SIGHTS BEYOND SIGHTS:
SOME JOKES ABOUT NATURE

by

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First and foremost, the landscape photograph communicates difference. Nature appears to be a discrete entity, apart from ourselves. In this way, it plays a crucial role in our daily construction of identity. Looking at it, we see what we are not. We see something that is diametrically opposed to the world that we live in, whose unstable environments stand at odds with our desires and aims as humans. Our ability to use nature in this way, as an instrument in the invention of humanness, derives from the photograph’s physical properties. Most obviously it is an object. It is a thing with limits that can be understood as separate from its context. Its existence as such is the result of alchemy and/or fraud. Something that envelops us, that we are enmeshed in, and to whose laws we must ultimately answer, is transformed into something that we can hold in our hands. An environment becomes an object. A surrounding becomes surrounded.

In pieces like *Sights Beyond Sights* and *Discard/Unrise*, the use of one landscape to frame another refers to the absurdity of nature’s status as an object. The repeated overlay of environments with no smooth transition calls attention to the images’ borders. The point of focus becomes the point at which the land is cut off. Speaking on this disruption of environment, Deborah Bright writes that “like the locomotive, photography annihilate[s] conventional understandings of space and time” (60) The continuity of the land is denied and it is made into a sort of concentrated idea of nature. The potency of this nature-concentrate, of this fetishistic object, is what interests me. In *Mother’s Keeper*, the still image of an
idol of undisclosed origin, suspended in a field of gray, is overlain with technicolor video footage of America’s national parks. In the corner of the collage, echoing the shapes of a blazing sun and a production company’s logo which appear in the video, sits a poorly printed image of a porcelain plate. The national parks seem to want to adhere to the idol’s surface, to inhabit a finite space, though their continuous movement denies them objecthood. Meanwhile the presence of two objects of varying social utility asks what type of thing the landscape has been transformed into - an idol to worship or an instrument of human desire?

In *Plato’s Pharmacy* Derrida writes that “the fear of death is what gives all witchcraft, all occult medicine, a hold” (123). If the landscape photo is the fetish, the occult object in which we seek salvation, then in what do we fear our annihilation? Is nature the destroyer, that which might rob us not of life, but worse, of dignity? Or will connecting with nature save us from over-industrialization and human greed? In reality, the landscape photo embodies all these anxieties and hopes. Looking into it, we alternately fear death and seek enlightenment through immersion in either pure nature or pure culture. On the one hand, the photo taps into a sense of the pastoral. It refers to a collective memory of nature which, in itself, is constructed. In this utopian state, all the complications of civilized life are imagined to dissipate and give way to a blissful unity with nature. In *Smoke*, the interweaving of two landscape scenes seems to resonate with this idea of an infinitely layered understanding of Arcadian nature.
Weaving in and out of each other, creating a composite picture with no single form, these ideas of nature constitute a sort of reservoir from which we derive vague spiritual fortification. In “The Machine in the Garden Revisited,” Deborah Bright places the origins of landscape photography somewhere within the tradition of Christian mystical experience.

Its startlingly precise detail, heightened by the three-dimensional illusion of stereographic viewing, caught the imagination of the transcendentalists, for whom it held a deeper meaning ...

Heightened by parallel waves of Utopian and evangelical revival movements (Shakerism, Mormonism, Methodism, Brook Farm), transcendentalism joined older Christian doctrines about the immanence of God in nature to Romanticism’s insistence on the personal experience of the sublime. Nature was the sign of both divinity’s awesome force and its redemptive grace, available to all seekers (80).

Today, the landscape photograph lacks this resonance with contemporary religious movements, but it seems to retain some residue of its early spiritual function. In *Clipped Falls*, the waterfall serves as an apt metaphor for this continuous flow of natural/spiritual energy. The central falls loop infinitely, while the flow of the paint to their left is paused and overlain with static. In this piece, the continuous falls seem to be fueled by images of photographic reproduction and summer
vacation, the quintessential processes through which we maintain our collective
delusions about nature.

In arousing our longing for some pure (if imagined) natural state, the
landscape photograph induces in us an intense fear of the opposite, a completely
industrialized environment. David Batchelor describes this state as “antiseptic.”
In an anecdote about the frighteningly white interior of a wealthy art collector’s
home, he expresses this fear of pure culture via whiteness.

Inside this house was a whole world, a very particular kind of
world, a very clean, clear and orderly universe. But it was also a
very paradoxical, inside-out world, a world where open was also
closed, simplicity was also complication, and clarity was also
confusion. It was a world that didn’t readily admit the existence of
other worlds. Or it did so grudgingly and resentfully, and
absolutely without compassion (2).

Taking the reciprocal fear of color as the subject of the book, Batchelor highlights
some interesting parallels in the ways that both color and nature have been
designated as dangerous elements that need to be subdued in order to maintain
form and identity.

For those who fear the hermetic white house of culture, which accepts
nothing but more of itself, the landscape photo is a symbol of salvation. For those
who fear a lawless Hobbesian state of nature, the landscape photo is symbol of domination. In its diminutive scale and flimsy materiality it represents our desire to subjugate nature. The act of holding the land in the palm of one’s hand is a subtly potent phenomenon. For over a century this ritual has been an integral part of life in the West. Every so often, we take up God’s perspective. The land that we see before us is under our control - predictable and still. In the context of our everyday lives, these images seem to remind us that the problem of nature is in the past. It’s been taken care of. Now we can move on to more pertinent business.

In *The Culture of Nature*, Alexander Wilson attempts to describe the true content of films and TV specials about nature. Speaking on the logistics of actually making one of these films, he writes

> Our ability to produce these films of ‘life in the wild’ is an index not only of our power over nature but also of our distance from it. For the closer the members of a film crew get with their cameras and paraphernalia, the further nature recedes from their experience, and ours (45)

This situation breeds frustration and as a result, the images are encoded with a contempt for nature. It simply will not do what we so badly want it to. In *Sights Beyond Sights*, the pin is an appropriate metaphor for this struggle for control.
That which restrains the object impales it. Analysis of the thing initiates its decay. In this piece, a cluster of pins meet at the center of a mountain, followed by an absurd nail, an act of overkill. The pins actually reenact the role that the photograph itself plays. Functioning much like writing according to Derrida, the landscape subverts its own attempts at elucidating the subject. “Under the pretext of supplementing memory, [it] makes one even more forgetful; far from increasing knowledge, it diminishes it” (102).

A general misunderstanding of nature breeds a love-hate relationship. The landscape photo carries all of this confusion, encapsulating feelings of loss, nostalgia, anger, and dread. An uneasy sense of weightlessness sets in. We cannot locate ourselves. Not knowing whether to fear or revere nature, unable to find a synthesis of the two options, we attempt to create the Arcadian state that we long for. Out of this comes nature conservation and the summer vacation. Making lengthy voyages to national parks, we stubbornly try to confirm the existence of the pastoral. Having finally arrived, we frantically try to capture the scene - souvenirs from a perfect world. There is a sort of desperation in this act. We gather these fetishes in our knapsacks, preparing for the deathly plunge back into civilization, not realizing that we never really left home.

Over a century of these personal and public attempts at capturing the elusive subject of the sublime have resulted in a flood of photographs. We are completely inundated by the image of nature. The process has come full circle as the environment-turned-object has multiplied to the point of establishing a whole
new environment. This is the environment into which I was born and in which I work. Though I haven’t found a solution to my discomfort within this environment, I’ve at least gained a better understanding of how it came to be. At the outset of my project, holding a crumpled mountainscape in my hand, I wondered why this banal act suddenly felt so potent. Agreeing to commit myself fully to understanding this phenomenon, I’ve realized that the most mundane experiences, if studied intensively, really can offer the deepest insight into the nature of our culture. This interest in clarity through meditation has always been present in my life. The important thing that this project has shown me, however, is that a personal sense of absurdity (a revelatory act in itself - essentially unlearning the thing in question) can be applied to subjects with real social relevance. Not only can it create an entry point to an overwhelming issue, it can help to clarify the issue by offering a different perspective. In this way, I feel I’ve begun and will continue to integrate sense of play, humor, social responsibility, and self-awareness within my work.
Works Cited


