Selections from “Colstrip, Montana”

Photographs by
David Hansen

Essay by
Paul Shepard
Modern culture seems about to make a change in its interactions with the ties that bind 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 metaphysics that made Lewis Mumford speak of “Gaia’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 venders of landscapes, being sensors and guides of the eye, narrowly defined the notion 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 sly in the beholder’s eye with the invention of perspective and the picture frame itself—an insider’s view through 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, landscape aesthetics conditioned us to surrender willingly all that was unbeautiful to industrial ravage.

Artists can rhapsodise and paint the deities of the miners and loggers, provided they stick with the language of limners’ manuals—the basic circle, line and triangle—or dailies 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...
Coal strip mine and abandoned farm.
is not upstaged by ski lifts, towers and gondolas. But the artist who would break from the stranglehold of scenery and yet avoid the various “traditions” that represent nature as colored retinal images is in a quandary. If one shows the “ugly” reality, “nature” vanishes and the patron turns away. If one opts for abstraction, disavowing mere “subject matter,” the risk is making art evil attractive.

EXILE IN ON PHOTOGRAPHY, Susan Sontag protests that surrealism is a cruel abuse of real events. She asks whether we are free to enjoy old photographs of suffering people—however excellent the photographs may be technically—simply because we have forgotten the peoples’ names and circumstances. These photographs, she says, are “a warning to the earth,” “a threat to the memory of the earth.” She believes that we have forgotten the earth and its inhabitants. “When we look at old photographs,” she writes, “we are reminded of what it was like to be alive in those days.”

When David T. Hanson presents us with aesthetically pleasing photographs of earth at the Coketrip open-pit mine, Cranberry, Connecticut 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, an “exhibition of the earth,” 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 a new aesthetic awareness and promote emotional detachment. Do time and distance make the anguish of people and the landscape acceptable? Should we admire such photographs solely as objects? No, Sontag insists. This “surrealistic enterprise” places the final decision between the observer and the occasion. Talk about form or balance or line or shape, but there is no escaping the subject. The absence of nature in the name of aesthetics has not been limited to art. At the same time, open-pit mining began in earnest at Coketrip, Erhard Rodland wrote in Landscape that clear-cutting forests produces a more beautiful prospect than selective logging or not clear-cutting the trees at all. An Ohio Chemical Co. advertisement in the Saturday Review read, “If You Think It’s Beautiful Now Wait ‘Til We Chop It All Down.” Today, at the Kemnitz mine in Butte, signs along the highway say, “Historic Site Ahead,” and “Technological Marvel—Bring Your Camera.” Since humans purposefully cut down the land, it follows that the result must be beautiful.

The viewer’s astonishment at places like this is an intoxicating distillation of our national power and will to dominate. Like the smoke from the Four Corners power plant, the open-pit mine is an entity that could be seen from the Moon. We associate the vertigo we experience in the pit’s edge with the exhilaration of our national and industrial success. The camera comes next, for it will turn that havoc into the two-dimensional replica that can awaken an echo of the almost obscene ambition or, for an audience, provide a concentration of pure visual enjoyment.

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 sensibiity is not simply another ideology, but a new seeing. It addresses the problem of how humans perceive nature and their own identity. Although the iron Coketrip raises is similar to that raised by the photographs Sontag criticized, its status is different. Her rage against the pictures of starving people as cofleetable scenography was a critique of the whole of European and literary humanism. The very arrogance and pride of humanism morality helped sustain a sympathy for downtrodden people, at the same time widening the gap between the human and the nonhuman. That habit had never completely waned 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 current natural resources conservation movement), Leo
Unreclaimed mine land from the 1930s.

Coal strip mine and railroad tipples along Arnett's Creek.
Marx's influential book *The Machine in the Garden* construed the ecological movement as a conflict between "pastoral" ideal and progress. If that were a complete analysis the issue 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 matter" and the preconceived assumptions of cultural synergy, the reawakening of a mythic 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 reconciling nature by preserving entered notions of "the other" "selves" creation. The problem of surrealism may appear: As might recover the importance of content, 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 Colstrip.

For the most part, Colstrip is not only a ravaged but also an invisible place. So that we do not misunderstand, Hanson has virtually excluded people from his pictures. Like Cézanne at Mont St. Victor, we are drawn to form and color, to the brink of the alienated 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 aptness? The lack of people in the photographs prevents a certain kind of distancing. The absence of other "selves" makes our involvement as viewers that 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 estrangement caused by the obfuscification and absence of attachment 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 as *Mother Earth Laid Bare*. It was a primitively effort that must have brought abusive chuckles from the avant-garde enemies of subject matter content. Hogue's evocation of prairie in redressing a land_centered by the plow was quaint, but one knew he had rage in mind.

Something horrible, or act we have committed upon ourselves, is at hand in this evocative. We have begun to escape the metaphor of the earth- organism as poetic convenience and to 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 pastorality, still glide quickly past the "ugly." There are plenty of geographer-traveler-writers who tell how "interesting" it all is, providing endless human description. Such endless fascinations with ourselves and our works also educates the eye, but its perception is that of linear analysis. Obtrusively value-free and demythologized, it acts as is a perverse enchantment, its mythic core the body of stories of domination that define the West.
Digging for Our Roots

Hansens Colstrip, Montana series is a worst-case scenario that alters our awareness and casts attention to the violence that shakes our complacency.

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

There is a paradox in kicking 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 Rosedale 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. “Rosedale” 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.
Burrco RV Court and power substation yard.

Abandoned trailer space off State Highway 39.
in the pit, after a coal blast.
not be a more ironic name, for the whole black mass is
mummified plants that once swayed in the surge
of a tidewater sea covering the center of the continent.
More than any other understanding it offers the
perspective of time. At this
under-surface, sixty thou-
sand times a thousand
years ago, a swamp hid the
last dinosaur bones, now
visible again. Below thin
calcareous mass, tan and
grey sandstones and mud-
stones that give much so of
the color to Hanson's pho-
tographs were accumulat-
ing when something mon-
suus struck the planet.

Hidden in these gray
rocks is a thin layer of
iridium dust, the remains
of the impact that changed
the history of life. Dust,
blasted into the sky,
surrounded the Earth for
months. In this twilight
the plants died, dragging
their animal dependents
into oblivion with them. A
minor scavenger form sur-
vived, giving rise to the
birds. And within the eco-
logical vacuum, our furry
quadruped ancestors ram-
aged in the ark, slang-
ing out their survival on the
bodies of worms and bugs.

When the Roseland was
soil a marsh of living
spagnum, the continents
had not drifted apart and
together were an island in
a world ocean. On Pacific
atolls, Margaret Mead
once observed, an island is
the symbol of limits. On
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 dis-
missing the Earth than an
effort at insight, a prelude
to recovery, a reminder of
our limits.

Like space travel, the
surrealist vision trods up
dangerous ground, for, as
Sontag says, it is a callous
denial of the passion of
lives lived and a celebra-
tion 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 immoral relation,
which is based on how
something looks" instead
of what it means.

But risk can have its re-
wards. If we can avoid
translating Coleridge's aw-
esome forms into admired
geometry we may see
beyond either forms or
pictures. Hanson's lens is
sharper than blades of
bulldozers and giant shov-
els, for it enters our heads
to open seams, to look for
grounding. (Where has the
acid rain from the 33 mil-
lion tons of coal removed
from Coalstrip fallen? How
many shabby 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 col-
ores 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 Story, a
recognition of social and eco-
logical contexts too long
repressed by the industrial
-technical era. We are
awakened to patterns col-
lecting us in a violent tale
of time and place.

Notes
1. Erhard Rothlund, "The
Changing Forest
Landscape," Landscape
42, 1955.
2. Saturday Review, April 8,
1967.