

Panorama of the 'New Landscape'

The Bay Area's rich tradition of landscape photography has been dominated for decades by the towering figure of Ansel Adams. His legacy lives on in the work of the "new landscape" photographers. But their work has an edge that challenges Adams' romantic, idealized celebrations of untouched wilderness.

Two current San Francisco shows, "Paradise Lost," at SF Cameraclub, and "Clouds," the most recent body of work by Bay Area photographer Richard Misrach, at Fraenkel Gallery, are the latest essays in this form.

Both shows continue the critical dialogue that began in the late 1960s with photographers such as Robert Adams and Bay Area-based Lewis Baltz. These artists reveal a landscape that has been altered and often damaged, if not destroyed, by human presence.

It's one thing to appreciate such work in a gallery or museum, but why would you want it in your living room?

First, it's affordable. Prices for work by new landscape photographers range from less than \$500 for emerging artists to more than \$7,000 for an early Misrach print (although Fraenkel Gallery has some Misrachs for \$750, and Misrach's large-format color prints of "Clouds" are \$2,800 each). Fraenkel also represents Robert Adams

PORTFOLIO *Marcia Tanner*

are priced at \$500. John Pfahl's prints sell at The Photographer's Gallery in Palo Alto for \$600 to \$3,000.

The Regional Factor

Continuing the regional tradition is another factor: "It's very important for the Bay Area, which has the heritage of Ansel Adams, to investigate what's going on as the result of Adams' imprint here," says Sandra Phillips, photography curator at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art. The new work may be based on a romantic conception of landscape, she says, "but it's much more clear-eyed, less romantic and exulting, and generally more tragic."

Another reason to buy the new landscape photography, says Debra Heimerdinger, director of Vision Gallery in San Francisco, is that we're ready for it. "It parallels an expanded consciousness in the culture," she says. Heimerdinger mentions a photograph by Texan Keith Carter: an image of an elderly black man sitting in a chair by a smoking landfill.

"An environmental lawyer bought it to remind him of why he was working," she says. "This work has particular significance to people who have a commitment to the

as an indicator of how we think about the world today."

Many Messages

The work may be elegiac, mourning the loss of pristine beauty while recognizing the birth of a more compromised one. It may be poetic — inviting reflection — or propagandistic, meant to provoke action. Some "new topographers" use straight photography bordering on the documentary; others manipulate the image in various ways. And some recent work — such as that of several young artists in "Paradise Lost" — uses landscape imagery to deconstruct the myths that underlie our culture's conflicted attitudes toward nature.

Peter de Lory's black and white triptychs, for instance, revisit our myths of the Wild West. His "Western Legacy I" sandwiches an image of a neon cowboy on a bucking bronco between two guidebook views of Monument Valley, making landscape the frame for an illusion.

Into her forest scenes, Sara Leith inserts tiny vignettes, like windows onto the viewer's unconscious, implying that no "view" of the landscape can be innocent or objective.

Phillips, who is planning an exhibition of new landscape photography reflecting environmental concerns, especially responds to the subtle, understated work of Robert Adams and Robert Dawson (Vision Gallery). "Dawson's is in the tradition of documentary landscape photography, using the large view-camera format: an emotionally pared-down, non-operatic Ansel Adams," she says.

She also likes the more "operatic" John Pfahl, whose alluring color prints of industrial sites, with chimneys belching gorgeous smoke dense with pollutants, were shown in a solo retrospective at the Ansel Adams Center last year.

"They're related to the Hudson River School of landscape painters, like Thomas Cole and Frederic Church, who celebrate the sublime, pictorial, romantic aspects of nature," says Phillips. "But they're also about the deadly aspects. They're very beautiful."

RESOURCES

Richard Misrach's "Clouds"

Stephen Wirtz Gallery