

an interview with ron jude

A_ What is your relationship with the “traditional” history of landscape photography? How did you approach the landscape while working on your project, and later book, *Other Nature*?

RJ Although I’ve always had an interest in landscape photography, I never imagined that I would make work that would be considered *Landscape Photography*. But here I am.

I like Timothy O’Sullivan’s photographs because of their graphic bluntness. There’s something so direct and unaffected about his images of the American West. They’re perfect in their unmannered clarity, and with the added benefit of seeing them through the filter of an early 21st Century perspective they seem very prescient. His images foreshadow everything from minimalism, to earthworks, and landscape photography of the 60s and 70s. (I know he wasn’t thinking about any of these things, but it’s a nice historical fantasy.)

When the term “traditional landscape” is used, however, idealized landscapes in the modernist vein usually come to mind. This brand of photography has never held my attention. Landscape photography that gets lumped-in under the New Topographics umbrella, however, has always appealed to me—especially that of Robert Adams. I look at his photographs whenever I need to renew my faith in what the medium can do. His work is simultaneously beautiful and tough, and never relies on easy devices or simple ironies. That said, I’ve never set out to emulate another photographer, regardless of how much I admire their work. When I started shooting what would become *Other Nature*, I very consciously looked at photographs by people like Robert

Adams and Lewis Baltz, and the later “New Objectivity” work by photographers such as Thomas Struth and Joseph Bartscherer and asked, “Okay, what else can be done with the landscape? What questions haven’t already been asked?”

I had the idea that I would approach the landscape from a perspective that runs through most of my work, one that questions our capacity to “know” things, and addresses the limitations of rational thought. I wanted to make images that pretend to fulfill the dubious empirical and narrative promise of a photograph, while quietly pulling out the epistemological rug. The expectations placed on the landscape genre are tremendous, and it’s ridiculously hard to avoid having one’s work read through that rubric. (This is especially true of photographs that get thrown into the broad, fuzzy category of “documentary,” simply by virtue of rejecting mannerism.) But *Other Nature* isn’t just about denying those expectations; it’s about delivering something else—something unsettling in its immediacy. This work isn’t grounded in the specifics of location, so the pictures hardly even qualify as landscapes in the usual, descriptive sense. Since there’s no clear narrative, no attempt at creating a sense of “place,” and no larger polemic being established, the photographs sort of stonewall you into looking for what else is there. And of course, there is nothing else there—just you.

The tricky part of trying to execute a body of work with these goals is to do so in a multi-layered way that allows for various levels of entry. I still want to make visually engaging photographs that evoke a visceral response. The last thing I want to do is to make work that looks and reads like a term paper with a bunch of literary footnotes. As academic as my program may sound, I value the enjoyment of pictures, and I understand how important that experience is to bringing people back for multiple readings.

A_ How did the project evolve from when you started shooting? How did you choose the places you photographed?

RJ I started by taking pictures of the landscape around where I live in Upstate New York. I did this for a few years. As is usually the case when I start something new, I didn't really know exactly what I was doing or what I was looking for. I had a vague sense of the kind of picture I wanted to make, but it took a while to get some traction. I did a small museum exhibition with the pictures from New York, and I felt like they were missing something. I stepped back from these photographs for a period of time while I worked on an archive project of newspaper pictures called *Alpine Star*. It was through working on this project that I discovered what I needed to do to sort out my problems with the landscapes. I learned a lot about the use of suspended narrative, and constructing blocks of unrelated images into something abstractly coherent and surprising. After I published *Alpine Star* as an artist's book, I came back to the landscapes with a renewed sense of purpose and enthusiasm for resolving the project.

At that point I stopped shooting locally, and decided to vary the landscapes geographically. Through this expansion I was able to establish a clearer tone of intent to the photographs. Some of the locations, like Southern California, Louisiana, and Washington State, I selected very specifically because of what they offered in terms of topographical diversity. Most of the other places were chosen with the Ouji Board method. I just drove, like Jim Nashe in Paul Auster's *The Music of Chance*.

A_ Through the enigmas of nature we can try to understand our limits. To understand our human condition

we approach the wild nature around us in search of some kind of answers. Nature's obscurity and limits are also our limits. In the representation of a dense bush, for example, we can see our impossibility of looking beyond. In your photographs we sometimes have the impression of not being able to see, to understand what is happening to us. It is a sort of mirror of our poor condition: we'll never know the truth.

Do you think that your studies in philosophy have influenced your work in some kind of way? *Other Nature* is full of signs that we have to decode.

RJ Yes, my interest in philosophy has a role in how I approach photography, but I should make it clear that I don't consider myself a philosopher. I'm not sure I have the intellectual chops, and I'm quite sure I don't have the discipline. More importantly, I really love photography, and I decided a long time ago that its inherent limitations present just as many fascinating problems as philosophy. It's a completely different way of transcribing things, and I prefer the messiness that happens when ideas get tangled up with the visible world. Simply put, I'd rather show you than tell you.

The existential themes explored in Sartre's novel, *Nausea*, get me excited to take pictures. It's a fantastic book that becomes more hilarious every time I pick it up. (On first read it's not comical. In fact, I wouldn't recommend reading it in a northern climate during the winter months.) I first read it in the middle of a hot Louisiana summer in 1991, and it was an epiphany for me. There seemed a clear connection to what I was trying to do with photography. I'd studied philosophy as an undergraduate before I turned my focus to photography, but it wasn't until I read *Nausea* that the two tracks seemed so parallel. Part of it, I think, was that Sartre was filtering his

ideas through fiction, rather than a straight-up philosophical treatise. It occurred to me that the same thing might be possible with photography.

A_ The relationship between interior and exterior plays a central role in your book. The romantic poets and artists frequently used the metaphor of the window to communicate this contrast between inside and outside. Would you like to tell us a little more about “the other” nature and what does it mean for you?

RJ The interior photographs got folded into the project when I started diversifying the landscapes. I understand how the interior/exterior metaphor could be garnered from the mixing of these images. What I’m more interested in, however, is the way the motel pictures create an ontological experience that’s parallel to the landscapes. They’re just as diverse in terms of location, yet by design, they’re all familiar, and they all provide the same truncated narrative. In an installation, and in the book, they’re meant to serve as interruptions, and reminders of how to look at the landscapes.

It’s hard to avoid having metaphor extracted from even the most clear-eyed, antiseptic photograph, regardless of intent. However, I hope there’s enough of a consistent stubbornness to my pictures that you’re ultimately forced to look elsewhere. There’s an unfulfilled *suggestion* of further meaning in my photographs, but in the final analysis, the only meaning in the picture is what’s in the picture. This is this, and that is that—there is nothing else. The frustration that comes with this realization is key to experiencing the photographs in *Other Nature*. So, “other” nature suggests that the physical world can act as a conduit for ideas about pure existence. As with any title, it’s a way to set the tone of the piece, and point one

in the right direction, hopefully without revealing too much or acting as a road map.

A_ In your photographs this “other” and unfamiliar, is not so devastating and catastrophic. In some analyses of your book it seems that your photographs are a metaphor of a man without orientation, oppressed by nature and by his nomadic refuge (in this case the hotel rooms). Maybe it’s true: your way to photograph nature is not a glorification of it. But there is a sort of hope that surrounds every moment of the book. *Other Nature* is very open to many interpretations, but which is your sincere point of view about this man’s condition? What do you think about this “terrifying” relationship between human beings and nature? Is it really that terrifying?

RJ I’m glad you’re able to see the potential for a hopeful undercurrent to this work. A common misconception about this line of thinking is that it’s fraught with dread and cynicism—quite the contrary, in fact. The concept of Nothingness may potentially lead to despair, but not necessarily. It can also lead to a sense of freedom. Meaninglessness – or a lack of orientation, if I understand you correctly - can liberate you from the determinism (and false comfort) that comes with the notion of cosmic order.

I also agree with you that the work is open to different interpretations, and I don’t see that as a flaw or weakness of the book. As I already mentioned, my point of view is that the reduction of meaning that occurs in these pictures is not terrifying at all. But I also understand that what I intend and what other people glean from the work can be different things from different points of access. That’s okay. I don’t have explanatory texts in my books and exhibitions for the

very reason of allowing multiple, equally valid interpretations. I'm also trying to create a specific world within the book, one that's as much about a psychological state, or feeling or mood, or whatever you want to call it. If someone only experiences the book on that level, they've sufficiently tapped into what I'm after, and it doesn't matter if they haven't read Sartre. It's unfortunate that we've come to the point where people think they need to be taught through academic essays how to look at and respond to works of art, and that their own visual literacy isn't adequate for understanding something as democratic and accessible as a photograph.

A_ Do you think that it is possible to combine the narrative, sequential aspect of the book with the 'ontological sensation' that the singular images transmit?

RJ I hope so. When I'm editing a book or putting a show together, the same ideas about balancing epiphany and frustration are considered as when I'm shooting. Just as suggested narratives are allowed to fall away in the individual images, the same impulse can be satisfied through the rhythm of a sequence. This requires dozens of attempted edits before all the elements are in place and balanced. You're not only looking at which image follows the last, you're also looking at the overall arc of the book, and various digressions and subplots.

A_ You've said that only a few of the original photographs made the cut for the final sequence. Could you tell us a little about the editing process for *Other Nature*?

RJ I worked on this project off and on from late-1999 through 2008. This yielded hundreds of photographs, and

from those, probably 60 or 70 usable images. In putting the book together, I started with a pool of a dozen or so photographs that I really wanted to make the cut, for one reason or another. Then, using those images as building blocks, I tried to construct something coherent yet non-linear, that didn't have redundancies. (I draw a distinction between echoes and redundancies.) There was a fair amount of logic that went into this process, but there was an equal amount of intuitive selection and exclusion that I had to trust. Inevitably, I had to make some tough choices. There were images that I was really attached to, but ultimately just didn't support the overall flow and arc of the book. There are several that come to mind that I had to sacrifice.

I should mention and give credit to my wife, Danielle Mericle, and my publishers, Mike Slack and Tricia Gabriel at The Ice Plant, who thoroughly understood what I wanted to accomplish, and helped me tighten-up the book edit without compromising the overall tone. Their input was invaluable.

When I start shooting a project, it's like I'm trying to learn a new language. It's exhilarating, but I feel ill-equipped most of the time. When I start working on a book, it's sort of the same feeling, but at least I have a finite amount of raw material with which to work, and I have the benefit of hindsight—I already know what I'm after. It's at that stage when I'm then trying to form coherent thoughts and utterances with the language I've just learned. I mumble a lot, but if you pay attention and listen closely, hopefully you can hear what I'm trying to say.

Interview by Daniel Augschöll and Anya Jasbar.