## November 27th, 2012

## "America in View" at RISD

by Jeanne Schinto

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Photos courtesy RISD Museum of Art

America in View: Landscape Photography 1865 to Now at the Museum of Art Rhode Island School of Design in Providence, Rhode Island, through January 13, 2013, plays a gutsy game with the term "landscape." I'm not used to seeing Ansel Adams, preeminent practitioner of what is sometimes called the "rocksand-roots" school of nature photography of the mid-20th century, and Ed Ruscha labeled as landscape photographers.

Ruscha (b. 1937) is a conceptual

artist. One of his small,

inexpensively produced artist's books from the 1960's, Every Building on the Sunset Strip, is included in this provocative show. To create it, he mounted a motorized Nikon camera to the back of a pickup truck and drove two and a half miles along the famed California boulevard, photographing each building he passed. The resulting deadpan work presents the pictures in

order, labeled with their street

numbers, nothing more.

I'm also not used to seeing

labeled as landscapes such images as Arthur Rothstein's 1936 image of a father and his sons fighting to stay upright during a 1936 dust storm in Cimarron County, Oklahoma; Lee Friedlander's 1971 Atlantic City, New Jersey, showing a boardwalk Ferris wheel and a big-haired woman on a billboard; and Catherine Opie's 2008 full-color chromogenic print of that most artificial of turfs (a football field) with players lined up under the Friday night lights in Corpus

Christi, Texas.

which begins with works by the genre's earliest masters, e.g., Carleton Watkins, William Henry Jackson, William H. Bell, and Timothy O'Sullivan, and ends with Opie and other contemporary artists, beautifully makes its case. Landscape isn't just trees and mountains, roots and rocks. It's strip mines, nuclear-testing fields, suburban tract houses, superhighways, large-scale agriculture, abandoned mill buildings, clear-cut forests, swimming holes, somebody's farm, somebody's skyscraper.

While the exhibition's curators,

like Ruscha in his artist book,

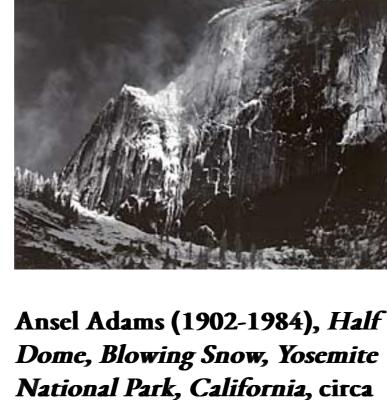
Yet this chronological survey,

don't overtly press us on environmental issues, viewers may find, as I did, that thoughts about these concerns come bubbling up. For example, I was caught up short when I turned a corner and entered the wrong gallery in the sequence, just after seeing Watkins's crystalline Oregon views Cape Horn, Columbia River and Tooth Bridge and Eagle Creek Crossing, Cascades captured on mammoth, collodion-coated glass plates. Suddenly it was a century later, give or take, and I was having a premature



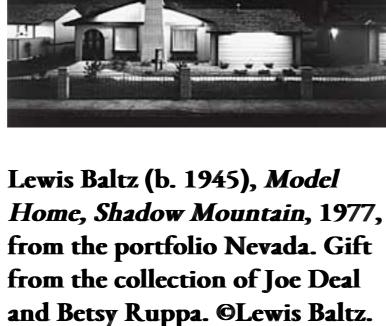
River, 1867, albumen print. Helen M. Danforth Acquisition Fund.

1916), Cape Horn, Columbia

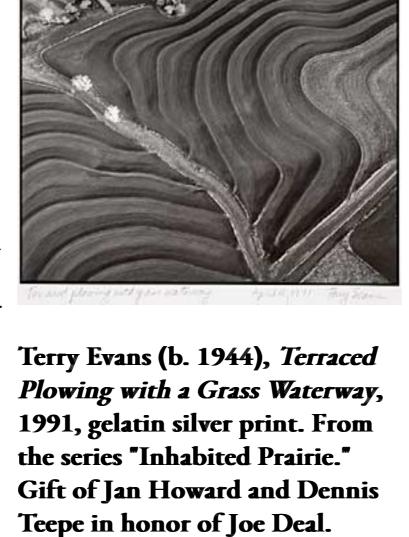


the 1970's. Museum purchase with funds from the National Endowment for the Arts. ©2012 The Ansel Adams Publishing Rights Trust.

1955, gelatin silver print from



Joe Deal (1947-2010), Kite, Chino Hills, California, 1984. Gift of the artist. OThe Estate of Joe Deal, courtesy Robert Mann Gallery.



encounter with John Divola's two-color inkjet prints of vandalized beachfront property on Zuma Beach in Malibu. In 1977, through the broken picture window of the sorry place, Divola photographed one of the country's most spectacular ocean views at sunset. The museum's signage stated that "this incongruously devastated and chaotic place suggests doubt about our ability to care for our

**©Terry Evans.** 

My immediate, muttered reaction was, "We've made a mess of things, all right, and it didn't take very long." But as I stood there studying the ruined real estate of Divola's dystopian vision, I gradually arrived at a more positive and perhaps more accurate takeaway—nothing, and certainly not mere hapless vandals, could destroy the kind of beauty that

the sunset represents. The building must have continued to crumble; it

environment." Doubt? That's an understatement if there ever was one.

must now be gone. America in View, 150 images mostly drawn from RISD's collection, had its genesis in a generous gift from Joe Deal (1947-2010) and his widow, Betsy Ruppa. In 1975 Deal was one of eight photographers chosen for the landmark show New Topographics: Photographs of a Man-Altered Landscape. When it opened at the International Museum of Photography at the George Eastman House in Rochester, New York, that was the first time an American museum defined deadpan documents of industrial parks and highway culture as landscapes. Now, almost 40 years later, most of the photographers from that show—Robert Adams,

Lewis Baltz, Henry Wessel, Frank Gohlke, Stephen Shore, and Deal—are

represented in this one.

subject to flooding.

The Baltz work is from the artist's 1977 portfolio of 15 silver gelatin prints meant to be viewed together, Nevada. The subject is home construction and trailer parks displacing unobstructed views in an area around Reno. The first half is the inescapably ironic "Model Home," and the second half, dream-laden "Shadow Mountain." Like Ruscha's artist book and several others in the exhibit, Baltz works in portfolio groupings to emphasize the change that's happening to the land or "landscape as real estate," as he once referred to his material. Robbert Flick (b. 1939), for example, is represented by S.V. 033/81, East of Lancaster, California, one in his 1981 series "Sequential Views," which

own Bloody Lane, The Battle of Antietam, from her 1983 series of Civil War sites called "Battlefield Panoramas." It's history recollected in uneasy tranquility. Sometimes the photographers have made certain politically loaded landscapes look downright seductive. Shot from the air, Emmet Gowin's 1988 Alluvial Fan, Natural Drainage near Yuma Proving Ground and the Arizona-California Border was hand toned in the darkroom to show the sinuously patterned scene's muted earth tones to their best advantage, despite their implications. Alluvial fans are dangerous and damaging,

Then there is a Chicago view, John Dowell's Wacker Drive, a color inkjet

print from 2005. This shows just the bottom half or so of the skyscraper,

shot at night, perhaps from a skyscraper across the way, with the city

reflected in its window glass. Are we supposed to think this is evil? It's

shows frame by frame what you'd typically see through the window of a

moving vehicle. And Deborah Bright, one of the curators, gives us her

hard to. Who hasn't been seduced at one time or other by the big-city lights? Nothing is simple here. Edward Curtis's An Inland Waterway from The North American Indian (1914) is not what it seems. The frontier was long gone by then, and the Native Americans who posed for him had already been relocated or removed to reservations. Even the untitled circa 1903 view of Yosemite's Mariposa Grove,

attributed to Julius T. Boysen, has its double-side story. Boysen was one

of many photographers who opened studios in Yosemite after it was

preserved as a national park in 1890. It quickly became one of the most popular tourist destinations in the United States. Boysen and others made a living by taking portraits and selling photographs of famous sites within the park, such as the giant sequoias. It's thanks in part to William Henry Jackson that we have those parks, but it's thanks in part to Boysen and other commercial photographers that we have big traffic jams in those same parks today. This show doesn't trace a straight and predictable trajectory from pristine and pure to poison. That's what makes it superlative. It's impossible to

divide these visions into utopian and otherwise. Each contains a little of

each. Landscape, as it turns out, is an idea rather than a place.

For more information about the exhibition, phone (401) 454-6500 or see the Website (www.risdmuseum.org). For information about how to buy the catalog, see the Website (www.risdworks.com). Aaron Siskind (1903-1991), Martha's Vineyard,



Deep Hole, New Hampshire, 2002, color chromogenic prints. From the series "Where We Find Ourselves." Gift of the artist in honor of Joe Deal.

114B, 1954, gelatin silver

print. Gift of Mr. Robert

**Aaron Siskind Foundation.** 

Justin Kimball (b. 1961),

B. Menschel. Courtesy



1988. Promised gift of Dr. and Mrs. William G. Tsiaras. ©Emmet and Edith Gowin, courtesy Pace/MacGill Gallery, New York City. Lee Friedlander (b. 1934),

## Francisco.



David T. Hanson (b. 1948), Coal Strip Mine, Power Plant and Waste Ponds, 1984, color chromogenic print. Museum purchase: Gift of the Artist's Development Fund of the Rhode Island Foundation. ©1984 David T. Hanson, from the book Colstrip,

Montana by David T. Hanson (Taverner Press, 2010).

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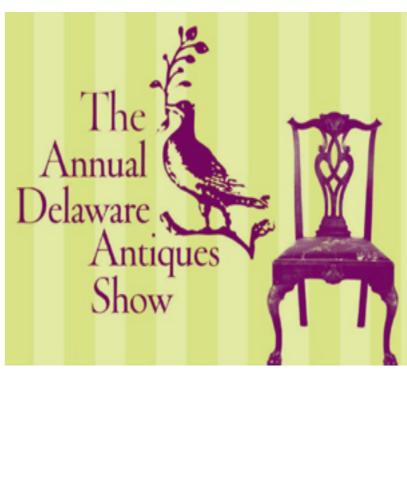
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- Emmet Gowin (b. 1941), Alluvial Fan, Natural Drainage near Yuma Proving Ground and the California-Arizona Border,
- Atlantic City, New Jersey, 1971, gelatin silver print. Museum purchase with funds from the National **Endowment for the Arts.** ©Lee Friedlander, courtesy Fraenkel Gallery, San

