

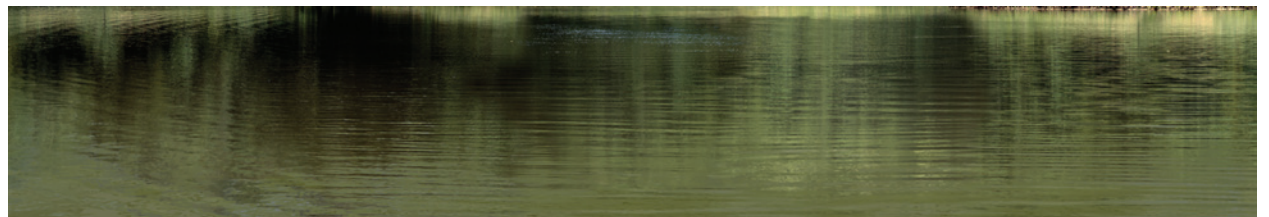


Going Out and Coming In:

Jon Scott Anderson's Man-Made Nature Photographs

Steve Shapiro

Photography is overexposed at present. Museums are building new additions to house collections like developers breaking ground on dream homes. The Metropolitan Museum of Art has just opened a wing devoted to a private collectors' extensive donation, and The Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art is preparing to feast on its fortune as the beneficiary of Hallmark's longtime holdings of classic photographers. Photographic images, even those less-than-iconic, are being auctioned at record high prices. The notion of the amateur photographer is also quickly being reestablished — the advent of Flickr, the photo-sharing website, and the ubiquitous cell phone camera both inspire and threaten to turn us into a nation of Diane Arbuses and Lee Friedlanders. If photography has come full circle, from big art to big business, it is still, like most of the fine arts, an act of solitary complicity between the artist and the viewer. The romanticism of the creative



re-setting places: pond, 2007, archival pigment print, ED. 7, 16 " x 94".

artist may have rubbed off at least as long ago as Andy Warhol, but there is a Warhol (or an Arbus or a Serra) out there, waiting to transform the day into a painting, a photograph, or an installation.

In Scott Anderson's large-scale photographs of nature, the wait is a pretext. He begins his work outside, taking photographs of things that either stand out or need to be teased out of some pattern of indistinguishable making;

then, he reworks the images in PhotoShop — a process invaluable to many contemporary photographers — to arrive at a new place that is more memory than landscape. In a series of conversations held at his West Side studio and at the Dolphin Gallery, prior to his new show, *re-setting a place* (November 23rd through December 29th), Anderson revealed an easy discipline toward his work. The digital manipulation is not his goal but rather a way to thinking through the photographs. Each lengthy

photograph consists of perhaps a half a dozen shots fitted together, not so the eye can see but such that it *knows*.

“My work is attached to the landscape tradition,” he explained to me early on. Indeed, his images of grasslands, rocks, skies, and ponds resonate, at first glance, with the built-in unconscious connection we have to seeing so many photographic still lifes, whether of the Ansel Adams, Minor White variety, where nothing is out of place and even the clouds feel *posed*, or the modernist inclusive aesthetic of the snapshot kids of the sixties, who did not seem to know how to take a photograph. For Anderson, the manipulation begins when he is out looking for things or shapes which catch his eye; it is a modern reverberation of photography’s stock in trade for manipulating images from the medium’s beginning. He has traveled and shot around the world from Mexico to Minnesota to Japan. For the new show, he worked in an eighty-acre private woodlands outside Louisburg, Kansas, going in all seasons and at all times of the day. Though his output is spare, each photograph achieves an iconic reach; he does not need to keep making over the same image. (Repetition is one of photography’s greatest blessings and its curse, particularly in the landscape field that Anderson works in.)

Looking at Anderson’s photographs, one comes to understand that they represent a multiplicity of references: the *pure* classicism of Adams and Edward

Weston; Anderson’s interest in the idea of travel as storytelling, as evinced in the unwinding pictorial narratives of Chinese scrolls and the pithy haikus of the medieval wandering poet Basho; his background in film and his academic education framed by the Field painters and the Abstract Expressionists. Images such as *creekbed* (2006) or *vines #4* (2006) yield the full range of Anderson’s pursuits. Vibrant in color, the pictures trigger associations to movies and to paintings. I am reminded of Werner Herzog’s films, such as *Aguirre*, whenever I look at *vines #4* and his masterful *grasslands* casts a joyful reflection onto Pollock’s swirling all-over works, in which space and place combine into a texture of emotions. The recent *grasslands 2*, bleached out and reminiscent of Anselm Keifer’s large constructions of straw, exerts a strange pull on the viewer to explain why the scene is so haunting and yet comforting somehow, too. The manipulation comes into play when Anderson adds to an image’s naturalness; in *creekbed*, he moved a long branch to make it tell a story and digitally repeated a tiny red leaf as decoration. Anything is possible in nature — like a two-headed calf — but it is Anderson’s prerequisite to create a natural world that is surreptitiously man-made and then re-made. Man cannot help but have a point-of-view; nature is just itself. To forge a connection between the two opposites, Anderson will stretch a photograph, printing an impossible view of too much at once, like a crane shot from far overhead in a movie. As a final touch of

whimsey, some photographs even show a hint of the horizon and the sky. Tracking these pictures from side to side, corner to corner, creates new photographs within themselves.

Anderson is pleased by the multifarious interpretations of his photographs, but for him the process takes precedence. He speaks about “the process of going out and coming in, even just going out into the backyard.” In conversation, he repeatedly goes back to the Japanese aesthetic of the rock garden, where rocks and other items are placed so as to appear organic, yet the placement favors a spiritual sensibility that nature necessarily leaves out.

“Form is how memory works,” the critic Peter Schjeldahl has noted; in Scott Anderson’s man-made nature photographs, the contradiction is necessary to following the art. One need not have traveled where Anderson did to shoot his photographs to find something in them, or to care what he applied to them. Form creates its own memories, its own tensions, its own joys; the photograph is an excuse, almost, for the photographer to find himself going over old ground, in more ways than one. ●

Steve Shapiro is a longtime film and book critic and one of this publication’s original contributing writers. Shapiro’s essays on art, artists, and the world in between appear regularly in *Review*.



re-setting places: grassland 2, 2007, archival pigment print, ED. 1/7, 27-3/4" x 86".