

CITY NEWSPAPER

ART REVIEW: "Nature as Artifice" and "New Topographics"

This land is our land

By Luke Strosnider on July 1, 2009

Humanity's needs (and, more troubling, its wants) bring profound changes to the planet's landscape, a story that can be understood just by looking. This summer, the George Eastman House focuses on our awkward relationship with land with two separate exhibitions, "New Topographics" and "Nature as Artifice: New Dutch Landscape in Photography and Video Art." Separately, they offer frank examinations of our great and terrible marks upon the Earth; together, they illustrate intense changes in the worlds of art and photography over the last four decades.

First mounted in 1975, the celebrated "New Topographics" returns in a slightly different edition, including a smattering of works by other artists who influenced the original exhibitors. (Walker Evans's "American Photographs" and Ed Ruscha's deadpan catalogues of West Coast architecture are among the additions.) While the original "New Topographics" artists all made work that was aesthetically aware, they were more concerned with clear-eyed, dispassionate documentation. This was a huge break from tradition; these were not Ansel Adams's bombastic peaks and canyons, enhanced by complex darkroom manipulation. These prints were smallish and somewhat dull, but that was partly the point. As Nicholas Nixon's artist statement succinctly puts it: "The world is infinitely more interesting than any of my opinions concerning it."

Although the exhibition came and went without much fanfare in 1975, "new topographics photography" has become a widely understood term throughout the art world, and the show is unanimously considered a turning point in the history of the medium. The roster of artists is amazing, akin to the line-ups of the New York Yankees of the 1920s. But this cohort was more than just a group of great players; they changed the way the game was played. Stephen Shore was among the first to photographically explore the beauty of everyday colors, Nixon's matter-of-fact views of Boston subtly revealed the tangle of hundreds of years of urban growth, Bernd and Hilla Becher's typologies and teaching influenced an entire generation of German artists (think Gursky, Ruff, and H♦fer), and Robert Adams, Lewis Baltz, Joe Deal, Frank Gohlke, John Schott, and Henry Wessel Jr. all unflinchingly confronted our bizarre modifications of the vistas of the American West. All are deeply respected, and many are bona fide legends, radically influencing what we now know as contemporary photography.

"Nature as Artifice: New Dutch Landscape in Photography and Video Art" features 19 contemporary artists who've transplanted the spirit of "new topography" to a much, much different location. While much of the original "New Topographics" work dissected the American West, consider this: the single state of Colorado is over six times the size of the Netherlands. Historically, the Dutch have never had the luxury of space, and their dense and still growing population has led to colossal projects where water is carefully controlled, the land drained and made useable for living and agriculture. The result is a

landscape that is orderly and precise, eschewing the haphazard, "we'll-just-put-it-here" anti-reasoning that infected American westward expansion.

The work of "Nature of Artifice" is significantly louder with outward passion than the detachment of "New Topographics." Playful humor is here, evident in Hans van der Meer's images of soccer games on fields that appear to have popped up out of nowhere in the Dutch countryside. These are amusing snippets of the game: a thrilling goal, a bored-to-death goalkeeper surveying the action far outside the frame. Fun, too, are Edwin Zwakman's huge color prints. From across the room, we see recently built structures, but mental unease sets in as you move closer. Inspection reveals them as miniature sets created and photographed in a studio. Zwakman makes the models strictly from memory, an interesting comment on the seamless sameness of much of the Netherlands contemporary built environment.

Beyond showing the unique landscape challenges and solutions of the Netherlands, "Nature as Artifice" illuminates the evolution in artistic documentary practice since the days of "New Topographics." Most everything is bursting with color and gargantuan in size compared to the pieces' diminutive early 1970's counterparts, but stylistic and conceptual nods to yesterday suffuse the new. Gert Jan Kocken records the aftermath of a factory explosion in the town of Enschede through photographs made from the same vantage every few years. They're as emotionless as Nicholas Nixon's views of Boston, and despite their color, they recall the Becher's staid examinations of Pennsylvania coal factories. Though ostensibly about form, the Becher's work does convey the sad collapse and stagnation of American industry, but Kocken shows the opposite: a quick and deliberate reuse of the accident site over the course of just a few years. The Dutch, it would appear, will not tolerate wasted space.

Spanish artist Xavier Ribas's dual-channel video further explores how much the lens-based arts have changed since "New Topographics." Half of "Greenhouse" is a 20-minute video of a slow, rolling journey between two ends of a massive greenhouse construction site north of Amsterdam. The footage is as aloof as a video camera can be: unedited, and offering nary a pan, tilt, or zoom. The other half of "Greenhouse" is an interview with two landowners who sold their property to the developers. They recall all manner of context and history, recounting the reclamation of the land from the water and the Nazi invasion during World War II. While the artists of "New Topographics" relied almost solely on the poetic mystery of images to make their statements, Ribas offers both a poem and a reason for why it was made.

Intense study of image culture, nascent in the early 1970's, is now deeply self-aware. Today's academically trained artists contend with post-modern theories of veracity, and digital technology has further eroded our trust in images. The demands on the medium since the days of "New Topographics" have radically changed, and for photography this is a good thing: art and ideas are renewable, mutating and evolving only after being thoroughly exhausted. Unfortunately, the same cannot be said for the subject of these exhibitions. We'll have to be more careful with the land.

Nature as Artifice: New Dutch Landscape in Photography and Video Art

Through August 16

New Topographics

Through September 27

George Eastman House, 900 East Ave.

Tue-Sat 10 a.m.-5 p.m. (Thu until 8 p.m.), Sun 1-5 p.m. | \$4-\$10 | 271-3361, eastmanhouse.org