily life in the Sawtooth Valley and to political issues surrounding the management of the land, it also suggests that our relationship to the land could still be sacred.

Capturing slices of life, as Deal did, is about both knowing where to look and being ready for what French photographer Henri Cartier-Bresson called the "decisive moment" when it happens. Street photography, which dominated the medium from just after World War I into the 1970s, made use of the hand-held 35mm camera to quickly make pictures, generally catching people unaware and producing images seemingly without artifice. Justin Kimball's experience as a street photographer taught him to anticipate people's actions but Kimball combines his street skills with a slower, medium-format camera to both capture reality and make the viewer question whether the result is in fact reality. Kimball's series "Where We Find Ourselves" explores the fantasy of finding wilderness in state and national parks and instead finding only other people looking for it too. *Deep Hole, New Hampshire, 2002* (pl. 48), captures light filtering through the trees as a dozen young men and women distribute themselves among rocky outcroppings, poised for adventure in the water below. The scene seems familiar and resonant. We suspect it must be staged as we recognize its historical precedent in the quiet drama of Thomas Eakins's swimmers. Indeed, that reference is exactly what drew Kimball to the picture as it played out in front of him, along with the palpable sense of elation in the youths' encounter with the landscape, no matter the deteriorating state of the site due to its heavy use.⁸

Long interested in the subject of landscape and its relationship to community, Catherine Opie chose one of most ubiquitous and recognizable landscape constructions in America for her series "Football Landscapes." Seen through her eyes, the football field becomes an outdoor public stage where communities gather and ideas of masculinity, camaraderie, teamwork, and leadership play out. The "Football Landscapes" were shot during games on high-school football fields across the United States, but they do not record exceptional feats

or plays in the game as one might expect. Rather, Opie edited her pictures to foreground the choreography that metaphorically spoke to the boys' relationships to each other and the arena in which they perform.⁹ In *Football Landscape #12 (Alice vs. W. B. Ray, Corpus Christi, TX)*, 2008 (fig. 30), Opie's distant position behind the goalpost seems to emphasize the enormity of the stage and, accordingly, the expectations for and among these adolescents as they play out the competitive glamour and spectacle of the sport.

The path from the playing field to the battlefield is often short, and it would be no surprise if some of Opie's subjects found themselves pictured in An-My Lê's "29 Palms." Lê's series appears to document soldiers deployed in the Middle East, but instead records staged maneuvers at the Marine training camp in California for which her series is titled. The harshness of the intense light and mountainous desert terrain and the documentary style of her black-and-white prints all sustain the fiction that these soldiers are in Iraq and Afghanistan rather than California. In making *29 Palms: Captain Folsom*, 2003–2004 (fig. 31), and other works in the series, Lê distanced herself from her subjects both physically and emotionally. Shooting with a large-format camera from a height and remove that captures the vast theater of activity in the landscape, she describes the scene with remarkable yet cool and detached detail. Photographing staged combat, Lê ultimately stages a dialogue about a distant war with huge consequences for American culture and lives.

Elsewhere in this catalogue Douglas Nickel describes the evolution of landscape as a genre, beginning with the removal of the figure from painted compositions in the 1700s. Today, contemporary American landscape photography is redefining the genre yet again by reintroducing the figure. The landscape, so fraught—as Deborah Bright describes in her essay in these pages—with environmental, cultural, and political issues, is both a stage for figures acting out their relationships with nature and a central character in its own drama. The photographs discussed here begin to suggest the rich territory that has opened up for American landscape photography with the inclusion of the figure, especially as it mines the tension between fiction and reality. Now, we can only await landscape photography's next act.

NOTES

1. See Susan Ehrens, *A Poetic Vision: The Photographs of Anne Brigman* (Santa Barbara, CA: Santa Barbara Museum of Art, 1995).
2. See Susan Bright, *Art Photography Now* (New York: Aperture, 2005), and Eric Lutz, *An Orchestrated Vision: The Theater of Contemporary Photography* (St. Louis, MO: St. Louis Art Museum, 2012).
3. Stephan Berg, "The Dark Side of the American Dream," in *Gregory Crewdson 1985–2005* (Ostfildern-Ruit: Hatje Cantz Verlag, 2005), 11.
4. Kurland was a graduate student of Crewdson's at Yale University, where Collier Schorr, Laurie Simmons, and others who construct imagery for the camera also taught.
5. Kurland described her process during a talk at RISD on February 28, 2012, as part of the Photography Department's T. C. Colley Lecture series. See also Meghan Dailey, "A Thousand Words: Justine Kurland," *Artforum* (April 2000), 119.
6. The project began as a commission from the High Museum in Atlanta, "Picturing the South," but soon evolved into "Broken Manual." See Siri Engberg, ed., *From Here to There: Alec Soth's America* (Minneapolis: Walker Art Center, 2010).
7. See Joanne Lukitsh, "Place Above All Else: Laura McPhee's *River of No Return*," and McPhee's interview with Dabney Hailey in *River of No Return: Photographs of Laura McPhee* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008).
8. In conversation with the author, April 4, 2012.
9. In conversation with the author at the exhibition *Catherine Opie: High School Football*, Mitchell-Innes & Nash, New York, March 9, 2011.



fig. 30 Catherine Opie *Football Landscape #12 (Alice vs. W. B. Ray, Corpus Christi, TX)*, 2008, color chromogenic print, 48×64 in., Courtesy of the Artist and Mitchell-Innes & Nash



fig. 31 An-My Lê *29 Palms: Captain Folsom*, 2003–2004, gelatin silver print, 26×37½ in., RISD Museum: Helen M. Danforth Acquisition Fund 2007.7.2