

The Gift

When Adams began to photograph in 1963, he searched for scenes that revealed his conception of nature's gift — its beauty and the peace it inspires in us. His love of nature began as a child, exploring the woods with his father and picnicking with his mother and younger sister near their homes in New Jersey and then Wisconsin. When the family moved to Colorado (Wheat Ridge, a town outside Denver) in 1952, his experience of nature widened as he and his father hiked in the foothills and canyons of the Front Range of the Rocky Mountains and scouted the state's eastern plains. There, he discovered different kinds of natural beauty — not only the magnificent grandeur of the Rockies, but also the minimal, seemingly empty beauty of the plains where one had to learn to “watch better,” as he said, to see its many wonders.

Unlike earlier twentieth-century American landscape photographers such as Ansel Adams (no relation), who recorded the sweeping majesty of the West's mountains and national parks, Robert Adams has focused on vast vistas of sparse, fragile prairies and quiet, often overlooked corners. The photographs in this room were made in Colorado and Oregon between 1969 and 2000. They reveal Adams' understanding of “the silence of light” and show how light articulates forms, bathes the natural world in grace, and gives us “courage and . . . hope,” as he has asserted. They create “a quiet so absolute that it allows one to begin again, to love the future.”

Our Response

Early Hispanic and Plains Communities

How have Americans responded to the potential and the vulnerability of the West? Divided into several thematic groups and arranged roughly chronologically, this section examines that question, beginning with *Early Hispanic and Plains Communities*.

After spending several years in California, Adams and his wife, Kerstin, returned to Colorado in 1962. Discouraged to find the natural environment he so loved sadly degraded, he found direction in photography and in studying the art, architecture, and culture of the Hispanic communities along the state's southern borders and the white immigrant settlements on the eastern plains. He wanted to document these settlements because many were abandoned or being transformed by developers. In high school he had taken an architectural drafting course that instilled in him a fascination with the way the built environment shapes our lives and expresses our values. It also inspired him to make his first significant body of photographs.

When he made these pictures, Adams acknowledged the importance of infrastructure to life on the prairie — the gravel roads and farmhouses, the stores and churches. But he also made clear the ways in which early settlers, both Hispanic and white, attempted to achieve a unity with nature, and the important role that faith played in their lives. The Hispanic immigrants, he noted, demonstrated in their art and architecture “an acceptance of the natural world, and . . . a faith that enabled them to accomplish what [writer Leo] Tolstoy called ‘the most difficult thing . . . to love life, to love it even while one suffers.’”

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Our Response

Our Imprint on the Land

In the late 1960s and 1970s Adams faced a crisis. The Colorado — and indeed the West — that he had loved since childhood was rapidly disappearing. As the population increased sharply, the impact on the once pristine landscape was dramatic, so much so that Adams asked himself if “the big views, the ones you instinctively associate with the word ‘West,’ [had] been eroded to the point where there is no grandeur left?” Were the suburbs, “those almost wholly man-altered places,” the sole thing that “constituted the American geography? And if so, were words like ‘majesty,’ so common in nineteenth-century vocabulary, now without application except for views of clouds?”

Adams explored these questions in a series of pictures made along the Missouri River around the time of the 1976 bicentennial of the United States, a moment of national reflection on the past and assessment of the present. While he recognized that many people thought landscape photographs should only depict the wilderness, he determined “not to lie” and “to include in the photographs evidence of man.” It was an easy prerequisite to follow, he noted, “since our violence against the earth has extended even to anonymous arroyos and undifferentiated stands of scrub brush.” His aim, however, was not to show the violence but to see if there was still any beauty in this landscape that nineteenth-century explorers had considered sublime and redemptive. “Was there remaining in the geography,” he asked, “a strength that might help sustain us as it had them?” Was there something that might give us hope?

Our Response

A New West

Adams' challenge in the late 1960s and 1970s was to determine how to record not only an altered natural landscape but also the new suburbs that were rapidly transforming the West. Concluding that well-reasoned argument, not passionate outcry, was the most effective approach, he resolved to make pictures that were documentary and apparently neutral. But how could he do so in an environment he saw as brutalized, and how could he transform those scenes into something promising, something more universal?

To accomplish this goal, Adams realized that he needed to radically change his style. He abandoned the nostalgic tone of his earlier pictures of rural communities. Instead, he drew on photography's seemingly uncritical acceptance of everything in front of the lens and made pictures that appeared transparent, that seemed to shed the prejudices of their maker and reveal "a hidden order."

He also abandoned his large 4 × 5 inch view camera, which rested on a tripod, and used a handheld camera that allowed him to photograph more rapidly: "The suburbs can be hostile," he explained, "and you have to keep moving." He no longer tried to capture a full tonal range but sought to convey the intense light of the West through brilliant highlights and dense blacks. He printed many of these photographs small, not quite 6 × 6 inches, to encourage close viewing and to mimic the size of amateur snapshots. Finally, he embraced an unapologetically new subject matter: gas stations, highways, housing developments, parking lots, strip malls, truck stops, abandoned and littered fields, cars and trucks. All these elements were radically transforming the physical look and character of the suburbs and the lives of their inhabitants.

Our Response

Our Lives and Our Children

In 1970, while Adams was living in Wheat Ridge, he and his wife saw smoke rising near a nuclear weapons plant 10 miles upwind from Denver. Frightened that they were witnessing a nuclear accident, they passed several anxious hours before learning that the fire was outside the plant. Throughout the 1970s, community opposition to the facility escalated as reports indicated significant contamination to the surrounding area, and experts warned that if a fire burned through the roof, Denver would suffer a major catastrophe.

In response, Adams decided to photograph the most important thing that would be lost if such an event occurred — quite simply *Our Lives and Our Children*, as he titled his subsequent book. He determined to capture people unawares because he knew that if they saw his camera, they would alter their behavior. To do so, he walked through suburban Denver hiding a 2¼ inch camera equipped with a wide-angle lens behind a bag of groceries. When he saw people and scenes with potential, he quickly shifted the bag to his other arm and released the shutter without looking through the viewfinder or adjusting the focus or exposure. As a result, these pictures are sometimes blurry, with odd juxtapositions and occasional light flares — imperfections that suggest the photographer's sense of urgency and infuse the pictures with a sense of authenticity.

Adams carefully sequenced the photographs when he published them in *Our Lives and Our Children* so that the people depicted display an increasing sense of agitation and anxiety. The final pictures show people looking over their shoulders or up into the sky with great alarm, as if they were witnessing a cataclysmic event. He also cropped the final pictures, changing them from squares or verticals to thin horizontals in order to further emphasize this shift in tone. Together these decisions created a deeply moving work whose power resides more in the cumulative effect of sequenced images than in any single photograph.

Our Response

Southern California

In the late 1970s and early 1980s, when Adams returned to California after an absence of several years, he was distressed to see that it had changed profoundly. Operating on the principle that you should “go to the landscape that frightens you the most and take pictures until you’re not scared anymore,” he determined to photograph it. His pictures show the same discordant vistas he had recorded elsewhere in the West, but they often have a harsher or more melancholic edge, coupled with an unmistakable moral outrage. They also vary in tone. He discovered, much to his surprise, that although the area was under a pall of air pollution, “the light that filters down through that smog is extraordinary.” He wrestled with the dilemma of making beautiful pictures of something as damaging as smog, but he found that the polluted light softened shadows and pervaded the scene with an overall luminosity and an unmistakable elegiac quality.

He published many of these pictures in his 1986 book *Los Angeles Spring*, its title a nod to Rachel Carson’s groundbreaking 1962 book *Silent Spring*. Just as Carson predicted that our profligate use of chemicals would result in a time when birds sang no more, so too did Adams reflect on the profound catastrophe he saw unfolding around him. In the introduction to *Los Angeles Spring*, he lamented: “Southern California was, by the reports of those who lived there at the turn of the [twentieth] century, beautiful. . . . Even now we can almost extrapolate an Eden from what has lasted. . . . Whether those trees that stand are reassuring is a question for a lifetime. All that is clear is the perfection of what we were given, the unworthiness of our response, and the certainty, in view of our current deprivation, that we are judged.”

Our Response

A Mythic Forest

In 1997, Robert and Kerstin Adams moved from Longmont, Colorado, to Astoria, Oregon. There, they discovered the extent of the destruction of Oregon's once majestic forests, and the impact that clearcutting had on people's psyche. In response, he decided to photograph these clearcuts. From 1999 to 2003, he and Kerstin drove and hiked through some of the remains of Oregon's forests. It was not an easy endeavor: the roads were without signs and not intended for public use, and the ground was sometimes piled high with debris that made walking difficult and occasionally dangerous. As they persisted, they came to believe that the once remarkable rain forests had become "the site of one of the major ecological disasters on this continent."

When Adams photographed the remains of Oregon's forests, he once again set several ground rules for himself: "Not to use the sky, on those rare occasions when there is one here in the Northwest, to rescue the land. Not to be seduced into celebrating the power of men and machines, which can have a Satanic beauty and heroism about it. And not to aestheticize the carnage."

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Tenancy

Merging the themes of hope and despair, beauty and desecration, that run throughout Adams' work, *American Silence* ends with a selection of pictures from his 2017 book *Tenancy: Between the River and the Sea; The Nehalem Spit, the Coast of Oregon*. This series of photographs made between 2013 and 2015 along the Nehalem Spit, a two-mile-long promontory on the Oregon coast, is divided into three parts. The first, *The River's Edge*, examines the eastern side of the spit where massive tree stumps have washed up on the banks, brutal evidence of the clearcutting farther up the Nehalem River. The second part looks at the spit itself, a fragile sanctuary of small trees, meadows, and dunes. The third depicts the ever-changing beauty and wonder of the ocean to the west, as well as the people who visit it, seeking to be restored by that beauty.

Signaling that *Tenancy* addresses not just a place or even the more specific act of clearcutting but something more fundamental, Adams began the book with a definition of the title word: "tenancy, the temporary possession of what belongs to another." Aptly named, both the book and this section of the exhibition call out the dangers that imperil the land, yet they also allow us a sense of promise and remind us "of a mystery," as Adams once said, "greater than our failures." The pictures convey Adams' belief that we are only temporary occupants of the earth that nourishes and sustains us.

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