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*Laid Bare
in the
Landscape*



I wanted to go and be free ... That was all I wanted.¹
—Anne Brigman

Anne Brigman penned these lines while reflecting on her journeys into the High Sierra, where she made groundbreaking photographs of herself laid bare in the landscape. One of Brigman's earliest known nude self-portraits, *The Brook*, was made in 1905 at the dawn of the twentieth century, against the backdrop of a cultural shift in values from the late-nineteenth century Victorian period to the modern era. American women were fighting for the right to vote and redefining their roles in society. It was during this time that Brigman courageously crafted her own voice and identity as a modern, independent woman. "Fear is the great chain which binds women and prevents their development, and fear is the one apparently big thing which has no real foundation in life," Brigman asserted in a 1913 San Francisco newspaper interview on the topic of women and absolute freedom. "Cast fear out of the lives of women and they can and will take their place ... as the absolute equal of man."² The paradigmatic cultural and political shift in America during this time influenced art production as well—an outcome expressed in Brigman's affirmation that between 1908 and 1927, "she slowly found [her] power with the camera."³ Although the term *feminist art* was not coined until nearly seventy years after Brigman made her first photographs, the suggestion that her camera gave her the power to redefine her place as a woman in society establishes her as an important forerunner in the field. Writing in 1980, cultural critic Lucy Lippard asserted that feminist art "is neither a style nor a movement ... but an ideology, a value system, a revolutionary strategy, a way of life."⁴ This definition is as easily applied to Brigman as it is to the numerous women artists and photographers who began making work in the late 1960s and '70s in an effort to further women's rights and assert a place for themselves in the art historical canon. For Brigman to objectify her own nude body as the subject of her photographs in the early 1900s was radical. To do so outdoors in a place perceived as an unoccupied and near-desolate wilderness was revolutionary. No longer restricted by social norms or relegated to the role of model in the artist's studio, Brigman, and the female artists who followed her, sought freedom by claiming their bodies and the landscape as their own. By the second half of the century, many women artists had discovered that the act of making nude photographs of themselves and other women outdoors forced new and challenging dialogues surrounding definitions of beauty, femininity, vulnerability, ritual, identity, body politics, and environmentalism. To compare the proto-feminist landscape photographs of Brigman to works by her feminist counterparts of the latter twentieth and early twenty-first centuries is to weave a new

thread through generations of visionary women artists who have aimed to further alternative ways of seeing and knowing.

CONFRONTING TRADITION

Anne Brigman (née Nott) was born in 1869 into an influential Protestant missionary family with ties to Hawaii's earliest Christian missions. Her formative years were shaped by the social customs of her race and traditions of her upper-middle-class world: obligations of daily prayer, a classical education, visits to her maternal grandmother's parlor, and the social expectation that women's work was best suited to the domestic sphere. Although later in life Brigman would write of "the ache in [her] legs for flight ... [and] ... the wild, wonderful need to stampede"⁵ from the trappings of her youth, her worldview was shaped, at least early on, by the patriarchal values, belief systems, and conventions of her Victorian-era upbringing. At the age of sixteen, Anne moved with her family to central California. Nine years later, in 1894, she married a much older master mariner, and as was expected, assumed the surname of her new husband, Martin Brigman. Their marriage afforded the twenty-five-year-old Anne Brigman the opportunity to see the world while accompanying her husband at sea. The couple made their home in a quaint bungalow not far from the bustling port of Oakland, across the bay from San Francisco. It was there that Brigman discovered the camera and began to make her first photographs. Engaging her sisters as her models, Brigman's earliest images rely on conventional art historical tropes celebrating traditional views of womanhood. The subjects of these photographs range from seated portraits and romantic silhouettes of young women surrounded by flowers to depictions of mothers with children in bucolic garden settings (Figs. 1, 2, and 3) [see also pages 301–303]. Taken together, these images celebrate and idealize traditional ideas of motherhood, feminine beauty, innocence, and purity, while asserting the constructed social role of women as passive, fragile, and decorative objects. Art historian Annette Stott observed that "at the end of the nineteenth century ... a new and more comprehensive manifestation of the flower/woman metaphor began to appear. ... In this new subject type, ... the 'floral-feminine painting,' the artist placed one woman in a flower garden setting and manipulated composition, color, texture, and form to make the woman look as much like flowers as possible. ... Floral-feminine paintings encoded a traditional Victorian definition of femininity ... and reasserted that women and the activities of women artists belonged properly in the world of flowers."⁶ Through



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1
Blasoms, published in
Camera Craft, 1905

2
Egypt, published in
Camera Craft, 1905

3
Untitled, 1908
Private Collection

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3



4

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5

4
[Anne Brigman], not dated
George Eastman Museum

5
[Nudes on rocks], not dated
George Eastman Museum

One might assume that such disfigurement ... would deter an emerging woman photographer from turning her camera upon herself. This was not the case for Brigman, who instead defied social norms, and began to make nude self-portraits of her own wounded body outdoors in the landscape.

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her classical academic studies, Brigman had likely encountered such images in the work of Victorian-era pre-Raphaelite and impressionist painters, as well as in photographs by Gertrude Käsebier, whose works reinforced gendered social roles that came to be associated with the cult of domesticity during the Victorian era.⁷ ¶ Brigman's first photographs were well received and selected to be exhibited as early as 1902 in the San Francisco Photographic Salon; they were also reproduced and circulated in *Camera Craft*, a magazine publication of the San Francisco Camera Club. Around this same time, New York-based photographer Alfred Stieglitz established a movement called the Photo-Secession that promoted photography as fine art. Largely responsible for shaping modern photography's canon, Stieglitz published Brigman's work in his influential periodical *Camera Work* and awarded her membership in the Photo-Secession in 1903. In her letters and writing, Brigman often referred to Stieglitz as "The Man," deferentially acknowledging his role as the powerful individual who shaped the canon and could make or break her reputation and career as a photographer.⁸ Referring to Stieglitz's New York gallery and the others (primarily men) who comprised the Photo-Secession, she once admitted, "This little place, the Man in back of It, the Fellows in back of him and yet shoulder to him, stand for one of the great storm centres of my life."⁹ ¶ Brigman's continued experimentation and subsequent achievements with her camera paralleled significant changes unfolding in her own life. By 1903, her parents had separated, and her mother and sisters moved with her into her Oakland home. She and Martin Brigman, having no children of their own, appear to have grown apart not long into their marriage. By 1908 Brigman was referring to her photographs as her "picture children," suggesting that perhaps her burgeoning career had supplanted any expectation to start a traditional family.¹⁰ ¶ During one of the couple's voyages at sea, Brigman was injured when she fell into the hold of her husband's ship, resulting in the surgical removal of one of her breasts.¹¹ A handful of unprinted negatives substantiate that Brigman's left breast was considerably scarred (Fig. 4). One might assume that such disfigurement—which threatened the very definition of idealized female beauty—would deter an emerging woman photographer from turning her camera on herself. This was not the case for Brigman, who instead defied social norms and began to make nude self-portraits of her own wounded body outdoors. It was not long before she recruited her sisters and friends to accompany her on excursions to the Sierra Nevada, where they volunteered to model nude before her camera (Fig. 5). ¶ Brigman made many such trips to the mountains

over the next few years, always embracing the challenges of her medium, along with the "happy freedom ... [and] comradeship" she found among the women with whom she journeyed.¹² Encouraged by her photographic successes, she grew more independent and confident in her own voice. By 1910, Brigman and her husband separated and she began to publicly critique conventional definitions of marriage, domesticity, and the gendered social expectations placed on women—the very things she had been personally negotiating in her own life:

*Women are, and always have been, afraid, and ordinarily they do not know what they are afraid of. They fear lest some of the little things of their domestic drudgery will go wrong and lead to some little inconvenience. They are afraid of their families when they are present and when they are absent. They fear to make changes and that is why they do not change.... Part of the cure of fear in women is making changes. A man gets change by going down town to his daily work, but a stay at home woman does not and she suffers and grows afraid of things being different than what they are, or what she thinks they are.*¹³

Up until this time, artistic representations of nude women were largely relegated to the domain of male artists who assumed the privilege of access to female models in academic art school settings or in their private studios and workshops. Writing in her seminal 1971 essay "Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?," art historian Linda Nochlin explained that "there exist," in the history of art, "no historical representations of artists drawing from the nude model which include women in any role but that of the nude model itself, an interesting commentary on the rules of propriety: that is, it is all right for a ... woman to reveal herself naked-as-an-object for a group of men, but forbidden to a woman to participate in the active study and recording of naked-man-as-an-object, or even of a fellow woman."¹⁴ ¶ There is no doubt that Brigman broke the rules of propriety in 1905—nearly sixty years before Nochlin made her observations about gender disparity in the art world. Brigman's decision to focus her camera on herself, to confront her own fears, and to accept her flawed body as a suitable basis for her photographs are proof of this. Despite Brigman's modern ambitions, however, she navigated the art world of her era by producing finished prints that conformed to the romantic sensibilities of her peers and critics. To do this, she employed extensive darkroom editing and manipulation of her negatives to conceal and enhance the

figures and forms in her photographs. This meant that the general viewer would not likely have even detected Brigman's scarred breast. "The etching tool is one of my closest allies," she admitted. "With it, all that is useless is etched away. ... So line of harmony is rendered more perfect and the motive, or underlying thought, enabled to appeal more clearly to the observer who understands and responds according to his ability." With this statement, Brigman acknowledges the balance she felt she had to strike between photographic convention and her progressive desire to "veer ... from the stern path of [photography's] iron-jawed ancestors."¹⁵ ¶ Nevertheless, Brigman's radical method of making art reflected a deliberate process of undoing the patriarchal value system that had helped to shape the content of her earliest photographs—and that continued to govern art production and the field of photography well into the twentieth century. On America's West Coast, Brigman's work developed along a parallel trajectory

to that of photographer Imogen Cunningham (1883–1976), who made her first nude self-portrait in a grassy field of dandelions on the University of Washington campus in 1906 (Fig. 6). After seeing Brigman's nude landscapes in various photographic journals, Cunningham followed suit with a series of images depicting nude figures—including her husband—in various outdoor settings such as the upper elevations of Mount Rainier. When the photographs were published in a regional newspaper, they were controversial and described by one critic as "inexcusably vulgar" and a "bestial portrayal of shame" [see page 205].¹⁶ The critic went even further: "If these pictures were posed in the open air, and there is a suspicion that one of them was, the whole gang of moral perverts who participated in the orgie [*sic*] should be arrested."¹⁷ The harsh criticism shows just how daring it was for a woman to photograph the nude figure—whether male or female—in the first decades of the 1900s. ¶ Brigman's influence is also felt in



6
Imogen Cunningham
Self-Portrait, 1906
Imogen Cunningham Trust



7
Louise Dahl-Wolfe
Night Bathing, 1939
The Center for Creative
Photography,
Tucson, Arizona



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the photography of Louise Dahl-Wolfe (1895–1989), a San Francisco-born artist who described meeting Brigman in 1921 as a “wonderful accident.” After their encounter, and on seeing her prints, Dahl-Wolfe immediately purchased her own camera, and later wrote of being so “bowled over” by Brigman’s nudes that she engaged a group of friends to “do Anne Brigmans” outdoors in the landscape.¹⁸ Dahl-Wolfe went on to become one of the first women to establish herself in the male-dominated field of fashion photography. Working for *Vanity Fair* and *Harper’s Bazaar* in the 1930s and ’40s, she was known as a groundbreaking perfectionist who reversed the male gaze in the fashion industry. Proclaiming that she hated “arty nudes in daisy fields,”¹⁹ Dahl-Wolfe’s images, such as *Night Bathing* (1939), provoked continued discourse around definitions of what constituted idealized feminine beauty in the modern era (Fig. 7). ¶ The progressive conversations engaged by these female photographers around visual representations of women remained relatively isolated until midcentury. This was due in large part to a wave of post-World War II social conservatism that placed renewed emphasis on traditional family values and women’s domestic obligations. Although Brigman achieved recognition for her work and was well known in pictorialist photography circles before the war, she fell into relative obscurity after her death in 1950. The civil rights movement and Vietnam War protests of the 1960s gave rise to feminist art movements that placed new emphasis on the voices of female artists. However, while women artists began to revisit some issues raised by their proto-feminist predecessors, they largely did so without knowledge of Brigman’s pioneering work. Nevertheless, echoes of Brigman reverberate in the feminist work of both East and West Coast artists like Cindy Sherman, Mary Beth Edelson, Judy Chicago, Barbara Kruger, and Hannah Wilke—who, with renewed energy, sought to challenge what they perceived as the tired narratives of a patriarchal art history. ¶ Within this context,



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nude self-representation via photography, performance, and film became a powerful vehicle for such confrontation—particularly when employed in outdoor landscape settings. For example, Barbara Kruger’s *We won’t play nature to your culture* (1983) overlays text onto a photograph of a woman who appears to recline in an outdoor landscape—with leaves covering her eyes—as though modeling for a male artist (Fig. 8). Kruger’s work calls visible attention to the art world convention of objectifying women’s bodies. Her statement reads as a declaration, asserting that women would no longer be complicit in a gendered scheme reinforcing male artists’ power over representations of women. Around this same time, the female activist-artist group known as the Guerrilla Girls, founded in 1984, highlighted the widespread and ongoing issue of gender disparity in the art world with their poster campaign that asked: *Do women have to be naked to get into the Met. Museum?* (1989; Fig. 9). The poster relayed hard data on the predominance of paintings depicting nude women made by male artists hanging in the Metropolitan Museum of Art. ¶ For many pioneering feminist artists, the natural landscape was an obvious place to make work that resisted conventional patriarchal strategies of representation. Cuban-born Ana Mendieta, who was exiled to America at the age of twelve, began making experimental outdoor work with her body in the early 1970s while studying at the University of Iowa. “The turning point,” explained Mendieta, “was in 1972, when I realized that my paintings were not real enough for what I want the image to convey and by real I mean I wanted my images to have power.”²⁰ After that, Mendieta began to engage physically and actively with the landscape. For example, in her self-portrait film, *Creek* (1974), Mendieta revised the story of the Shakespearean character Ophelia—the archetypal Victorian woman who was rendered voiceless, vulnerable, and near death in a pastoral body of water by the artist John Everett Millais in 1851–52 (Fig. 10). Mendieta upended that narrative by



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8
Barbara Kruger
Untitled (*We won’t play nature to your culture*), 1983
Courtesy Mary Boone Gallery

9
Guerrilla Girls
Do Women Have to be Naked to Get into the Met. Museum?
1989
Courtesy guerrillagirls.com

10
Sir John Everett Millais
Ophelia, 1851–52
Tate Gallery, London

11
Ana Mendieta
Creek, 1974
Courtesy Galerie Lelong & Co.



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placing her own nude body, alive in the water, with her back facing us—as if to deny the viewer the privilege of gazing on her figure (Fig. 11). ¶ It is worth noting that even with the emergence of feminist art in the 1970s, fine art photographs of nude women, regardless of the maker's gender, still occupied a conflicted place in American mainstream culture. The appearance of Judy Dater's *Imogen and Twinka at Yosemite* (1974) in a 1976 issue of *Life* magazine, for example, was the first time the publication ever featured a photograph of a full-frontal female nude (Fig. 12). The image shows photographer Imogen Cunningham in an encounter with a female model in a forested setting. Dater has compared the image to Thomas Hart Benton's *Persephone* (1938–39), which depicts a man gazing on a nude woman reclined against a tree (Fig. 13). Almost as soon as Dater's photograph was released, feminist critic Lucy Dougan wrote that the image “parodies depictions of male voyeurism in the history of Western art, as it playfully amends all those mythical violations of sacred places.”²¹ Dater's photograph reverses the traditional exchange of gazes that was typical in images of women made by men. ¶ Dater, who is based in the San Francisco Bay Area and familiar with the work of her predecessor Anne Brigman, went on to create a provocative body of work in the 1980s that forced further conversations about nude self-portraiture, power, and the female gaze. In a series of black-and-white images, Dater photographed her nude body among rocky and isolated outcroppings in the deserts of the American Southwest. “After the first wave feminist revolution more women felt empowered, or were looking for their inner power, wanting to take

charge of their own body image,” she explains, as one reason for undertaking the desert series. “It was a way of testing your self, testing your strength and courage. I think that was true for me. I wanted control over the portrayal of my own body. I stopped letting men photograph me or use me as a model, at least in the nude.”²² In *Self-Portrait with Cable Release* (1981), Dater frames her nude body with the cable release of her camera—a subtle yet symbolic gesture signifying that she controls our gaze as the maker of her own image (Fig. 14). ¶ Dater's photographic intentions did not differ significantly from those of Brigman, who had taken up her camera decades earlier to confront tradition, challenge her fears, and defy social expectations. “I turned full force to the medium at hand,” Brigman once said of her camera, “And the beloved Thing gave me a power and abandon that I could not have had otherwise.”²³ For Brigman, and the dozens of women photographers who followed her, that “Thing” called the camera gave them a voice.

EMBODYING NATURE

It is not a stretch to describe Anne Brigman's photographic outings in the wilderness as antecedents to the type of experimental performance art that emerged in the art world in the 1960s and '70s. Although Brigman was familiar with the traditional performing arts, having participated in community theater, her endeavors in the landscape pushed the boundaries of performance by engaging actors (herself included) in expressive and dramatic productions on an unconventional outdoor

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stage. The physical challenges of working “on location” in the mountains did not intimidate her. Brigman wrote frequently about the arduous journeys she made to the Sierra—the dusty stagecoach rides, the pack mules, setting up rough camp, and hauling her camera gear.²⁴ She conceded that her work was different and daring, but she remained committed to it:

*Were I doing “studio nudes” where the lights are managed and a perfectly well trained professional model takes on some ground-out pose—why I suppose all would go “happy as a marriage bell”—but I don’t. Where I go is wild—hard to reach ... because there are things in life to be expressed in these places.*²⁵

Brigman's favorite high-altitude destination was Desolation Valley, a place she described as “primeval ... austere ... forbidding ... sinister ... radiant and beautiful.”²⁶ Working in such a setting involved more than snapping a scenic photograph; it demanded planning, patience, perseverance, and a desire to embrace the elements. She sometimes remained on location for days at a time, carefully orchestrating performances worthy of photographing. “They are honest little negatives in their creation—the settings, backgrounds, lightings, all found in the wonderful wilds of the high Sierras, all planned for, and the psychological moment waited for, sometimes for days or weeks.”²⁷ When she finally exhibited her finished works in galleries and exhibitions, she invited viewers into her photographs to witness the dramatic performances that had unfolded in the mountains. ¶ As both creative director and her own

actor, Brigman aimed to produce photographs that underscored her deeply held beliefs about the interconnectedness between humans and the natural environment. Sometimes she undertook private rituals in the mountains, such as when she communed with an ancient juniper tree by building a fire on a rock outcropping near its trunk as “an offering to the Gods of the Mountain.”²⁸ During her time spent in the high elevations, Brigman developed ongoing relationships and friendships with specific trees, which explains her eventual desire to intertwine human bodies with their natural forms. “In all of my years of work with the lens, I’ve dreamed of and loved to work with the human figure—to embody it in rocks and trees, to make it part of the elements, not apart from them,” Brigman wrote.²⁹ ¶ In photographs like *Soul of the Blessed Pine*, *Inviatus*, and *Via Dolorosa*, Brigman positions herself and her nude actors in and among the trunks of trees. Human limbs and tree limbs become entangled, while shadows blur the forms of the human body with those of gnarled and contorted branches (Figs. 15, 16, and 17). The figures in Brigman's photographs are not limp or passive observers of nature, but rather participants in nature—they are active, strong, vigorous, engaged, and interconnected with their surroundings. “Rare humans, rare in their minds as well as in their slim, fine bodies, have given me of their simple beauty and freedom, that I might weave them into the sagas of these wind swept trees on high peaks,”³⁰ Brigman said of the way she composed her photographs to create a symbiotic union between the female human form and the surrounding flora and fauna. ¶ Brigman's performative acts in the Sierra prefigure the work



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12
Judy Dater
Imogen and Twinka at Yosemite, 1974
Courtesy Judy Dater and Modernism, San Francisco

13
Thomas Hart Benton
Persephone, 1938–39
Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art

14
Judy Dater
Self-Portrait with Cable Release, 1981
Courtesy Judy Dater and Modernism, San Francisco

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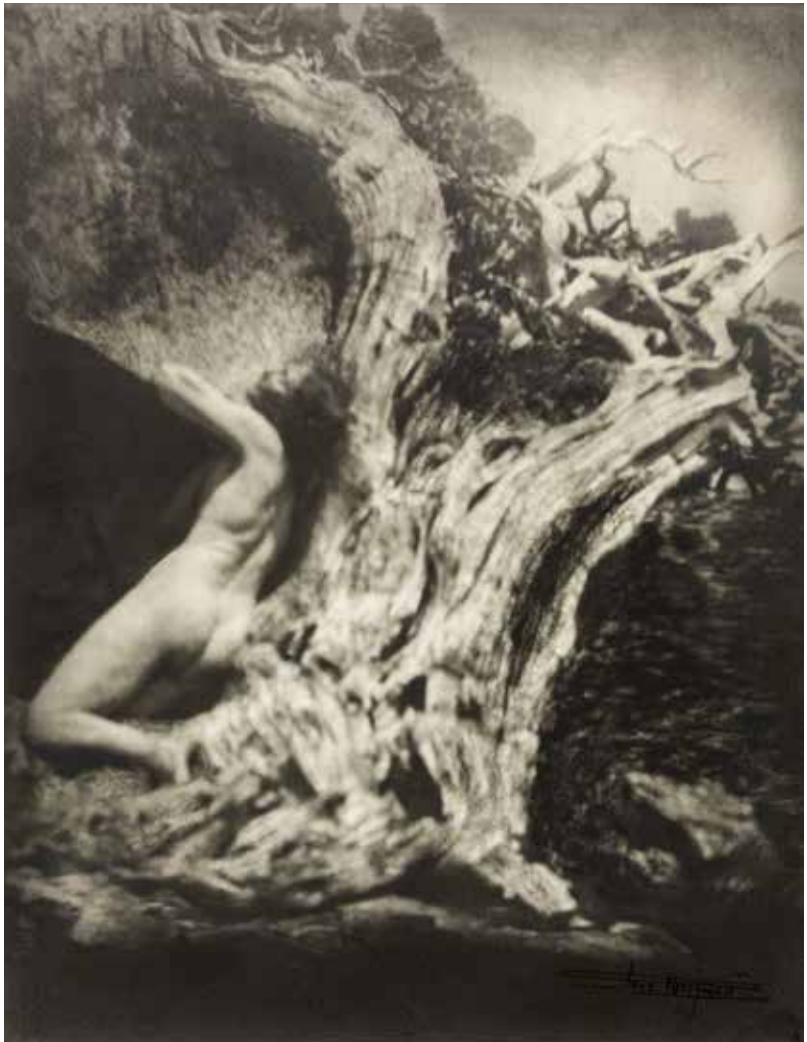


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15
Soul of the Blasted Pine,
negative 1906
Wilson Centre for
Photography

16
Invictus, circa 1925–26
George Eastman Museum

17
Via Dolorosa, circa 1911/
printed circa 1912
Michael and Jane Wilson
Trust Collection



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18
Mary Beth Edelson
Goddess Head (Calling
Series), 1975
Courtesy David Lewis,
New York

19
Judy Chicago
Smoke Goddess V,
1972, from the *Women
and Smoke* series
Courtesy of Through the
Flowers Archives

20
Ana Mendieta
Tree of Life, 1976
Courtesy Galerie
Lelong & Co.

21
Finis, 1908/printed 1910
Michael and Jane Wilson
Trust Collection

of feminist artists who relied on similar rituals and strategies to express a kinship with nature in the decades following her. Many of them embraced the outdoors as a grand stage upon which to evoke ancient rituals to convey the idea that female power was deeply rooted in the natural world. For example, beginning in the 1960s, East Coast feminist artist Mary Beth Edelson frequently ventured to isolated outdoor places like caves and ruins to perform rituals and other solo nude performances that she documented using time-lapse photography. By interweaving her body together with artifacts from nature, she effectively evoked female goddess archetypes in her works of the early 1970s. In *Goddess Head* (1975), for example, Edelson photographed herself nude in a rocky canyon with her arms outstretched to convey a sense of power and strength (Fig. 18). She manipulated her final image using a method called photomontage to overlay a spiraling seashell onto her own body, further alluding to primeval creation myths and female interconnectedness and interdependence with nature. ¶ Around this same time, Judy Chicago embarked on a series of elaborate outdoor performances on the West Coast called *Atmospheres*. Working with a group of women in the desert and other outdoor settings, participants stripped off their clothes, painted their bodies in bright colors, and used flares to release smoke of various hues into the air. In one self-portrait from the series, Chicago stands in a rocky canyon as bright orange smoke pours into the space around her. Referring to herself as a *Smoke Goddess* (1972) in this performance, Chicago evoked the practice of ancient fire rituals often associated with the creation of the earth (Fig. 19). Through their performances, both

Edelson and Chicago transformed themselves into symbolic and empowered goddess figures, establishing women as agents of creation rather than passive observers of nature. ¶ With a similar ongoing focus on the female body in nature, Ana Mendieta frequently made work incorporating her nude body as a strategy for reclaiming her cultural origins and underscoring her connectedness to the earth. In *Arbol de la Vida* (*Tree of Life*), a 1976 performance resembling ancient creation rituals, Mendieta covered her nude body in brown mud that seamlessly blended with the trees around her (Fig. 20). A photograph documenting the performance bears an uncanny resemblance to the work that Brigman made nearly seventy years earlier. In another instance, as part of her *Siluetas* series, Mendieta crawled into a sunken stone depression and buried her nude body in a field of delicate white flowers, leaving visible only her silhouette. Although the recessed space resembled a shallow grave, Mendieta's physical insertion of her body into the earth established her as an active agent of renewal and regeneration in nature. Mendieta's *Siluetas* eventually evolved into a series of sculptural works referring to ancient goddess figures that she carved into stone, sand, and clay. ¶ Feminist artists working outdoors at this time also frequently juxtaposed the nude female form against rocks and stones, sometimes with an aim toward acknowledging vulnerability, and at other times as a metaphor for strength. Brigman engaged this metaphor in her work as well (Fig. 21). "Stones touch human beings because they suggest immortality, because they have so patently *survived*," Lucy Lippard has written. "Virtually every culture we know has attributed to



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22
Judy Dater
*Self-Portrait with Snake
Petroglyph*, 1981
Courtesy Judy Dater and
Modernism, San Francisco

23
Judy Dater
Self-Portrait with Stone, 1981
Courtesy Judy Dater and
Modernism, San Francisco

24
Regina José Galindo
Piedra, 2013
Courtesy the artist

25
Laura Aguilar
Untitled #111, 2006–7
Courtesy of Laura Aguilar

pebbles and stones, rocks and boulders, magical powers of intense energy, luck, fertility, and healing.”³¹ Working in the 1970s, Judy Dater acknowledged these associations in her nude desert self-portraits. In *Self-Portrait with Snake Petroglyph* (1981), Dater overlaid her body onto an ancient indigenous mark etched onto a large rock (Fig. 22). While we cannot be certain of the ancient symbol’s meaning, the position of Dater’s body establishes her as a life-giving force, linking her to the earth and primordial creation stories. In another photograph, *Self-Portrait with Stone* (1981), Dater positioned her nude body in an open desert expanse, assuming the physicality of a rock as she asserted her place as a woman in the natural environment (Fig. 23). ¶ More recently, female artists of color have relied on performative and photographic strategies in the landscape to encourage conversations about social issues such as race, body politics, and gendered power relations. Guatemalan-born Regina José Galindo, for example, frequently stages nude performances around the world to critique violence and the exploitation of women. With her nude body covered in pigment made from black coal, Galindo physically embodied a rock during her performance *Piedra* (2013; Fig. 24). While she crouched in a fetal position in a public square, men approached her at set intervals to urinate on her body. Viewers watched Galindo unflinchingly tolerate the violence against her—an homage to the strength of thousands of working women who have endured exploitation in Latin America’s coal mining industries. “Bodies are fragile only in appearance,”³² Galindo asserted in her artist statement, underscoring that by metaphorically transforming her body into a stone she and her female counterparts would find a way to survive and endure. ¶ Acknowledging human resilience and strength are also key messages of photographer Laura Aguilar, who began photographing her nude body in the landscape in the 1980s. Using an approach and style similar to that of Judy Dater, Aguilar situated her body among boulders, in rocky ravines, and near waterways in Southern California and New Mexico. However, because she is Latina, lesbian, and large-bodied, Aguilar’s photographs invite a more complicated analysis of beauty, gender, and identity. Aguilar frequently images herself alongside large rocks and boulders, and in *Untitled #111* (2006–7), she sits with her back to the viewer before a large boulder that echoes the shape of her own body (Fig. 25). Aguilar’s photographs show her as continuous with the earth and an embodiment of its natural elements. Interestingly, however, whereas other feminist artists have embraced their relationship with nature as a positive identification, queer theorists Dana Luciano and Mel Y. Chen suggest in their essay

“Has the Queer Ever Been Human?” that Aguilar’s self-identification with stones may actually reflect the dehumanizing treatment she has endured during her lifetime:

*As in other feminist self-portraits, the female body [in Aguilar’s work] refuses either to open itself to appropriation by the viewer or to position itself as the object of the male gaze. Ironically, though, Aguilar performs this refusal not by intensifying her apparent status as subject . . . but by turning away from the demand for recognition within the circle of humanity. By mimicking a boulder, Aguilar enters the very nonhuman fold where some would place her, effectively displacing the centrality of the human itself.*³³

By embodying a boulder in her photographs, Aguilar acknowledges the marginalization she has experienced as a queer Latina, but also celebrates the beauty of her body as a part of nature. While her practice may not resolve the ongoing struggles with the depression, fear, and self-doubt that she has faced since childhood, her images are nevertheless empowering and encourage those who are typically defined as the “other” in Western society to embrace their own realities and express their unique voices. Like Brigman’s, Aguilar’s images call into question traditional Eurocentric definitions of female beauty and ask viewers to reconsider how we, as humans, interpret and define our relationship to nature.

CLAIMING SPACE

Anne Brigman recognized the significance of creating her own space to nurture and develop her voice as an independent thinker and artist. One need not look further than her studio, which she frequently described as her “cave” and appointed with artworks, prints, and other objects of personal meaning. Although she was known to host small gatherings for friends and artists in her home and studio, photographs of Brigman there show her focused and absorbed in her labor, establishing it as a private place for work. (see pages 196, 310 and 361) ¶ Brigman immersed herself in the progressive intellectual conversations of her day, and was especially drawn to the writings of English socialist poet Edward Carpenter, whose philosophies of free love, natural living, nudism, and socialist thought she admired. One wonders whether she modeled her simple dwelling in Oakland on that of Carpenter’s home in England, which was



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considered a pilgrimage destination for thinkers and artists challenging the customs of Victorian society in the 1890s. In a photograph of her standing outside her studio, she is framed by the foliage of her lush garden, which was similar to a widely circulated postcard of Carpenter (Figs. 26 and 27).³⁴ Whether the similarities were intentional or not, Brigman clearly defined her home and studio as a place for community that also functioned as a space of her own. ¶ Brigman's urban oasis, however, did not fully satisfy her hunger for "the wilds." She yearned for the freedom that the backcountry offered and ventured into spaces that were, during her time, traditionally considered the domain of men. This included the Sierra—a storied mountain range encompassing both Donner Pass and Yosemite—which had come to be associated with America's nineteenth-century frontier expansion and Manifest Destiny. ¶ Since the 1850s, American pioneer landscape photographers like Timothy O'Sullivan and Carleton Watkins had taken commanding photographic views of these same places (Fig. 30). Their sublime vistas of America's newly acquired lands intentionally included symbols of progress, like railroad bridges and industrial structures, celebrating the nation's discovery, mapping, colonization, and possession of these places. In nineteenth-century literature it was common for writers to use gendered language when referring to such places—the wilderness was often feminized as a "virgin" place before it was developed or cultivated by predominately male pioneers.³⁵ Access to such remote frontier destinations in the second half of the nineteenth century was generally limited to the elite handful of privileged male photographers who had been hired

by the United States government and private companies to celebrate expansionist progress. In the same way that male artists gazed on, and by extension objectified, the bodies of nude female models during the Victorian era, the underlying perspectives of these men toward the land and their control over its representation came to define what is known as the male gaze in the field of landscape photography. The images of these pioneer photographers remained the primary vehicle for imagining the American frontier at the turn of the twentieth century. ¶ By 1901, the Sierra Club—an organization founded by John Muir to "to explore, enjoy, and render accessible the mountain regions of the Pacific Coast"—held its first summer outing in the Sierra.³⁶ While women were welcome to join and a handful participated in the early outings, membership in the club remained mostly male. Brigman likely knew about the outings from active members living near her in Oakland and Berkeley; however, she never joined the group's excursions. When women did join the ranks of hikers in the Sierra in the first decades of the 1900s, they typically adhered to traditional Victorian conventions and dress codes such as those shown in one of Brigman's early family outings to the Sierra (see page 194). The long, layered, high-collared climbing dresses worn by women and recorded in hundreds of amateur mountaineering photographs were the norm. ¶ This historical context makes Brigman's first hiking excursion to the Sierra in 1905 all the more groundbreaking. During that summer trip and those that followed in the next decade, Brigman continually defied gendered social expectations. She seemed innately aware that her self-portraits—both clothed and unclothed—helped

Often posing with a hand on her hip, or her back toward the camera, she inserts herself into pioneer narratives that had been traditionally reserved for men.



29



28

26
Untitled [Portrait of Anne Brigman], not dated
Oakland Museum of California

27
Photographer unknown
Edward Carpenter, 1905

28
My Self
from *Songs of a Pagan*

29
[Anne Brigman, Overhanging Rock, Glacier Point, Yosemite], not dated
George Eastman Museum

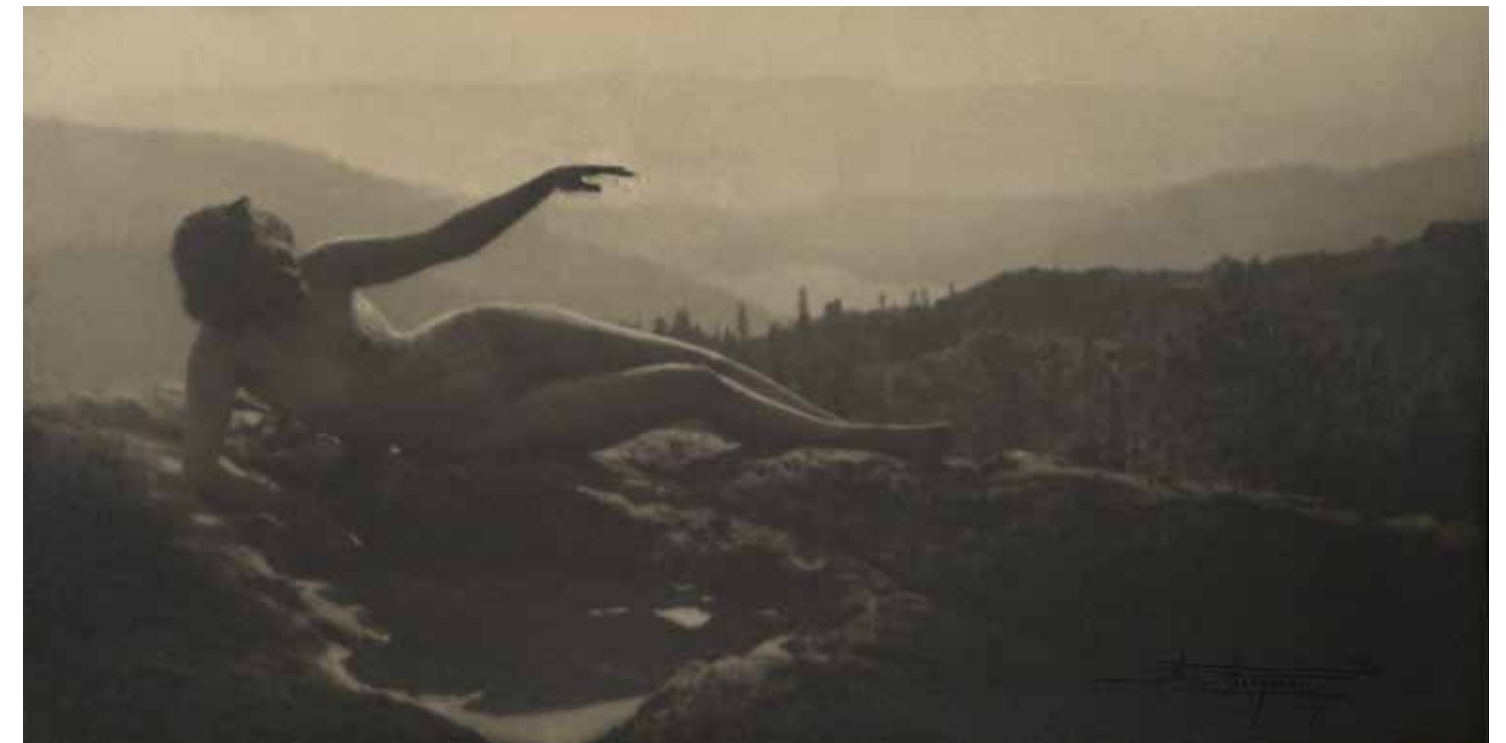
to construct her personal identity as a multifaceted independent woman. In numerous photographs (as well as many unprinted negatives), Brigman frequently portrays herself wearing progressive hiking attire while conquering high mountain peaks and overlooking grand mountain vistas (Figs. 28 and 29). Often posing with a hand on her hip, or her back toward the camera, she inserts herself into pioneer narratives that had been traditionally reserved for men. ¶ Of all her nude self-portraits, it is *Dawn* (1909) that directly confronts the implicit male gaze of frontier landscape photography (Fig. 31). Brigman took the image near the iconic vista of Donner Lake—the same view photographed by her male predecessors to celebrate the completion of the transcontinental railroad and the grand achievement of America’s coast-to-coast expansion. Rather than focus on the man-made railroad tunnels and snowsheds as male photographers had in the past, Brigman positions her nude body in the foreground of her image as if to reclaim the legendary summit as her own. Her nude presence in many of her other mountain landscape photographs can be read in the same way. Even though it would be decades until other women artists took her lead, it was Brigman’s revolutionary decision to deliberately make herself present in the landscape that set the stage for her successors. ¶ Even by the middle of the twentieth century, however, the inclusion of people in American landscape photography was atypical. By the 1950s, most landscape photographers (whether male or female) followed in the formal footsteps of photographer Ansel Adams, who aimed to represent an idealized American landscape devoid of human presence or industrial impacts. Adams’s influence in the field of landscape photography and his intent to produce beautiful images dominated the field through the 1960s. By the end of the decade, however, artistic attitudes toward the land began to evolve. ¶ In the American West, a number of artists began to shift their practice beyond making images for gallery and museum walls and instead started to make large-scale artworks using the earth as their canvas. Often sited many miles from urban centers and relatively inaccessible to the general public, photographic documentation became the primary method for communicating the artistic endeavors taking place in the desert. The undertakings of artists such as Walter De Maria, Michael Heizer, and Robert Smithson relied upon the physical manipulation or excavation of soil, rocks, and natural vegetation, and eventually came to be known as Land Art. While the work of these artists in the expanded field was acknowledged as a logical next step toward postmodernism in art historical canon,³⁷ others critiqued it as environmentally destructive and overtly masculine. Jeffrey Kastner, writing

many decades later, summarizes what many critics were thinking: “The Land Art movement was arguably the most macho of the post-war art eras. In its first manifestations, the genre was one of diesel and dust, populated by hard-hat-minded men, finding their identities away from the comforts of the cultural center, digging holes and blasting cuts through cliff sides, recasting the land with ‘masculine’ disregard for the longer term.”³⁸ ¶ Among the artists to respond to the Land Art genre was feminist Judy Chicago, who in the late 1960s observed “the macho art scene of southern California,” and aimed to “soften that macho environment.”⁴⁰ While Chicago’s *Atmospheres* have already been discussed earlier in this essay within the context of performance art and goddess imagery, it is worth noting their intent as a subversive response to Land Art as well (Fig. 32). “I was and am horrified by the *masculine* built environment and the *masculine* gesture of knocking down trees and digging holes in the earth,” she once said in response to the work of Land Artists. Chicago’s response to the male-dominated genre was to “feminize” the landscape, which by the early 1970s involved choreographing nude women deploying fireworks to release colored smoke into the atmosphere. The haze from these performances blanketed the landscapes where they took place. “It softened everything,” she recalls of the tinted hues. “There was a moment when the smoke began to clear, but a haze lingered. And the whole world was feminized—if only for a moment.”³⁹ Through these performances Chicago not only responded to the Land Art interventions of her male contemporaries, she also reclaimed the landscape for women by employing a method that was more sensitive to the fragility of the environment. ¶ At this same time during the early 1970s, photographers began to increasingly record marks and traces of human impact in their landscape imagery, even though the human figure remained rarely depicted. This new focus on America’s altered landscape, or “new topography,” represented a paradigm shift in the field and was validated in the 1975 exhibition *New Topographics: Photographs of a Man-Altered Landscape*.⁴⁰ The gender-specific title of the exhibition seemed to underscore the presumption that most land development had occurred under the watch of men, and the predominance of male photographers in the exhibition (nine out of ten) demonstrated that photographic representations of the landscape continued to be gender biased. ¶ This reality, set against the emergence of feminist politics, opened a door for female artists and photographers to critique photography’s status quo and reclaim images of the landscape in the second half of the century. Women often did this by inserting their own nude bodies into visual landscape

Rather than focus on the man-made railroad tunnels and snowsheds as male photographers had in the past, Brigman positions her nude body in the foreground of her image as if to reclaim the legendary summit as her own.



30



31

30
Timothy O’Sullivan
*Donner Lake, View from
Donner Summit, 1867*
Bancroft Library, University
of California, Berkeley

31
Dawn, 1909
The Metropolitan Museum
of Art



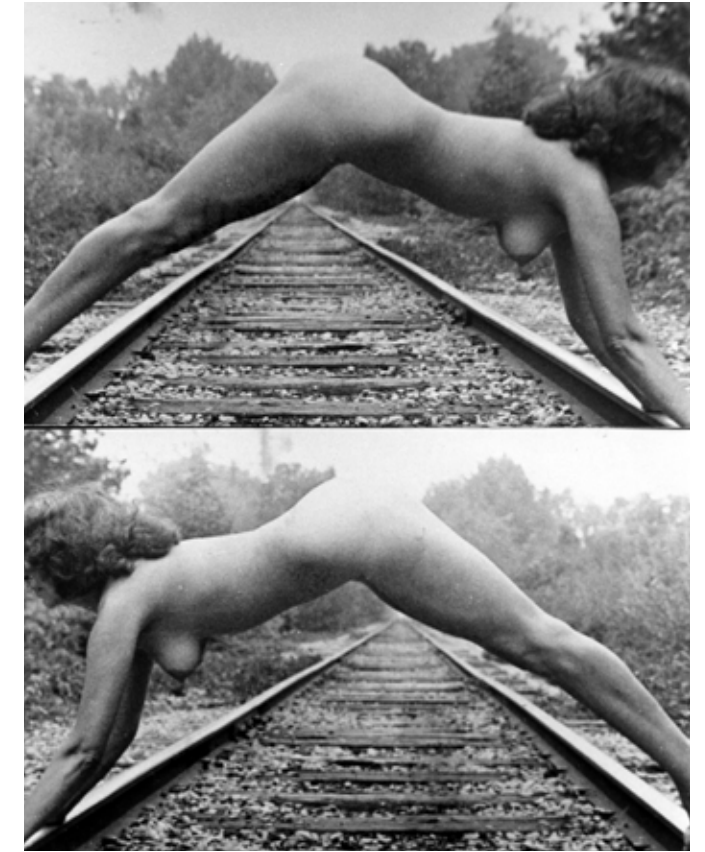
32

narratives. For example, feminist artist Carolee Schneemann, working almost sixty years after Brigman made *Dawn*, picked up the conversation about reversing power relations in gendered landscapes. In her work from the 1960s, Schneemann was one of the first women artists to ask: “Could a nude woman artist be both image and image maker?” In *Nude on Tracks, Parallel Axis* (1975), Schneemann catapults herself across a pair of receding railroad tracks (Fig. 34).⁴¹ The double-stacked image calls to mind the railroad photographs of American pioneer image-makers whose pictures of tracks receding into the distance were interpreted as symbols of expansion. Schneemann’s nude body, however, blocks the tracks, and by extension, expansionist progress. While her photographs allude to the clichéd cinema trope of the helpless “damsel in distress” tied up in the path of an oncoming train, Schneemann clearly needs no male hero to rescue her. Her nude body is a free and active subject in the otherwise masculine landscape setting. Like Brigman’s placement of her body on Donner Summit in *Dawn*, Schneemann claims this industrialized space for women by forcing viewers to confront her presence and reconsider misplaced definitions of women as passive objects. ¶ Working in the early 1980s, photographer Jo Spence began a project with Terry Dennett to continue this critique of the male-dominated history of landscape photography. The pair called their series *Remodelling Photo History* and made images that deconstructed and revisualized conventional photographic representations of subjects like industry and colonial expansion. In *Remodelling Photo History: Industrialization* (1979–82), Spence photographed a

heavily developed landscape marked by large-scale utility poles (Fig. 33). Rather than make the industrialized space the primary focus of her image, however, Spence disrupted the landscape by boldly inserting a nude woman (Dennett) into the foreground. Made not even a decade after the celebrated *New Topographics* exhibition, these images appear to challenge the predominant trend among male landscape photographers of the 1970s and ’80s to exclude the human figure in their images of the altered landscape. ¶ But even as photographers like Spence and Dennett continued to define a space for women in the field of landscape photography in the second half of the twentieth century, they still remained in the minority. While the emergence of large-format color photography brought renewed interest to the field, and the rise of environmentalism made photographs a valid place for social and political critique, women photographers continued to push against the weight of photographic history to claim a space for themselves in the canon. Interestingly, some of the most progressive female voices in the field of landscape photography in the twenty-first century come from across the globe where women have taken up the camera and photographed their own nude bodies in the landscape to critique social and political injustices. ¶ Regina José Galindo, for example, the artist who staged the aforementioned performative work *Piedra*, frequently uses her body as a form of political protest. Her performance *Tierra* (2013), which she also documented using film and still photography, begins with the artist standing naked in a pastoral field as a bulldozer excavates the earth around her (Fig. 35). Galindo made the piece in



33



34

32
Judy Chicago
Smoke Bodies III, 1972
Courtesy of Through the
Flowers Archives

33
Jo Spence and Terry Dennett
Industrialization, from the
series *Remodelling Photo
History*, 1979–82
Ryerson Image Centre,
Toronto, Canada

34
Carolee Schneemann
*Nude On Tracks, Parallel
Axis*, 1975
Courtesy P.P.O.W Gallery
and Galerie Lelong & Co.

35
Regina José Galindo
Tierra, 2013
Courtesy the artist



35



36

response to the atrocities initiated by a former Guatemalan president who was accused of murdering innocent civilians and burying them in mass graves. Toward the end of her performance, Galindo stands alone and on an island-like precipice in the middle of the excavated field. By positioning herself in the path of a powerful and formidable machine, Galindo asserts her presence and resists the injustices she and the people of her country have endured at the hands of a violent governmental regime. ¶ Nigerian-born Otobong Nkanga also photographed her own body to directly implicate the socio-cultural and environmental impact of humans on the landscape. Her large-format triptych *Alterscape Stories: Uprooting the Past* (2006) considers the human impact and development of the Canary Islands, off the northwestern coast of Africa, which were first colonized beginning in the fourteenth century (Fig. 36). To make her large-format photographs, Nkanga fabricated a maquette of the island landscape on which to stage her photographic performance. Casting herself as both creator and destroyer, Nkanga physically uproots the ruins of the historical buildings, which are replaced by modern skyscrapers that seem out of place in the otherwise natural setting. While Nkanga's studio performance using a fabricated landscape maquette may seem to diverge from the outdoor photographic work of her peers, its intent was familiar: to assert a place for women as active agents in the history of landscape representation.

FINDING FREEDOM

For more than a century, women have sought direct engagement with the landscape as a strategy for navigating the patriarchal conventions and gendered social inequities that they have perceived across generations, particularly in the art world. For Anne Brigman, and the women who followed in her footsteps, freedom came by way of leaving the civilized world behind—if only for a short time—to enter into a thoughtful

and creative dialogue with nature and the environment. While the journeys of these individual artists have taken different paths, they are united by a shared desire to liberate themselves from the expectations placed on them by others and to create a space for women in the broader history of art. In the second decade of the twenty-first century, the momentum of the #metoo movement and the proliferation of women's marches around the world has shone a renewed light on issues of gender equality. The work of many feminist artists who remained relatively unknown in the 1960s and '70s—as well as their predecessors from earlier generations—are now being reconsidered and celebrated by major museums, newspapers, and new audiences. ¶ It is perhaps Anne Brigman, reflecting on her own transformational art-making journeys into the mountains, who best characterizes the ongoing struggle of female artists, as well as the collective desire for change that their work calls forth:

You remember, too, the long steep trails that lead zig-zag, mile after mile, away from trees and brooks, up, up into the heat of rocks blessed by the sun, where your lungs ache and your heart hurts from the struggle—and then you find it—the Vision!—the glory of the things beyond. The memory and the wonder of it goes with you to the lowlands, into the daily life, and you are glad that you had the courage.⁴²

36
Otobong Nkanga
*Alterscape Stories: Uprooting
the Past*, 2006
Nevada Museum of Art

Notes

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- Stieglitz/Georgia O'Keeffe Archive, Yale Collection of American Literature, Beinecke Manuscript Library and Rare Book Room, YCAL MSS 85, series 1, box 8, folder 171.
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ANNE BRIGMAN: A VISIONARY IN
MODERN PHOTOGRAPHY

First published in the United States of America in 2018 by

RIZZOLI ELECTA

A DIVISION OF RIZZOLI INTERNATIONAL PUBLICATIONS, INC.

300 PARK AVENUE SOUTH

NEW YORK, NY 10010

WWW.RIZZOLIUSA.COM

PRINTED IN ITALY

For Rizzoli Electa:

CHARLES MIERS, PUBLISHER

MARGARET RENNOLDS CHACE, ASSOCIATE PUBLISHER

ELLEN COHEN, EDITOR

For Nevada Museum of Art:

ANN M. WOLFE, CONTENT EDITOR AND PROJECT MANAGER

PAMELA CHADWICK, RIGHTS AND REPRODUCTIONS COORDINATOR

KALEB TEMPLE, IMAGE EDITOR

Design and visual editing:

BRAD BARTLETT DESIGN, LOS ANGELES

This book is dedicated to Debbie McKeown

Special Thanks:

JOSHUA BARTLETT, JENNIFER BELT, BRITTANY BRADLEY, MARY
ELLEN BUDNEY, CASEY BURCHBY, CLINT DISHAROON, BRIAN EYLER,
POLLY FLEURY, SCOTT HINTON, HOPE KINGSLEY, ROSS KNAPPER,
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ISBN: 978-0-8478-6287-0

LIBRARY OF CONGRESS CONTROL NUMBER: 2018941591

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