Selections
from
“Colstrip,
Montana”

Photographs by
David Hansen

Essay by
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Digging for Our Roots

Modern culture seems about to make a change in its interaction with the tie that binds humankind with the earth. What wisdom shall guide it?

Both science and religion may have been co-opted and subverted; they have become creatures of an exploitation mentality. In a secular society perhaps only art can deal with the problem of evil. But the art that can do this must exorcize its own cankers.

The 500-year tradition of the landscape arts would seem to have a redeeming potential, something that could be enhanced as part of a new ecology. But the sources of those arts are the same mechanistics that made Lewis Mumford speak of “Galileo’s crime.” Christopher Hussey makes it clear that the painters took poetry as their source, geometry as their lever and give us the picturesque.

The vendors of landscapes, being sensors and guides of the eye, narrowly defined the notional of “scenery.” The painters’ evocations of the old poets gave us what would become calendars, doing for the mind what Muzak would do for the ear.

Marshall McLuhan associated this syn in the beholder’s eye with the invention of perspective and the picture frame itself—a window in a wall, concealing more than it showed.

We still suffer from this legacy, for out of it came the sorting of the world into the beautiful and the unbeautiful according to a pastoral imagery that has stood for what is good in nature since the time of Theocritus and the authors of the Psalms, and an “enclave” mentality that leads us to preserve nature by partitioning it into parks or wilderness areas. Conversely, this perceptual lock on landscape aesthetics conditioned us to surrender willingly all that was unembellished to industrial ravage.

Artists can rhapsodize and paint the debris of the miners and loggers, provided they stick with the language of limners’ manuals—the basic circle, line and triangle—or dally with color complements. An educated elite can then admire, in the name of aesthetic abstraction, such abuses as waste, poison and death. The rest of us must make do with the picturesque, wherever scattered groves remain or sublimity...
The Morality of Hanson's Colstrip, Montana

When David T. Hanson presents us with aesthetically pleasing photographs of earth at the Colstrip open-pit mine, Crazies, Contable and the Hudson River School are far away. Claude, Virgil and Theocritus have vanished, as though landscape itself had disappeared.

There are various ways to consider photographs such as these. They could be, as Sontag says, images of Depression-worn families on the road, a reprehensible exploitation of this place purely for our visual pleasure.

But I do not think Hanson is trying to flush away an outworn romantic idea and replace it with visual abstractions or symbols of power. Indeed, there is a link between his photographs of these raw earth layers and the heart of Tennyson’s objections to the neo-classic logos of rationalism, capitalism and industrialism.

Somewhere under all the husk of Romanticism’s sentimental excess there lurked a deeper design. Linear thought has dominated the Western world since the time of Copernicus that its rationality and mechanism deprived modern culture of the very terms of an alternative. Romanticism was an effort to recapture a lost paradigm, an organic view of creation, a sense of the earth as a living being.

If the land is an organism, what does it mean to cut down a forest or open the land? And how do Hanson’s photographs escape the moral outrage Sontag expressed against parading distant wounds for casual use in art?

The answers are not simple. First, it must be clear that this new paradigm or organic sensibility is not simply another ideology, but a new seeing. It addresses the problem of how humans perceive nature and their own identity. Although the three Colstrip zones is similar to that raised by the photographs Sontag criticized, its status is different. Her rage against the pictures of starving people as cofﬁtable amusement was a critique of the whole of Renaissance and literary humanism. The very arrogance and pride of human morality helped sustain a sympathy for downtrodden people, at the same time widening the gap between the human and the nonhuman. That hunger had never completely subsided before the cold hearts of the makers of the Industrial Revolution and in modern representatives.

Yet the wounds of the earth are a similar matter. During the classic phase of environmentalist ideology from about 1964 to 1976 (as distinct from the earlier natural resources conservation movement), Leo
Unreclaimed mine land from the 1930s.

Coal strip mine and railroad tipple along Armel's Creek.
Marx’s influential book *Th e Machine in the Garden* examined the ecological movement as a conflict between “pastoral” ideals and progress. If that were a complete analysis of the issue, the reduction of consumption would have become merely a choice between competing styles of consumerism. But the shift proposed by the ecological movement was more revolutionary. It addressed “mind and nature,” and the precocious assumptions of cultural stereotypes, the reawakening of a myopic understanding.

Both the Romantics and ecologists urge us to abandon the Enlightenment’s logic and obsession with binary divisions, such as separating the beautiful from the useful or escapist nature by preserving enclaves of it (as Leo Marx would put it, as understanding the world as a machine). Once we do this, the problem of surrealism may disappear. As we might recover the importance of context, locality and participation.

As we begin to accept the story of humans as part of the larger story of all life on earth, perhaps we need to search for obvious targets, as Mother Teresa does in working among the worst of the sick and dying, and as Hanson does in homographing Castiglione.

For the most part, Castiglione is not only a ravaged but also an invisible place. So that we do not misunderstand, Hanson has virtually excised people from his pictures. Like Cézanne at Mont Ste. Victoire, we are drawn to form and color, to the brink of the altered mood being chased. Hanson starts with the degree of dislocation that an ambivalent culture finds aesthetically acceptable. We seem at first invited to scrutinize a juxtaposition of mining and the human environment it creates. But do they truly have this apartness? The lack of people in the photographs prevents a certain kind of distancing. The absence of other “selves” makes our involvement as viewers much more undeniable, just as the absence of a self in the animal dreams of young children makes the dreamer’s presence more vivid.

What we see has neither the emblems of romantic technophilia nor romantic grandeur; it is not even a landscape in the customary sense. We are pulled up short by the strange passage caused by the obscuration and alteration of these photographs. Just who is the wounded and the wounding?

Compare these photographs to Alexander Hogue’s painting of rural Oklahoma during the Dust Bowl era in *Mother Earth Laid Bare*. It was a primitive effort that must have brought abject chuckles from the avant garde enemies of subject matter content. Hogue’s evocation of prudery in redressing a land denuded by the plow was quaint, but one knows he had rage in mind.

Something horrible, act we have committed upon ourselves, is at hand in this evocation. We have come to escape the metaphor of the earth-organism as poetic convenience and recover its meaning in homology, in a common ground differing only in expression.

Healing the division of the world into what was pictorially aesthetic and what was not begins with the act of attention. Our eyes, educated in Anglo-Americanized Italianate escapist pastoriality, still glide quickly past the “ugly.” There are plenty of geographer-traveler-writers who tell how “interesting” it all is, providing relentless humane description. Such endless incitement with ourselves and our works also educates the eye, but its perception is that of linear analysts. Objections: value-free and demythologized, it acts as a perverse enchantment, its mythic core the body of stories of domination that define the West.
Digging for Our Roots

Hawken’s Gulch, Montana series is a worst-case scenario that alters our awareness and casts attention to violence that shakes our complacency.

Nonhuman life—animals and plants—is difficult to perceive anew because its identity is clouded by Romantic human individualizing and “Disneyification.” Instead, the new reality emerges as a raw, elemental renewal, sensitive to air, water and earth.

There is a paradox in licking off from life to get close. It is a precursor of a new consciousness: a world of beings bound by infinite and mysterious acts of connection, created from the Earth, itself a being.

There is no dichotomy between the mineral and being. Such is the wisdom of all stories of creation.

The Peabody Coal Co. made no acknowledgement of this when it removed coal from the earth, but the geology of its cut speaks of the Earth’s anatomy.

The Rosebud Formation, a 24-foot-thick seam of coal—the remains of an incalculable host of plants—is uncovered 100 feet below the surface.

That 100 feet, the “overburden,” is misnamed. The real overburden is three thousand years of human estrangement from nature, nurtured by bizarre fantasies of human identity. “Rosebud” could
Drilling and loading explosives for an overburden plant.

Mine road and power lines.
Coal storage area and railroad tipple.

Abandoned strip mine and unreclaimed mine land.
Stockpiling topsoil and subsoil, new mine area.

Unreclaimed mine land.
Burtco RV Court and power substation yard.

Abandoned trailer park off State Highway 39.
in the pit, after a coal blast.
Pacific atolls islanders know about bounds and have a sense of scale in their affairs. Seen from space, Earth is an island. That view is surreal like Hanson’s photographs and is less a staircase to new frontiers or a means of dismissing the Earth than an effort at insight, a prelude to recovery, a reminder of our limits.

Like space travel, the surrealistic vision trods upon dangerous ground, for, as Sontag says, it is a colossal denial of the passion of lives lived and a celebration of forms, postures and compositions. The visual allure of photographs like Hanson’s is addictive, says Sontag, and can turn us into image junkies lusting after “an amorous relation, which is based on how something looks” instead of what it means.

But risk can have its rewards. If we can avoid translating Colorstrip’s awesome forms into admired geometry we may see beyond either forms or pictures. Hanson’s lens is sharper than blades of bulldozers and giant shovels, for it enters our heads to open seams, to look for grounding. Where has the acid rain from the 333 million tons of coal removed from Copenhill fallen? How many chilly ex-mining towns are there, and what living death haunts them? In inviting us to look in order to perceive truly, Hanson traffics in the colors of poisonous effluents, like a shaman curing with the glands of toads. He asks us boldly to exercise a kind of hue-delight as a means rather than an end.

At first we are reminded of the mineral brilliance of Roman Vishniac’s micro-photographs of translucent slices of minerals, at the other end of the size scale. But the conjunction of detailed captions and the series of images links Hanson’s work with the narrative arts instead of painting. It is Our Storied a recovery of social and ecological worth too long repressed by the industrial–technical era. We are awakened to patterns collecting us in a violent tale of time and place.

Notes