

ART FAIRS INTERNATIONAL

Ecotopia at the ICP – Laurel Angrist

February 12th, 2007



Early photographs of the American West captured a pristine wilderness untarnished by industry and tourism. Ansel Adams spent his lifetime photographing this remote landscape with its snow-covered peaks and cascading waterfalls. In these images, nature appears sublime and majestic. There is no evidence of human intervention in these scenes, not even a single footprint in the snow.

Less than a century later, such remote scenes are quickly vanishing. Industries like logging, tourism and real estate development are changing the landscape and environmentalists are fighting to preserve what is left.

As the landscape changes, contemporary photographers have increasingly considered our troubled relationship with the shrinking natural world. “Ecotopia,” a show running at the International Center of Photography, presents work by 39 visual artists that explores the environment as a central theme. These photographs, films and videos don’t simply bear witness to environmental decay, they also retrace the past and try to imagine what the future has in store.

“Ecotopia” is the second of the ICP’s major triennial exhibitions, which are meant to highlight the most interesting and innovative photography from around the world. It was only after the ICP’s curators had reviewed the work of hundreds of artists over the course of about two years that the show’s obvious theme began to emerge. As natural disasters like the South Asian tsunami and hurricane Katrina drew more attention to global environmental change, the curators began to notice an increasing amount of work with an environmental focus. After many studio visits here and abroad, they began to select artists who dealt with this theme in engaging and provocative ways. Thirty-nine visual artists from 14 different countries were ultimately chosen for the show.

“We were interested in exploring as a starting point the way the tradition of landscape photography has changed,” says assistant curator Joanna Lehan.

“We have this very storied tradition with landscapes in this country. So many traditions in landscape imaging were about idealized visions of nature. Photographers are informed by different motivations now—we can’t help but look at the landscape as something rarified and in danger.”

The degradation of the American landscape is front and center in the works of Robert Adams. The show presents selections from his series “Turning Back: A Photographic Journey of Re-exploration,” in which Adams partially retraced Lewis and Clark’s famous expedition through the Northwest Territory to document the devastating impact of the logging industry on this once fertile region.

These works are a far cry from the idealized visions of nature captured by the earlier Adams. The stark black and white photographs of “Turning Back” present a barren landscape that has been pillaged, and all that remains are clusters of hacked-up stumps. Adams surveys the damage, photographing vast clearings, piles of timber and close-ups of exposed and twisted roots.

Many of the works in “Ecotopia” also deal with our own defenselessness in confronting nature. Giles Mingasson documents life for the Inupiat people

of Shishmaref, an Alaskan village by the Arctic Sea whose native residents' traditional way of life is severely threatened by climate change. As melting sea ice causes water levels to rise, these native fishermen are being forced to move inland, away from the sea they depend on for food. As in Mingasson's work, much of the photojournalism surveyed in "Ecotopia" shows how such ecological disasters have the greatest impact on indigenous or impoverished peoples. Into this category would fall Vincent Laforet's striking photographs for The New York Times, which document the devastation caused by Hurricane Katrina as thousands of New Orleans residents awaited aid from ineffectual federal and local organizations.

In Mitch Epstein's Biloxi, Mississippi, the storm's devastation has a quiet and arresting beauty. Taken six weeks after the hurricane struck Biloxi, with the cleanup effort already in progress, it shows the degree of damage to the small coastal city. Bathed in purplish light, a tree stands in the forefront of this large-scale color print. A brown mattress is impaled on its branches, along with tattered bits of fabric and other remnants left over from the storm. In the distance, the gulf is calm and flat.

Some of the most interesting pieces in "Ecotopia" take an up-close look at the natural world, depicting animals in a way that often deviates from traditional wildlife photography. Catherine Chalmers' video, Safari, goes deep into the jungle to observe the lives of insects at extreme magnification. In each scene, there is an astounding amount of action that occurs within this microcosmic world: a caterpillar appears larger than life, and we hear and see each of its legs as it marches across the grass. An enormous orange butterfly flaps its wings like a helicopter ready for takeoff. Two rhinoceros beetles fight to the death, appearing like a futuristic alien species in a 50s sci-fi movie.

Other artists, like Harri Kallio, look to the past for inspiration. Taking a historical approach to his subject—the long-extinct dodo bird from the island of Mauritius—Kallio did extensive research in libraries and museums looking for images and descriptions that would enable him to create actual models of how the birds once looked. He then flew his models back to Mauritius, to photograph the birds in their natural habitat. In these works, the dodos gather together in small groups in sunlit patches of jungle or sun themselves on the open hillside.