

Laid Bare in the Landscape

For more than a century, visionary women artists have sought direct engagement with the landscape as a strategy for navigating the patriarchal traditions and gendered social conventions that have persisted across generations—particularly in the art world. *Laid Bare in the Landscape* assembles photographs, films, and performance documentation by women artists who situate the nude female body in outdoor landscapes. Their works range from self-portraits to surreal and provocative statements by artists who explore topics such as beauty, femininity, vulnerability, ritual, identity, and body politics, specifically as they relate to nature and the environment.

While the journeys of these women have taken different paths, they are united by a shared desire to liberate themselves from societal expectations 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 these once overlooked artists is being reconsidered and celebrated by museums, critics, and new audiences.

To compare the landscape photographs of Anne Brigman to her counterparts of the late twentieth- and early twenty-first centuries is to weave a new thread connecting generations of women artists who have aimed to explore and promote alternative ways of seeing and knowing.

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Confronting Tradition

When Anne Brigman photographed herself nude for the first time 1905, she unabashedly broke the rules of propriety. It would take another sixty-five years, however, before art historian Linda Nochlin penned her seminal essay in 1971, “Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?,” explaining that the act of depicting nude women had been historically limited to male artists who had privileged access to female models in academic art school settings.

Although a handful of progressive women photographers had made nude images of themselves and other women before midcentury, it was definitely not the norm. This limitation was due, in large part, to a wave of American post-World War II social conservatism that placed renewed emphasis on traditional family values and women’s domestic obligations. The civil rights movement and Vietnam War protests of the 1960s fueled a host of feminist art movements that amplified the voices of female artists. Within this context, nude self-representation, via photography, performance, and film, became a powerful vehicle for resisting conventional patriarchal strategies of artistic representation.

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Embodying Nature

Anne Brigman's performative acts in the Sierra during the early 1900s prefigure the work of feminist artists, who beginning in the 1970s, relied on similar rituals and strategies to express a kinship with nature beginning in the 1970s. Many women artists working during these later decades embraced the outdoors as a grand stage upon which to evoke ancient rituals to convey the notion that female power was deeply rooted in the natural world. Through their performances, typically documented using photography or film, female artists transformed themselves and their female subjects into empowered goddess figures who were agents of creation, rather than passive observers of nature.

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Claiming Space

By the mid-twentieth century, the inclusion of people in American landscape photography was atypical, as most photographers (regardless of gender) depicted idealized views in the tradition of Ansel Adams. Even during the early 1970s, when landscape photographers increasingly began documenting marks and traces of human impact, the figure was rarely included. This photographic trend paralleled the rise of Land Art in the American West, a movement that relied upon large-scale physical manipulation and excavation of soil, rocks, and natural vegetation.

Set against the emergence of feminist politics at the same time, women artists began to critique the male-dominated photographic canon and respond to the masculine Land Art tradition. They often did this by inserting their own nude bodies into the landscape. Interestingly, some of the most progressive female voices in the field of twenty-first century landscape photography come from all points on the globe, in places where women have taken up the camera to critique their own unique social and political injustices.

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