

Ziegesar, Peter von. *Jon Scott Anderson at Thornhill Gallery*, Review, January 2006, pp. 28-31.

From time immemorial, landscape has been construed as a metaphor for the human soul. In *Empty and Full*, the writer Francois Chen remarked that in traditional Chinese painting, “The external world is not only ‘out there’; it is seen from the inside... to paint the mountain and water is to paint the portrait of man—not so much his physical portrait (although this aspect is not absent) but more of his mind and spirit: his rhythm, his gait and bearing, his torments, his contradictions, his fears, his peaceful or exuberant joy, his secret desires, his dream of the infinite, and so forth.”

Long and very narrow, the pristine slice of the *Stillaguamich River*, in Washington State, stretches before one like an old-fashioned panorama, more than the eye can take in at once. So detailed is the photography that surfaces of rock and water pop out in a startlingly realistic way, while the red and grey colors of river rock and the icy blacks of the water swirling around it are saturated and almost supernatural. The scene is revelatory and personal and feels as if it has been extracted with great clarity from some distant wilderness.

To approach one of Anderson’s photomurals as a simple example of landscape photography is to invite vertigo, however. Often the artist has digitally “stitched” together several perspectives into one scene. As the picture’s narrative unfolds, one has a sense of movement from near to far, and one occasionally falls into a hole, so to speak, as in the Chinese scrolls Anderson admires, where a poetic vagabond can wander from small boat, to town, to high mountain, all within the same continuous two-dimensional plane.

For the past decades he has studied the aesthetics of Chinese brush painting and Japanese gardening. Varied experiences and aesthetics have imbued the current works with a unique and careful mix, both nature-based and philosophically-hued. Much as a traditional Japanese gardener arranges elements of nature, river rock, trees, swept sand, to satisfy philosophical and aesthetic principles, Anderson moves and replants rocks and plants within his images to record new insights and understanding. Not so much thought-provoking as thought-invoking, many of the photographic panoramas on display in his current series, re-setting places, are from the point of view of a man looking down at his feet (minus the feet), lost in thought. Though the rocks are hard, they are porous in the sense that they are seeped in the artist’s life and philosophy.

Anderson started as a painter at the Kansas City Art Institute influenced by Jackson Pollack and the ‘field’ painters. This may explain why one can sometimes stand back from the current photo-scrolls and view them as flowing, near-abstract compositions of light and color, within a shallow planar environment.

From the start, Anderson’s work tended to distill his experiences of time and place. The artist gleaned his Hood River slide shows, for example, from photographs taken over several years when he was employed as a fruit farm worker in Oregon. These time-works presented a contemplative vision of a sort of lean-to paradise, of labor regulated by weather and the seasons, set to the tune of the Mariachi music he listened to with the migrant workers among whom he lived.

Later, the artist moved from painting and still photography to motion pictures, and took a masters degree in filmmaking at Syracuse University. His method continued to be basically the same, though he had by this time come under the influence of filmmaker Jean-Luc Godard and French philosopher-critics, such as Gaston Bachelard. Anderson would gather images slowly over time, typically of his house, family and workplace, then intricately layer the scenes, without dialogue or narrative, to achieve a fluid, poetic sense of place and time. The semi-documentary films he made during this period were thoughtful interior landscapes, transforming the raw materials of his day-to-day life into reflective visual essays on aesthetics and experience.

In the 90s, like many of his contemporaries, Anderson quickly recognized the digital-imaging program, PhotoShop, as a legitimate tool of expression – similar to the brush in painting – rather than a mere means of trickery or manipulation. While past photographers created surreal effects in the darkroom, digital processing gave the artist subtler means to recreate his own version of truth. Artists such as Anthony Goicolea, Barry Frydlander and Loretta Lux freely use the computer to create synthetic landscapes and portraits that both undermine our sense of reality and ask important questions about it.

Anderson neither accentuates the “stitching” of disparate images necessary in his work, nor tries to hide it. In a photscroll such as *roots*, which is among the most calligraphic and gestural of this series, the artist has allowed the edges between the images to remain ragged and apparent, and probably intentionally so. In contrast, it’s very easy to sink, so to speak, into the epic and almost seamless narrative of *lake stones 2* – a cultured stonescape from Lake Superior. As in a well-edited film, one loses sight altogether of the fact that the separate scenes that make up the whole were likely taken in different locations and on different days.

In the first of his photo scrolls, *temple moss*, a composite view of the Saiho-ji Temple in Kyoto, Anderson cinematically combined a close-up, medium shot and long shot within a single frame, setting a pattern that would sustain many of the later works. This photography is meant to be experienced in time, to be read from one end to another. Indeed, because of its length, it’s almost impos-

sible to view it in any other way. A tiny path leads one's eye from a platform of ancient rock illuminated by a ray of sun to a bumpy, tree-shaded area of emerald moss, where it seems the foot of man has never walked.

That this unabashedly beautiful scene persists in being the most popular of Anderson's scroll photos is a subject of some rue to the artist. A gardener prefers to put together his own stones and to place his trees where he wants them. temple moss has appropriated, and is an homage to, the centuries-old craft of the temple garden. Yet it is apt that the first work of a series so influenced by Chinese and Japanese art should do so. The "Sixth Canon" of traditional brush painting emphasizes that the artist should connect with the past, that he allow "his brush to retrace the inspired hand and arm movements of the great masters."*

In any case, Anderson says he is somewhat less satisfied with this work, simply because it portrays and channels a natural setting that has already been shaped by others. Domestic scenes, such as *webs*, *webs 2* and *clouds*, shot in the artist's backyard in Kansas City, harken back to Anderson's earlier timeworks, such as the films and slide shows, except that their scope seems more epic – almost in the realm of magic. As myopic visions obsessed with natural details, they seem to argue effectively for William Blake's interiority of landscape, that there is no view capable of being seen by humans doesn't contain the whole of his experience:

To see a world in a grain of sand,
And a heaven in a wild flower,
Hold infinity in the palm of your hand,
And eternity in an hour.

In *web 2*, one steps along the frame on a bed of brilliant ivy leaves. The image has a fairy-like quality. There are tiny webs of spiders. clouds, of a massive Kansas City cloud system about to break into storm, specifically seems to invoke Alfred Stieglitz's "Equivalents" – the photos of the 1920s, with their soaring depths, oxygen-less blacks and hints of something sacred and living inside, which were meant to represent the artist's own life philosophy.

But the purpose of these scenes is not purely revelatory, although the artist's satisfaction at having understood – and to some extent have been changed and renewed by contact with – these nearby place settings is apparent. Instead, like a Chinese brush scroll they emulate, they invoke an intellectual journey. The Chinese scholar would know before taking a first step towards visiting a distant shrine, that along the way he would encounter many unexpected sights and have conversations with poets he had never met. In the end he himself would be transformed. Each of Scott Anderson's photo-scrolls invites one to follow a journey he has taken. They seem to say, just for its own sake, that the scholar's path is well worth taking.

[*Sherman E. Lee, *A History of Far Eastern Art*, 6th ed. (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall and Abrams, 1994)]

-----Peter von Zeigesar won a PEN fiction award and has contributed articles to *Art in America*, *The New York Times*, *The New York Times Sunday Magazine*, *Outside Magazine* and *The Kansas City Star*, among other publications.