

Evan Anderman
Wounds of Time:
Beauty and Despair in an Altered Landscape

Evan Anderman's aerial photographs of the American Southwest are provocative. At first glance they appear to be beautiful images of landscapes, shot from above, composed of intriguing, even whimsical, lines, shapes and colors. One could infer that the farmers operating the tractors and combines that draw these curvy, looping lines across the landscape have a sense of humor—and perhaps they do.

Yet, his images of industrial scale farms, feedlots, fracking sites, wildfire burn areas, Minuteman missile launch sites and military maneuver zones invite introspection about the impact—and long-term consequences—of human activity upon the landscape.

Most think of the Southwestern US landscape as wide-open and untouched. Yet, Anderman's images reveal that this is a grave misconception. Nearly every square foot of land as far as the eye can see has been indelibly marked by human engineering projects, vehicles and industrial operations.

Anderman's photographs document accelerating human activity. Future archeologists won't need to dig far to find the artifacts of 20th and 21st Century human presence, even in the most remote corners of the American Southwest—the evidence is obvious, everywhere and overwhelming. Of course, human activity doesn't just mark the surface of the earth, but has an impact on the atmosphere, and beneath the surface as well, in the form of depleted aquifers and polluted ground water.

Humans have been altering this land for millennia, domesticating animals, raising crops, fishing, building villages and altering the flow of water for farming. However, the building of railroads, dams, aqueducts, cities, highways, power lines, and undertaking industrial agriculture and resource extraction on a vast scale, has radically transformed the Southwest and surrounding regions.

With certain early exceptions (Roman roads and aqueducts, the Great Wall of China, the Pyramids of Giza), it is the scale of contemporary anthropocentric land interventions that distinguishes them from historic human alterations of the landscape. It is thought today that pristine landscapes—untouched by humans—no longer exist. Anywhere.

When acts of human engineering and ambition alter the landscape, we don't consider the results—visible or invisible—to be art. Yet, as Duchamp demonstrated, the act of re-contextualizing industrial products and artifacts, (i.e., Bicycle Wheel and Fountain), by pointing them out and re-locating them into an art context, the *thing-pointed-out* becomes a work of art.

Photographing objects and *processes*, (i.e., pointing them out), and exhibiting the photograph in an art context, (relocating them), is no different. Dorothea Lange's photographs of Dust Bowl migrants, Mathew Brady's photographs of Civil War battlefields and Sebastião Salgado's photographs of workers laboring in gigantic mining operations, are documents of places and events, as well as works of art.

The work of the above artists manifest a fine balance between the despair in front of the lens and the aesthetic qualities of the photograph itself: this interstice between beauty and despair is not often achieved as lesser artists tend to push things toward the aesthetic or the noteworthy (capable of “going viral” in today’s nomenclature.)

Anderman has taken a unique approach to achieve that balance. His photography embodies six related qualities that, together, distinguish it from most other works of landscape photography, aerial or otherwise:

Human Time / Progression
Optimal Distance
Delayed Read
Beauty and Despair
X-ray Vision
Geologic Time / Earth Anatomy

His work has a strong aesthetic sensibility and documentary character, but conceptually, sits solidly in the social / environmental realm, invoking questions regarding not only the activity of humans on the planet, but our long-term role as creators and destroyers.

HUMAN TIME / PROGRESSION

Anderman often visits the same location repeatedly over time, revealing the progression of change, (as in agriculture, as farmer’s plow under and rotate crops), and sometimes, the progression of the desecration of the land over the years, (by industrial and military-industrial uses, and suburban development).

OPTIMAL DISTANCE

His overhead gaze takes in the land from from an optimal distance that is much lower than what can be seen out of the window of a commercial jetliner at 30,000 feet; but significantly higher than what can be seen from the window of a tall building or from the top of a bluff. This height allows Anderman to arrive at an effective visual distance, to put his aircraft on auto-pilot, and literally, “open the window” to the vista below. He leans out into the wind with his camera to photograph what he sees, with nothing between his lens and the land below.

DELAYED READ

This crucial middle distance produces images that are more than the merely beautiful images commonly associated with aerial landscape photography: lines, shapes, shadows, color, gradation. Look closely into certain of Anderman’s images and it’s possible to discern thousands of animals crammed mercilessly into filthy feedlots for the sake of our burgers and BLTs; or the equipment for fracking operations strewn about the scraped, no longer pristine landscape. At this distance, what appears to be fine linear textures reveal themselves to be thousands of vehicle tracks etched into the thin, fragile surface of the landscape.

Human alteration of the land is seen everywhere in Anderman’s photographs. His images don’t embody a false narrative of pristine natural beauty, but instead reveal the land as it is: gouged, scraped, scarred and polluted.

BEAUTY and DESPAIR

On the other hand, this particular distance allows one to experience that beauty can exist simultaneously with despair. Anderman's photographs show a disfigured landscape, yet they are beautiful unto themselves. His images can be appreciated as works of photographic art independently of their subjects.

Anderman's images are shot from just enough distance to not *smell* the horror, literally or metaphorically. The strong odor of drilling chemicals and waste gasses from wells only hundreds of feet from suburban homes, and the stench of industrial scale feedlots and slaughterhouses cannot be conveyed by photographs.

Yet, once one realizes that those tiny specs in some of Anderman's photographs are images of living cows or pigs, the horror of their unwilling incarceration and imminent death can be easily, yet uncomfortably, conjured in one's mind. In this way, Anderman's photographs are gorgeous, provocative and disturbing.

X-RAY VISION

Anderman is a geologist by training. Thus when he looks down on these undulating earthly surfaces, he can also visualize what lies below: layers of deep sedimentary rock here, vast swathes igneous rock there, fields of volcanic basalt in the foreground with ash tuffs in the distance. Anderman can "see" the forces shaping the land, from the inside out.

GEOLOGIC TIME / EARTH ANATOMY

Like Renaissance artists who practiced detailed anatomical dissection, Anderman has an understanding of the "musculature and anatomy" of the land that very few other artists possess. This deep understanding of the underlying structure of the land informs his work in subtle ways.

This "informed x-ray vision" is particular to the geologist, who is keenly aware of the thin skin of the earth's crust over the vast depths of the earth's hot, roiling, viscous mantle—as well as the millions of years of time represented in the tilted, stratified bands of rock revealed by slow, but inexorable erosion.

Given Anderman's appreciation of extremely long spans of time, Anderman says, "The planet will survive, but humans may not."

Of course, given enough time, all of the damage—and the achievements—that humans have wrought upon the earth, the very evidence of our existence in time and space, will be entirely erased.

— Roy Montibon, August 4, 2018
Artist, designer, educator