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Monuments of a Postindustrial Landscape

By MARTHA SCHWENDENER

The first-floor galleries at the [Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art](#) were home until recently to the heart of the collection: 19th-century landscape paintings by [Thomas Cole](#), [Frederic Church](#) and [Albert Bierstadt](#), members of the [Hudson River School](#), which were collected by and commissioned directly from the artists by the museum's founders and earliest patrons. Removed last fall for the installation of a new heating and cooling system, they have been replaced by an exhibition of contemporary photographs that show a very different version — and vision — of nature.

Instead of forests eluding the creep of industrialization or mountains and sunsets full of Romantic-era symbolism, “An Artificial Wilderness: The Landscape in Contemporary Photography” features monuments of the postindustrial landscape: gas stations, parking lots, and signs and buildings stamped with corporate logos.

Some of the great analysts of early postwar urban sprawl are here, like [Ed Ruscha](#), represented by a vitrine of self-published artist's books from the 1960s. One of them, “Every Building on the Sunset Strip” (1966), is a deadpan representation of exactly what the title promises.

Photographed in black and white, the buildings on the Sunset Strip in Los Angeles are printed along the edges of a long piece of paper folded into an accordion configuration, with a strip of white running down the middle like a street. Two other books, “Twenty-Six Gasoline Stations” (1962) and “Thirty-Four Parking Lots” (1967), function almost like works of contemporary urban archeology, with the parking lots, photographed from above, resembling ancient burial ruins and geoglyphs.

[Bernd and Hilla Becher's](#) mid-'60s photographs of cooling towers in Germany document obsolete industrial structures in Europe rather than urban sprawl. [Lewis Baltz](#), who photographed early suburban development, is represented by a much later work, “Piazza Sigmund Freud” (1989), an eerie red-pink triptych of a parking lot near the central train station in Milan. A student of the Bechers, [Frank Breuer](#), uses the tight-cropping techniques of his teachers to frame street-sign logos — photographed, like the Bechers' images, against a plain white sky — and rectilinear buildings that look like minimalist sculptures branded with corporate logos.

Claire Beckett plays a similar game, photographing real buildings in such a manner that they end up looking unreal. The subject of “Above Medina Jabal Town, National Training Center, Fort Irwin, California” (2008) is a military building in which storage containers have been painted to look like a town in the Middle East. With its muted desert hues and artificial subject, the photograph looks like a digital animation or a scene from a video game.

The works of Louise Lawler and James Welling are more conceptual in their approach, showing how highly constructed our versions of “nature” tend to be. For “Fragment/Frame/Text (#163)” (1984), Ms. Lawler photographed a museum wall label next to a landscape painting by Claude Lorrain; only a fragment of the landscape appears in the photo. Mr. Welling’s early-’80s images of tin foil, crumpled and then unfolded and photographed, have been compared to everything from night skies to the cosmos. Hung here alongside a dark photo of “Foliage” (1981), the foil photograph, “Untitled (Foil)” (1981), suggests a view into a forest as well.

That is not to say that there are no actual forests or mountains here; it’s just that they are generally marked by human intervention. For “groundspeed (Rose Petal) #17” (2001), the Australian artist Rosemary Laing installed a carpet in a forest in New South Wales, Australia. It has been carefully integrated with the landscape — tucked under branches and roots and with a few leaves scattered on top — so that the photograph looks like a digital construction. It is instead an imaginative marriage of “artificial” nature (the carpet with its English rose pattern) and the real thing — which ends up looking fake, too.

Ana Mendieta was well known for her performance-based photographs, like the fertility symbol in “Guanarooca (First Woman)” (1981), which she carved in a cave in Jaruco State Park outside her native Havana (after nearly two decades of exile in the United States). Also here are several photographs from her “Silueta” series from the ’70s, in which she covered her body with mud or flowers or ash and stood near trees or lay down in gravelike trenches.

An artist who is more of a copyist than an originator is Andy Goldsworthy, whose 1996 photographs of a hole carved into a mound of snow built in the space below a low tree branch feels like a redux of works by earlier artists like Ms. Mendieta and Nancy Holt (who is not included here).

The photographs of Edward Burtynsky, although they look artificial, are perhaps the most “real” in the show — and the most sobering. The home page of Mr. Burtynsky’s Web site includes a quotation by the artist that encourages us to have “a certain reverence for what nature is because we are connected to it,” and “if we destroy nature, we destroy ourselves.”

Mr. Burtynsky has traveled around the world photographing despoiled sites. A photograph of a

vast concentration of discarded automobile tires (at its peak, 42 million tires) is captured in the relatively deadpan “Oxford Tire Pile #1, Westley, California” (1999). But more often Mr. Burtynsky’s documents of environmental disaster are photographed at times of day and in such a fashion that they look hauntingly beautiful — earning them a place in the art world’s slightly unflattering category of “ruin pornography.” [Bangladeshi ship breakers](#), who undertake the dirty and dangerous work of tearing apart old freighters, are captured here in photographs that are as richly romantic as a painting by Thomas Cole or [Caspar David Friedrich](#) (and with the same compositional tricks of scale: tiny humans are dwarfed by the hulking wrecks of the freighters).

But in many ways, Mr. Burtynsky’s photographs seem the most at home in these galleries at the Wadsworth, where the elegant rooms and careful lighting created a theatrical stage for 19th-century paintings that show nature in a majestic light. They do the same for the high drama of what Mr. Burtynsky photographs: a sadder, uglier side of humans’ interaction with nature.

“An Artificial Wilderness: The Landscape in Contemporary Photography,” Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art, 600 Main Street, Hartford, through Jan. 5. Information: (860) 278-2670 or wadsworthatheneum.org.