

FRAGILE CONNECTION



Hulleah Tsinhnahjinnie, *Idelia*, dye-sublimation print, 1995.

Artists:

Geir Jordahl
Ansel Adams
James H. Evans
Nine Francois
Steve Goff
Brent Phelps
Hulleah Tsinhnahjinnie
Danny Conant
Robert Langham
Brett Weston
Kate Breakey
John Sexton
William Neill
Paul Kozal
Martha Casanave
Rod Dresser
Sebastião Salgado
Stephen Johnson
Judy Bankhead

Curated by
Kerry Ann Hennigin



Geir Jordahl, *Canyonlands, Utah*, gelatin silver print, 1990.

path of these two celebrated explorers, the viewer experiences, throughout the progression of images, what areas of the land remain untouched and what areas have been transformed to make way for the modern American lifestyle. The contrast linking these two forms of landscape illustrates the division we now face between Nature and humankind in the wake of such realities as global warming, oil spills, and even GMO or chemically-dependent farming. In Phelps' *Two Medicine Fight Site*, the panoramic perspective creates a sense of eternity as the land and sky stretch into an immeasurable distance. These two areas of expanse meet at an indefinable point, creating a relationship of both symbiosis and separation, much the same as between Nature and its current inhabitants. The varying hues of natural color, coupled with the crispness of detail, and the elimination of a human element, place this image from the series in a historical context, jointly in terms of subject matter, as in the history of western

Our natural world continues to create and express its endless biodiversity despite pollution and destruction. These planetary expressions of life, both simple and complex, have become the basis for our medicines, our mass food supply, our fuel, and even alternative options to produce our technology. Natural and environmental elements weave a common thread that we all experience on a daily basis, generating an atmosphere of community and consciousness which diminishes the idea that we are separate in our humanity. The photographs in this exhibition cover several aspects of the natural world—the land, animal life, and human form—displaying the fragile connection among all essential types of life and how those relationships influence species' evolution and global environmental choices.

Historically, the genre of landscape photography often limits our relationship to the environment, creating profound vistas, but failing to convey the connection between our human existence, Nature, and the reciprocity inherent in our daily needs for survival and health. Estelle Jussim and Elizabeth Lindquist-Cock discuss how late nineteenth century and early twentieth century photographers began to see landscape as more than just documentation of the natural world, using the genre as a photographic manifestation to reveal their faith or spiritual ideologies:

That the nineteenth century worshipped Nature as God is a truism of art history. Because the various manifestations of Nature were regarded as the direct revelation of the Creator, both landscape painting and landscape photography enjoyed the exalted status of an aesthetic ideal. Since no activity could be more uplifting than the contemplation and praise of the Creator's ingenuity and power, the arts which conveyed these blessings to the general public became the most admired of the visual genres.¹

Landscape is a way to visually demonstrate "a higher power," but excluding a human element from the images creates a sense of inaccessibility, distancing our awareness of the myriad ways humans and the environment serve each other. Many artists connect to the observation that Nature supplements our way of life. Some even convey the notion of a divine source's hand in the natural world's materialization simply by choosing this theme. Still, the communication of a deeper relational understanding is often subtle or even subconscious, as artists repeatedly confess to being a channel for the vision, rather than sole creators of the content.

Ansel Adams' photographic sensibilities focus equally on the majestic and modest aspects of a landscape, as seen in *Winter Sunrise*, allowing the viewer a personal encounter representative of the miraculous, as noted by Jussim and Lindquist-Cock. A more contemporary examination of the tangible interaction between man and landscape can be seen in Brent Phelps' series, *The Lewis & Clark Trail*. As Phelps retraces the

expansion, and in the photographic tradition of landscape, which celebrates purism in natural imagery.

Geir Jordahl's series, *Searching for True North*, takes the spiritual aspirations of photography one step further. Jordahl documents pure landscape, man's imprint upon the earth, and includes figures in his images. Through his technique, Jordahl creates supernatural visuals that are not necessarily seen by the naked eye. As Jordahl states himself, "*Searching for True North* is about visual exploration. It is a celebration of the Earth and its interaction with human-made elements. This universal landscape serves as a common language that reveres all things. *Searching for True North* also represents a spiritual quest for direction and meaning." ² In the photograph *Canyonlands, Utah*, the viewer observes something magical by hiding behind a rock, as to not disturb a significant event taking place. Jordahl creates accessibility to this world by keeping the scene centered on the valley of the canyon, filled with bushes that sprout up sparsely along the dale's floor, and smaller rock formations that are easily traversed. However, beyond this nearby setting are the canyon walls, copious in design and impossible to navigate without equipment or assistance, capped by an open sky covered in stars, jet streams, and clouds. The image is of a night sky, yet the sun is shining down into the valley, presenting the fantastical and the ordinary in chorus. Such mysterious imagery is also a component of John Sexton's series, *Listen to the Trees*. While retaining the mystical and untouchable sensations, in his image *Black Oaks, Morning Mist*, Sexton allows the viewer to grasp the moment by centering on a single group of trees. An ethereal mist hovers around mature oaks in their stark winter format, creating an intoxicating effect. Once the spell is cast, the viewer gets lost in the immediacy of the surroundings, the focus being on the telepathic rapport amongst the cluster of trees. While no figure exists in the frame, it is perhaps the anthropomorphized element that humans easily find in all living things, including something as stationary as trees, that draws the connection to our involvement with the natural world. Such rendering of experience brings to light questions about our past behavior towards the natural world. What "magical" materials or

moments could we be destroying in our quest for a convenient and technologically driven lifestyle?

Our imposition upon the natural world is also evident in our connection to animal life. Animal activities and emotion can sometimes be startling, even disturbing in the context of natural disasters, relocation, or natural selection, all of which are compounded by human intrusion. In Kate Breakey's *Cyanocitta Cristata (Fledgling Blue Jay)*, the close-up shot of an abandoned newborn blue jay does not provide many clues regarding the surrounding space. Soft white material, simulating clouds or bedding, swaddles the tiny bird. The fact that the bird sits alone with an open mouth, presumably crying for food or perhaps the comfort of its mother, speaks not only to the fragility of our ecosystem, but also to the unabashed, innate capability of animals to experience emotion and pain. In Nine Francois' *Monkey Legs #1*, much of the animal is obscured. All that is seen by the viewer is a mysterious white background and a portion of the animal in motion, resulting in an impulsive dance with the photographer. Francois attempts to capture the animal within the frame, as if to contain the unpredictable instincts that drive the natural world. However, technology cannot control an innate impulse, the driving force behind survival. The animal possesses an inherent affinity with the natural world versus technology, whereas a human experiences a fine line of confusion when attempting to choose between two worlds of opposition.

In a more direct documentation of humankind's unconventional relationship to animals, Martha Casanave's series *Beware of Dog* records the photographer's personal bond with her rescued Whippet. As Casanave states, "The process of paying close attention to every detail of my dog and watching her behavior closely has caused me to find more joy in quotidian things, to be more conscious of being fully present." ³ *Untitled (Beware of Dog)* examines the everyday alongside veiled subtleties in the tenuous and often rewarding union found in domesticated animals and their human companions. Her hand is wrapped around the dog's muzzle, simultaneously covering the dog's eyes so it is blinded, with just her pinky finger slightly

Brent Phelps, *Two Medicine Fight Site*, chromogenic color print, 1997.





Robert Langham, *Snail Hand*, platinum print, 1994.

raised and released. A hint of the hesitancy we engage in during domestication lingers, prompting the question, is it more desirable to be in harmony with Nature rather than to dominate it? On the contrary, Robert Langham's *Snail Hand* speaks more to the possible reciprocal relationship between man and nature. The snails are perfectly inclined to use the hand as an obstacle course for entertainment, and the hand is quite tranquil in its posture, offering itself in service. Together creature and human have found a peaceful coexistence.

While the evolution of humanity has attempted to separate itself from the planetary ecosystem, the reality is that this disconnection has produced fractures in our identity as a species, as well as in our ability to survive in and sustain our environment. Through recording the human form, artists can suggest a connection to the environment, document ties to the past, to a former era when an individual's survival or ancestral inheritance depended upon the land, and comment on our relationship to the natural world, which is in need of revival. Danny Conant's *At Sea*, a portrait of a figure in a tightly cropped view, is rendered as a warped image, due to the alteration that occurs during the processing of an emulsion transfer. This distortion creates a reference to the sea itself, with its passenger at rest, flowing with the water and the waves (or the intrinsic way of the world), instead of struggling against the current. Perhaps Conant is making a suggestion that this is the type of behavior we should practice, as she simultaneously

reflects upon human nature and where we will discover bliss, whether organic or spiritual. Hulleah Tsinhnahjinnie's *Idelia* speaks plainly on the subject of Native American heritage, the role flora and fauna have played in that heritage, and what place the digital age has taken among those traditions and legacy. In a field of sky and clouds rises a full moon, and in the foreground a young woman sits with quiet grace, taking her place among the highest ground of this planet, that of the spirits and ancestors that distinguish Native American culture and spiritual beliefs. The portrait is a digitally manipulated image, but it also invites a return to the land, the place where Native Americans and all of humankind can find medicine, sanctuary, and the inner peace and sense of self so frantically sought after in the present day.

"Most people are *on* the world, not in it—have no conscious sympathy or relationship to anything about them—undiffused, separate, and rigidly alone like marbles of polished stone, touching but separate,"⁴ is what naturalist John Muir wrote in his journals, *John of the Mountains*. This separation in current society has created a quest to be "better, faster, stronger, more," leading to the slow destruction not just of our planetary home, but also to the deliberate demise of our physical bodies and psychological well-being. Part of our current dialogue regarding the environment includes documentary films such as *The 11th Hour* and *Food Matters*, which address the complex relationships between scientific research and our human existence, from preservation to conservation, from farming practices to pharmaceuticals. The work in this exhibition embraces the prospect that the movement towards a "green revolution" is a probable and essential solution to advocate for the work of artists as naturalists, but more importantly, the greater terrestrial whole that keeps us living and breathing, and binds all forms of life together.

— Kerry Ann Hennigin

- ¹ Jussim, Estelle; Lindquist-Cock, Elizabeth. *Landscape as Photograph*. Yale University Press: New Haven and London, 1985.
- ² Geir Jordahl, Artist's statement, 2007
- ³ Anderson, Donald R. "Photography Book Reviews." *Photo Vision 3* (2003): 3
- ⁴ Muir, John. *John of the Mountains: The Unpublished Journals of John Muir*. Houghton Mifflin: Boston, 1938.



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