



*Wildorado Wind Project, Winford Ranch, n.d. Photograph by Tammy Cromer-Campbell  
Digital Pigment Print, 11 x 17 inches*

landscape—the desert. Stringfellow engages in a direct conversation with the public through her multi-media research-based documentation of the historical landscape—a specific place transformed over a period of time and, sometimes, the people who inhabit it. Her project, *Greetings From the Salton Sea (2011)*, documenting the largest body of inland water in California, tells the story of a once prosperous, once booming ecosystem where a balance existed between the wildlife and human population. In the 1960s, this popular tourist destination at times received more visitors in a year than the esteemed Yosemite National Park.<sup>5</sup> The Salton Sea of the past, however, is gone. Instead, dilapidated buildings, rusted automobiles, and deceased wildlife fill the frames. Similarly, an almost haunting feeling imbues her next project, *Jackrabbit Homestead (2009)*, which records the remains of an area in the Morongo Basin Valley of California. In the 50s, this land was a part of the Small Tract Act of 1938—a land act designed to distribute federal lands deemed “useless,” which thereby created the promise of acreage, of a home, of a future to many. Homesteaders simply had to lease the land and build a small dwelling on the property within the first three years, and it could be theirs. However, once again, that which is depicted in Stringfellow’s work is not the hope of a thriving community; rather, mostly abandoned shack-like structures, some completely intact and others weathered down by the harsh climate, dejectedly freckle the desert.

The compositions that make up Jackrabbit Homestead range from interior and exterior shots of the homesteads to portraits of the few people who still live in them. In *Brewer Homestead, U.S. Patent No. 1146096, 2009*, a small wooden structure occupies the right third as the sun’s supple light glimmers in from off the frame, as if echoing the position of the sun in Adams’s *Cathedral Spire and Rocks, Yosemite*. The colors of the shack seem to blend into that of the landscape, uniting it with its surroundings. Small, scrubby shrubs blanket the ground as low range mountains roll along the background of the softly lit desert landscape, much like the wide open plains leave bare the architectural forms in Peter Brown’s work. Similar to Brown’s America, the windowless home visually represents the sometimes-harsh history of America; sometimes, despite

one’s will, the manifestation of the American Dream founders. Stringfellow, however, is not simply documenting dilapidated structures in desert landscapes. Her web-based, multi-media projects aim not only to show, but to tell and preserve—to educate.<sup>6</sup> To Kim Stringfellow, the Jackrabbit Homesteads are not simply a part of American history, but a part of the evolving landscape that reveals changes over time as part of the larger narrative of America.

The desire to photograph isn’t new. The urge to capture the varying American landscape has been present throughout the history of photography. From the monumental to the everyday, from beauty to barrenness, from the dream to the reality, the American landscape has offered a subject matter that is ever changing while simultaneously remaining familiar. A visual record of the American Dream is constructed with Adams’s images of the majestic Yosemite Valley, Brown’s narration of the Great Plains, and Stringfellow’s documentation of the Jackrabbit Homesteads. Together, these three artists harness that familiarity by documenting remote places that seem to encapsulate the successes and failures encouraged by the American Dream.

--Devyn Gaudet, 2016

<sup>1</sup> James Trustlow Adams, *The Epic of America*. New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 2012; Little Brown Publishers: 1931. 363.

<sup>2</sup> Jonathan Spaulding, *Ansel Adams and the American Landscape*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995. 67/171.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 131.

<sup>4</sup> Peter Brown and Kent Haruf, *West of Last Chance*. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2008. 12.

<sup>5</sup> Kim Stringfellow, *Greetings From The Salton Sea: Folly and Intervention in the Southern California Landscape 1905-2005*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011. 16.

<sup>6</sup> The viewer is capable of taking a virtual tour though the space, or an audio tour if physically on site, that explains the structures purpose on the land. [www.kimstringfellow.com](http://www.kimstringfellow.com)

**ah.utdallas.edu**

Gallery Hours: Mon. – Fri., 2 - 5 p.m.  
UT Dallas, School of Arts & Humanities, 800 W. Campbell Rd., Richardson, TX 75080  
For more information, call 972-UTD-ARTS or visit [ah.utdallas.edu](http://ah.utdallas.edu).  
For assistance, call 972-883-2982 or Texas Relay Operator 1-800-RELAYTX.  
UT Dallas is an equal opportunity/affirmative action university.

# American Landscape and The American Dream



## An Exhibition of Works from the Comer Collection

Curator’s Gallery Talk: **Thursday, February 25, 2016**

2:00 - 2:45 pm, Edith O’Donnell Building Gallery

Honored Photographer: **Tuesday, March 8, 2016**

**Kim Stringfellow “Art, Environment and Place”**

Reception: 6-7:30 p.m., Edith O’Donnell Building Gallery

Lecture: 7:30 p.m., Jonsson Performance Hall

Curated by Devyn Gaudet, **February 19 - March 11, 2016**

*Brewer Homestead, U.S. Patent No. 1146096, 2009, Photograph by Kim Stringfellow  
Archival Pigment Print, 17x22 inches  
© Kim Stringfellow 2009*

## Artists:

Ansel Adams  
Morley Baer  
Peter Brown  
Paula Chamlee  
Tammy Cromer-Campbell  
Mark Klett  
Richard Reynolds  
Luther Smith  
Kim Stringfellow





*Dimmitt Meat Co., Dimmitt Texas, 1992* Photograph by Peter Brown  
Ektacolor print, 7.1 x 8.9 inches

In the land of the free and the home of the brave, the opportunity to live a prosperous life is boundless; as long as you work hard, you can live well. Ever since the term's rise in popularity during the early years of the Depression, and as first used by historian James Truslow Adams in his book, *The Epic of America* (1931), the idea that is the "American Dream" has become synonymous for the values that make up the heart of our nation. And like the American Dream, the American landscape has been translated in as many varied ways throughout the history of photography: from the traditional landscape, namely the idealized vision of nature's beauty as depicted by Ansel Adams; the historical landscape, records of the evolution of the land and culture documented by Kim Stringfellow; to the vernacular landscape, architecture and language engaged with the everyday rather than the monumental as portrayed by Peter Brown. These disparate approaches and their sometimes contrasting visual results share correlations in terms of concept, in their reflection on the ethos of America, and the vast interpretations of the American Dream.

Ideals encompassed by the American Dream began with the Declaration of Independence, stating that "all men are created equal" and have the unalienable rights of "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness." Founded on these principles, America was deemed a country of wilderness and freedom with endless land and limitless opportunity—and this before the phrase "American Dream" ever existed. The desire to explore, establish community, and attain prosperity drove American settlers across the Mississippi during westward expansion, as The Frontier, and the belief that anyone could make something of the land—of themselves—evolved into the first iteration of the American Dream, an idea that has been understood over time not only as achieving prosperity, but also as opportunity and equality.<sup>1</sup>

Nothing quite represents the wilderness of the American

landscape as well as our expansive system of national and state parks and recreation areas. Such is seen in the breathtaking view captured by Ansel Adams in *Cathedral Spires and Rocks, Yosemite*, (1949/91). Sunrays squeeze towering pines occupying the far right edge of the frame as the diffused light breaks through the clouds to quietly illuminate the flora that surrounds a pond below the majestic cliffs. The morning light creates soft shadows off the trees and reflections in the pond, details likely enhanced during printing in the darkroom. Similarly, the limited value range of the cathedral spires in the upper left portion of the frame in contrast with the deep black tone of the pine to the right and the luminous valley in-between are indicative of Adams's Zone System, a methodical approach to photography—from pre-visualization and exposure to the final print—that emphasizes the importance of his images accurately representing not only what he saw, but also what he felt.<sup>2</sup> As a technically flawless print depicting the beauty of nature, *Cathedral Spires and Rocks, Yosemite* is a perfect example of traditional modernist landscape photography; Adams's emphasis of light on a small treeless portion of the valley is a perfect allusion to hope—to optimism in the new day breaking, in the potential it brings, in the American Dream becoming a reality.

Time and again, Adams captured the unique nature of national parks in America in an effort to preserve our nation's land and inspire a shared fascination with the landscape. Through his photographs we see that the wilderness did not die with the untamed frontier of the 1800s, but rather remnants of that frontier are still alive in our national identity. Beyond photographing, Adams became an active conservationist and helped to establish other national parks and forests as a member of the Sierra Club and by rallying Congress.<sup>3</sup> Adams's images show us that the land once dreamed of still exists; his work as an advocate for the national parks shows us that it is our responsibility, as Americans,

to preserve and respect that land, our place to be free.

However, the national parks are but one aspect of the American landscape that visually embodies the vast expanse of both the land and the Dream. Peter Brown takes a different approach to his work but creates an equally powerful representation. Following in the footsteps of photographers such as Walker Evans and Stephen Shore, Brown creatively documents the vernacular landscape and culture—common and everyday architecture and language—of America by photographing his journey through the West and the Great Plains. Often depicting the wide-open land of the plains and the small towns that fill them, his work documents the cultural landscape and the architectural forms that define small town America. Kent Haruf, author of the text paired with Brown's images in their book *West of Last Chance* (2008), sums up the plains and Brown's work excellently: "You have to know how to look at this country. You have to slow down. It isn't pretty, but it's beautiful."<sup>4</sup> Not all aspects of the landscape, or the American Dream, are pretty, but they have the potential to be beautiful.

From depicting a haunting emptiness to celebrating beautiful expanses or recording small vignettes of daily life, Brown creates a visual representation of aspects of the American Dream that still exist, even if they have failed or been forgotten in isolated rural places. Upon first glance, *Dimmitt Meat Co., Dimmitt Texas, (1992)* presents an apparently simple frontal composition. A rich blue sky with a single cloud occupies the top half of the frame while a

white stucco building with a red door fills the bottom portion. The red door, positioned just slightly off center, is itself framed by two wooden pots, a window, and a white wooden sign quietly announcing "Dimmitt Meat Co." The lone cloud hovering above the red door takes the shape of a conversation bubble, outlining a space for the viewer to fill with the stories of this place. The color palette of reds, whites, and blues, immediately, even if subconsciously, symbolizes American patriotism. The landscape is uninhabited, is devoid of human presence. The viewer envisions the owner of this shop, a self-made individual, who still works long days behind the counter. Or, on the contrary, some might see only what is left of a family business—what remains of a broken dream. Whether through the description of a small town shop, a church, a shack in the middle of a field, or a storm looming at the edge of a property, Brown's images represent an overlooked yet integral slice of America and exude both a bitter and sweet aura of Americanness. In this documentation of American life, the American Dream takes on a different meaning than the one extracted from Adams's work. In Brown's landscape, the Dream can be viewed as alive and flourishing through the success of small town businesses and farms and can be felt in the immense expanse of the Great American Plains; simultaneously and in sharp contrast, one could see a dream unfulfilled, with only an empty silence remaining.

While Adams reveals majestic mountains and Brown portrays the wide-open grasslands of the plains, Kim Stringfellow documents yet another expansive American



*Cathedral Spires and Rocks, Yosemite, 1949/91* Photograph by Ansel Adams  
Gelatin silver print, 7.3 x 9.3 inches  
© 2016 The Ansel Adams Publishing Rights Trust