

Astrud Reed - University of Oklahoma - Art History Minor

Spring 2012 Directed Readings: AHI 4960

Professor B. Byronn Price, Charles Russell Center Director

Photographers and the 20th Century Western Landscape (1900-1960)

Landscape photography in the 20th century transformed from sterile documentation of strange lands to a more personal, artistic capture of the American West. This period's photographers expressed emotion in their work, while often focusing more on the people inhabiting the area and their ties to the land than was done in 19th century landscape photos. The changing definitions of photography were based on America's catastrophic upheaval, spawned from industrialization, urban growth, wars, and the Great Depression. National perspectives altered concerning what was important, what was art, and what was entertainment. The era's photographers were forced to fluctuate with the morphing of a culture, responding eloquently with pictorialism and preservationism, while constantly fine tuning the meld between the roles of documentarian and artist, spiritual aesthetics and technological advances in the industry.

Pictorialism emerged at the turn of the century as a stark contrast from survey photography - emphasizing mood, emotion, and artistic purview. Techniques not previously used in landscape photography, like the use of soft-focus lenses, design, personal expression, flat, decorative forms, and negative and print manipulation creating broad gray scales, began to emerge to romanticize the images in an attempt to recreate the atmosphere for the viewer. "Many enter the field of photography with the impulse to record a scene. They often fail to realize that what they wish to do is to record the emotion felt upon viewing that scene . . . a mere record

photograph in no way reflects that emotion." ¹ This artistic movement that highlighted the beauty of the land was best captured by Laura Gilpin (1891 – 1979). Gilpin’s background, which combined technical training and an adventurous spirit, was ideal for leading photographers into a new realm of landscape photography. The key to her greatness came from an understanding and appreciation of her surroundings and its ability to sustain domestic life and influence people. “For Gilpin the southwestern landscape was neither an empty vista awaiting human settlement nor a jewel-like scene resisting human intrusion. It was a peopled landscape with a rich history and tradition of its own, an environment that shaped and molded the lives of its inhabitants.” ² Other women photographers of the period, Dorothea Lange (1895 – 1965), Anne Brigman (1869 – 1950), Clara Sipprell (1880 – 1975), Barbara Morgan (1900 – 1992), and Louise Deshong Woodbridge (1848 – 1925), mostly used landscapes as backgrounds for portraits or only completed short studies of the American West landscape, making Gilpin’s large body of work, of a land she loved, very unique for both women and men photographers. Gilpin’s photographic work may have begun with pictorialism and vast expanses, but it changed over the course of her life to include the mystical and historical capture of archaeological sites of the Southwest, environmental studies of the Rio Grande, and a large collection based on the adaptable Navajo culture and their peoples’ strong ties to their physical surroundings. “This deep sense that she,

¹ Laura Gilpin, "Historic Architecture Photography: The Southwest," *The Complete Photographer* 6, no. 31 (July 1942): 1987.

² Martha A. Sandweiss, “Laura Gilpin and the Tradition of American Landscape Photography.” In *The Desert Is No Lady* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987). Section 1.

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too, was somehow a part of the landscape and tradition she photographed is what distinguishes Gilpin from the other great photographers of the American Southwest.”³

Ansel Adams is known by many as the father of environmental photography. His sharp, high contrast Yosemite National Park images of perfectly lit cliff faces mostly taken with large format cameras inspired the nation to travel west and experience these magnificent vistas for themselves. Creating appreciation for nature was surely an initial goal, but after a tourism onslaught, he began to use his images as political tools for landscape protection. “But the popularity of this genre of leisure consumption began to take its toll. Nature was literally being loved to death. In 1908 sixty-nine thousand travelers visited the national parks. By 1921, annual attendance exceeded one million. Automobiles revolutionized access and cheaply excavated dirt roads gave passage to previously inaccessible backcountry.”⁴ Like Laura Gilpin, Adams had found a deep, spiritual connection with the land that he shot. His Zone System techniques afforded him the ability to adjust final print contrast and determine proper exposure allowing him to create powerful images with sharp clarity and depth that realistically expressed how he viewed, as well as, felt about the American West landscape. His black and whites are renowned for the same reason as Gilpin’s “color seemed too literal a rendering of the scene she observed.”⁵

³ Martha A. Sandweiss, “Laura Gilpin and the Tradition of American Landscape Photography.” In *The Desert Is No Lady* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987). Section 3.

⁴ Deborah Bright. “The Machine in the Garden Revisited: American Environmentalism and Photographic Aesthetics” *Art Journal* 51 (Summer 1992): Page 61.

⁵ Martha A. Sandweiss, “Laura Gilpin and the Tradition of American Landscape Photography.” In *The Desert Is No Lady* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987). Section 2.

His appreciation of the national parks began as a child, but was fostered through his relationship with John Muir, twenty-two year initial Sierra Club president who understood that the success of preservation came from tourism and outdoor recreation. Adams' landscape photos were often used to further this mission even though he proclaimed for a great deal of his life to not have social and political affiliations in these arenas. ⁶ Adams, like Edward Weston, focused on the natural with the belief that current event agendas should not be sought by photographers in an attempt to be disengaged in their art. Both created timeless pieces and modern aesthetics, even though their styles and subjects varied. "Embracing aesthetics and shunning politics, they hoped to avoid the pressing issues of the moment, and make nature's enduring beauty the focus of their personal and professional lives . . . (but) for all their devotion to natural beauty, they were not as disengaged as they claimed to be." ⁷ Landscape photography's role in the environment began to have a much greater influence during the 20th century. It is also started having more power in social and political arenas as seen during the Great Depression and the radical protests movements of the 1960s and 1970s.

The Great Depression brought harsh realities to the nation after a long period of growth and prosperity. It also brought many great programs that funded some of the most famous documentary landscape photographs of the 20th century. The dilemma of documentary

⁶ Jonathan Spaulding. "Yosemite and Ansel Adams: Art, Commerce, and Western Tourism," *Pacific Historical Review* 65 (1996): 615-639.

⁷ David P. Peeler, "The Art of Disengagement: Edward Weston and Ansel Adams," *Journal of American Studies*, Vol. 27, No. 3, American Art and Music (Dec., 1993), pp. 311-312.

photographers from this period was much greater than that of the survey photographers of the 19th century. While truthful depictions were crucial to these recorders of contemporary events,⁸ photographers in this era were also artists who understood the necessity for pleasing the public while also possessing the desire to express their original artistic style. The *Migrant Mother* image, taken by Dorothea Lange, is synonymous with the Depression becoming a timeless American symbol of overcoming adversity. As a Farm Security photographer, Lange's job was to document the farmland, crops, and the people working the land. Many of these landscape images clearly showed the western erosion devastation caused by poor soil care and a lack of crop rotation. The images were an important tool used to get governmental funds to aid in revitalization of these areas. It is incongruent with the mission that the most famous of the images from this Work Administration Project does not show the land, and was at least partially staged and edited, but it did bring a great deal of attention to the plight of the migrant farmers.

The situation was extremely important to landscape photography then. Where is the line drawn between the real and an artist's vision? The blend of pictorialism and truth is still being defined today. What are the rules regulating how much or in what situation a photographer's motives can become an integral part of an image? Is it possible for them ever not to play a role? "In his introduction to the Museum of Modern Art's 1966 retrospective of Lange's work, critic George P. Elliott maintained that *Migrant mother* had developed a life of its own with its own

⁸ James Curtis, *Mind's Eye, Mind's Truth: FSA Photography Reconsidered* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1989). Page 47.

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message rather than its maker's There is a sense, he continued, in which a photographer's apotheosis is to become as anonymous as his camera . . . For an artist like Dorothea Lange, the making of a great, perfect, anonymous image is a trick of grace, about which she can do little beyond making herself available for that gift of grace." ⁹

⁹ James Curtis, *Mind's Eye, Mind's Truth: FSA Photography Reconsidered* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1989). Page 47.