Stanley Wolukau-Wanambwa: I understand you’ve been making handmade books since the 1990s—what sorts of works do they comprise? What sorts of books are they? Do they have any bearing on your published works?

Mark Ruwedel: I love books, large and small. When I received my BFA (Painting!) in 1978, I bought Evans’ *American Photographs* and Emmett Gowin’s first monograph as graduation presents to myself, and I have been collecting ever since. So, I live with books.

The handmade books fall into two broad categories: they are either composed with images from my archive, or photos I make specifically for the possibility of a small book. Some are very small indeed, sometimes only two pictures and a title. Physically, there are also 2 categories: they are either made by altering commercially made blank books or I fold some paper and sew the sheets together. In addition to my own images, I sometimes use found pictures, stuff I pick up in the field or material I find on eBay and other sources. I also make what I would call “albums”, works that are collections of photos without narrative or a significant structure.

One example of how this may work: I noticed on some contact sheets that I had three images of palm trees that had been chopped down along the LA River—three different trees cut to stumps of different heights. In sequence in a book, where the viewer can only see one at a time, there’s the illusion that
it’s the same tree being repeatedly hacked away, or that the tree is further from the camera in each succeeding photo. I put the 3 photos in a book last weekend and called it *Palm, Receding*.

As for their relation to my published works, with one exception they act as an antidote. The books allow me to conceptualise and realise an idea (sometimes a very small one) quickly.

The published works represent years of research, image-making, editing, etc. The exception mentioned is *1212 Palms*, which is essentially a commercially produced version of a handmade book. In that case, the “original” was a spiral bound sketchbook containing 9 silver prints with titles set in press-type, in an edition of three. Very old fashioned. On a camping trip in the desert, I was perusing my road atlas to find somewhere to go the following morning: I noticed that I was close to Seventeen Palms Oasis, and then saw that nearby was Five Palms, and so on. Over the course of a year or so I visited all the places in the California desert named for a number of palms. When I finished, I added them up: 1212.

I think that, early in my work, I was drawn to the landscape as something designed or planned, and to those neglected spaces between the designed. As the work evolved, I found myself becoming more attracted to the evidence left behind by the human use of place and space.

I love *1212 Palms*. I found it on a windowsill in Claire de Rouen books and bought it before I went to graduate school in 2012, of all years! But the way you make these books brings to mind your interest in, and influence by some of the tenets of Conceptual Art. On the one hand, you work in series, which are repetitive, categorical and often open-ended engagements. On the other, you work from premises that can be enumerated by arbitrary data, like the number of palms in the titles of desert sites in California... Could you talk a little about your attraction to the kind of thinking about art-making that flows from broadly ‘Conceptual’ roots? Are you drawn to the inherent unpredictability that comes with working in this way?

Much of my work evolves from some sort of structure, or originating concept. But I also allow for improvisation, accident and surprise. Since we have mentioned *1212 Palms*, in that work I knew that I would go to these places and make a photograph, but I did not know what would be there to photograph, except, of course, the obvious palms. For *Pictures of Hell*, I photographed almost 200 places named for the Devil or Hell. The idea was to go to those places and make a picture, but what that picture would show, and how, became an improvisation with the syntax of my equipment and the particular physical qualities of the place. I should add that the idea itself usually comes from a response to something seen, either in the field or in work already completed. Or perhaps from looking at a map or book. Another example: I did not sit in my studio and say, Aha, abandoned dog houses! I came across a few and became interested in the possibility they represented in terms of my overall interests, So I started looking for them on my working trips to the desert.
A few years ago I did a project called *Following Nigel: 72.5 Miles*. Nigel Raab, an ardent urban hiker (and Russian professor) walked across Los Angeles, following a route he composed that would cross as many borders as possible: economic, geographical, social, etc. He asked me if I would be interested in photographing it and I spent about 2 years on that, using the Google map of his journey. When I began, I tried various conceptual strategies (only looking east, only photographing at intersections and so on) but finally, none of those were satisfactory. What I ended up doing was photographing whatever was interesting or characteristic of the neighbourhood I was exploring, from the point of view of a pedestrian. So, it was a subjective survey, yet all of the pictures had to be made along a route that I did not choose. I organized the work by trying to have a successful photo for each mile.

I am attracted to art that is broadly termed Conceptual but if my own work is conceptual, it’s with a small “c”.

*Your Following Nigel: 72.5 Miles project brings to mind something I’m intrigued about in your work, which is your attraction to/interest in the traces of human motion, and even (im)migration (in *Pictures of Hell* and *Crossing* for instance). Where did that interest originate, and how has it developed?*

To understand where interests originate is difficult. I see something “out there” and ask, is this place, building, object, etc. of use to me in terms of exploring my interests. Sometimes this process takes a long time to come to fruition, or even begin in terms of making pictures.

I drove through a place called Wonder Valley for many years on my way to photograph somewhere else in the desert. There are hundreds of abandoned houses there, and as I would register them in my peripheral vision I would think there’s something there for me, some possibility, which I finally began addressing with the camera in 2003 or so.

The *Crossing* photographs were also a response to something I came across while working on another idea. I was walking in the desert near the international border, looking for pre-Columbian evidence and in particular, a very special geoglyph of a horse. I noticed a lot of trash, which isn’t so unusual in the California desert, but this trash was unusual in that it included a lot of water bottles and inner tubes: I finally figured out that it was related to border crossing, as the border there is an irrigation canal. I had some colour film with me and made a few photos which really intrigued me when I later printed them. So I went back several times to pursue that idea further. Incidentally, I did find the horse intaglio.

I think that, early in my work, I was drawn to the landscape as something designed or planned, and to those neglected spaces between the designed. As the work evolved, I found myself becoming more attracted to the evidence left behind by the human use of place and space.

Another thought comes to mind: in *Westward* and *Following Nigel*, I was photographing Lines (although of course, each single image represents a singular spot) while with, for example, *Pictures of Hell*, I was photographing Points.
That notion of Points also brings to mind your most recent work, *Message from the Exterior*, in which you’ve photographed those abandoned homes you mentioned earlier. These seem to represent points of return (as homes), points of departure (as abandoned homes), points of emigration (toward these homes from elsewhere) and points of disappearance (as the plots lapse entropically back into the desert). How did your work with these houses develop over the past thirteen years?

As I mentioned, I had been noticing these houses for many years before I began photographing them. In 2003 I had a residency in Joshua Tree National Park. I found little that interested me within the park’s boundaries but just beyond were these houses. So I had time to explore and began, somewhat casually, to photograph them. And gradually I began to investigate other areas of the desert where, as it turned out, there were many more abandoned houses in various stages of neglect and decay. Most often I would make several pictures of a particular structure, but ultimately I was most pleased with the views that suggested a portrait of the house. And, like other subjects I have pursued, this became somewhat of an obsession and it seemed very important to present many examples of this phenomenon. Lewis Baltz said something about having many pictures of the “same” thing, likening it to scientific work: an experiment gains validity if the results are repeatable. (He said it better but I trust that you will know what I mean).

I am very clear on what I think the real subject is of works like *Westward* and *Hell* and can be fairly articulate about those works and their potential meanings. With the houses, my interest, my motivations, seem more mysterious to me. There is tragedy in the work, and sadness and maybe madness as well, along with some humour, I hope. And mystery: I don’t have a clue about the people who once lived in
them, why they left, who vandalized the sites and so on. They might also represent a kind of revenge on my own suburban upbringing. I hope that my detached, forensic approach tempers some of these more subjective potential readings.

One thing that interests me greatly about this work is the location: for the most part, the houses are only a few hours drive from the Los Angeles metropolitan area, yet they appear to be in the middle of “nowhere”. This brings up the whole mythology of the frontier in terms of the development of the American West and what that might mean today.

That proximity to Los Angeles is interesting in the sense of how quickly some place becomes nowhere, which is a process that the houses themselves are also going through: they’re moving from *something* (inhabited, individuated, personal) to *nothing* (vacant, forgotten, decayed). It reminds me of the line a little after the Joan Didion quotation you use in the book, where she writes of those drifting adolescents in *Slouching Through Bethlehem* as “sloughing off both the past and the future as snakes shed their skins.”

**Simon Baker wrote about “entropic power” in your work, and I note in the structure of Message that there’s a temporal trajectory in the concluding phase. How did you approach structuring the work into book form? How are you thinking about endings in terms of the series as it’s staged in the book? Is it done?**

I remember writing something about “entropic narratives” years ago, in relation to a much earlier series of photographs of the abandoned Expo 67 site in Montreal. That said, it was not my intention to “tell a story” with *Message*. Almost all books have a narrative structure, as they all have a beginning and an end. I wanted to end with something that felt right in terms of the specifics of certain images without, hopefully, suggesting a conclusion. To some degree, the structure of the book as a whole led to a logical “ending”.

I work best within limits, either of my own device or those imposed from without. For *Westward* I devised a symmetrical structure of three equal parts, with the “V” shaped railroad cuts as the center. The third section was then subdivided into equal parts. For *Hell*, the conceptual aspects of the project determined the structure of the book. (This book relied more on sequencing than editing as it was Simon Baker’s reading of the work as being encyclopedic that led to the inclusion of so many of the pictures). *Message* is also structured in three “movements,” although the structure is less rigid than *Westward*. And the flow from Part 1 to Part 2 is more subtle than what happens with the third section.

When Michael Mack and I spoke about what this book could look like, he suggested a certain number of plates—this gave me something to work with in terms of both structure and selection.

“Is it done?” For me, there are always good pictures that don’t survive the edit for a book. I am probably finished making those photographs but as I continue to exhibit them, I will use images from the archive that do not appear in the book.
There is tragedy in the work, and sadness and maybe madness as well, along with some humour, I hope.

I’m intrigued by the single photograph that appears before the title page of your book, which shows a house on which have been painted the words “ALPHA” and “OMEGA.” The words invoke an epic scale, but the photograph is also a very tightly composed photograph (as are the others). It made me begin to wonder whether you think of these photographs as portraits in a way? Perhaps as individual members of a family of homes?

Yes, portrait is a word I have used before to describe my house pictures. I hadn’t thought of “family”: maybe “extended family”?

If you look again, you will see that its spelled ALFA, not ALPHA, which echoes the Didion quotation, in which she mentions the “misplaced” words scrawled on abandoned homes.

I have quite a collection of spelling errors that I record with a snapshot camera on my explorations. Vanderlizm is a favourite. In Mark Hayworth-Booth’s text, he mentions seeing a licence plate on one of our outings together: EXPLOSE.
As the winner of the 2014 Scotiabank Photography Award — a prestigious honor celebrating achievement in contemporary Canadian photography* — Mark Ruwedel received a $50,000 cash prize, an exhibition at the Ryerson Image Center in Toronto and a publication produced by Steidl. The first book to assess the photographer’s entire career, Mark Ruwedel includes sixteen bodies of work and a section dedicated to selected bookworks, spanning the 1980s through 2010s. Steidl beautifully translates the lush tonality and tactile quality of his black-and-white (and occasional color) photographs to the printed page, employing a straightforward layout that echoes the work’s minimal aesthetic. Presented individually and in chronological order, Ruwedel’s projects become more resonant when viewed within the context of his vast and tightly coherent oeuvre, marked by consistent formal, aesthetic and conceptual interests.

Ruwedel primarily focuses on the American West and Canada, examining these areas with a stripped-down, deadpan clarity that references the approach of New Topographics photographers such as Robert Adams and Lewis Baltz. For over thirty years, he has reflected on the intersection of place and human beings, producing images of this omnipresent interaction — manifested in forms both conspicuous and imperceptible. He explains, “I just don’t see [nature] as being understandable outside its relationship to the human, and I also don’t see the idea of ‘pure nature’ as being a viable subject at this point.”** This perspective distinguishes him from contemporaries considering similar subject matter, such as Edward Burtynsky and Richard Misrach. Ruwedel is discreetly political, motivated by the need to highlight the profound impact of technology, human activity and natural forces on the land and the way history is inscribed in the contemporary landscape.

Westward the Course of Empire (1994–2006) — one of Ruwedel’s most emblematic and ambitious projects — surveys sites where railway lines were constructed during the nineteenth and twentieth century in the American and Canadian West; these monumental feats of engineering were, however, ultimately abandoned with the completion of the transcontinental railroad. Now, tunnels, trestle bridges and other structures exist in varied stages of deterioration. Deep cuts are carved from mountain ranges for paths to nowhere that fade around bends or into the distance. Though these industrial vestiges are easily identifiable in the landscape, they appear dwarfed by their surroundings, controlled by the natural world rather than vice versa. Nevertheless, narratives of expansionism, exploitation, Manifest Destiny, industrialization, and technology are woven through these fractured terrains, even as the surrounding environment slowly begins to engulf these artifacts.

Ruwedel has also investigated desert houses and shelters — often abandoned and vandalized — which take on a more contemporary tenor and relevance. Recalling the work of Hilla and Bernd Becher, his photographs of these dwellings are a taxonomy of haunting relics, a stark contrast to the idyllic notion of home. Situated in isolated, barren landscapes, these structures eerily hover between timelessness and ephemerality, construction and deterioration, presence and absence, eliciting more questions through their ambiguity than the photographs can answer.


At times, the human impact documented is more firmly rooted in the context of the sites depicted than in the imaged subject matter. In Pictures of Hell (1995–present), Ruwedel visits places where the word “hell,” “devil” or some variation thereof appears in the names given to these sites by Euro-American explorers in the nineteenth century — Devil’s Lookout, Arroyo Seco del Diablo, Hell’s Canyon Creek. While some terrain may seem a bit more treacherous than average, the landscapes themselves often belie their nefarious names. Ruwedel highlights the power of naming as a means of not only controlling land, but people and their perceptions as well.

Together, the works surveyed in Mark Ruwedel advance the possibility of a balance between the natural world and the inevitability of the manmade. Whether we like it or not, landscape’s history is inextricably linked to human progress. By approaching this subject from an alternative perspective, he creates photographs that engage and challenge us to freshly see our environment and impact — past, present and future. —ALLIE HAEUSSLEIN

Mark Ruwedel: The lonesome, crowded west

Scotiabank Photography winner has spent more than 30 years documenting the abandoned byways of the west.

By: Murray Whyte   Visual arts, Published on Wed May 06 2015

We spend a lot of time worrying about the landscape and with good reason. It's the only one we've got and we've been busy ruining it since we planted the first seed where it didn't belong about 10,000 years ago.

We've spent the intervening millennia scaling up, at turns blasting holes in rock for mineral extraction, or razing entire forests to make way for farmland or subdivisions. Every now and then, likely out of abject guilt, we fence off a chunk here or there and declare it a park. But really, it's an outdoor museum: a living, breathing remnant of something that once was and will never be again.

Art's complicated relationship to landscape mirrors our own. Ultimately, it has to choose a side: romantic depictions of idyllic, manufactured perfection or grim portrait of humanity's violent industry?

No medium, maybe, teeters on this edge more precipitously than photography. A product of the industrial age, it seems born to bear witness to ruin but does only sometimes. In the hands of, say, Ansel Adams, it reflects, however falsely, a heroic wilderness bathed in silvery tones of beatific light. Our own Edward Burtynsky has more recently put his lens to use pulling back that curtain to dramatic effect: his landscapes, of molten slag pools and deep, fractured rock quarries focus on not a pristine land but its deep man-made wounds.

Somewhere between these two poles lies Mark Ruwedel. As the most recent winner of the Scotiabank Photography Prize, which comes with a $50,000 cheque, Ruwedel's work is the subject of a career survey that just opened at the Ryerson Image Centre and it is eerie, understated sight to behold.

Ruwedel, who is 61, has been wandering the byways of the west — America, mostly, but Canada too — for half his life, making pictures of a landscape marked by human endeavour and its creeping impermanence.
His pictures are of wounds, their damage scarred over but never fully healed. They can be frank — a series of images of craters in the southwestern desert, where atomic bombs were detonated during the spirited postwar arms race — or sort of gaudy, in their understated way (a grid of vinyl LPs, shot identically but found abandoned, separately, at far-flung points across the west, or a makeshift geodesic dome of cast-off plywood, with its Burning Man-esque sensibility).

Most often, though, they’re so subtle as to be barely visible. It’s here that Ruwedel works his particular, restrained magic. He works in series and the best of them reveal a furtive compulsion to link the industriousness of our busy little species across time and space.

Desert Houses, plainly titled, is pretty much that: a grid of a couple dozen prefab homes plunked down on the sun-bleached flatlands of the American southwest. Up close, their various states of repair — crumbling, blown-out, grown over, occasionally tidily kept — work as a minisurvey of the stalking impermanence of westward expansion, a transience spurred by resource extraction that’s never really stopped (look at Northern Alberta, say, where massive pits heaving with oily muck are expected to be empty in 50 years).

Step back and something else emerges: identical profiles of identical houses snap together in a matrix of eerie sameness that bundles up the worst symptoms of humanity’s modern-age disease.

Not so long ago, we built monuments with a notion to permanence, an empire and a civilization for a new world. As the 20th century drifted to middle age, that changed: the priority shifted to the temporary and convenient, and nowhere is that more visible than in Ruwedel’s untrammeled western byways.

His project — all 30-plus years of it, really — brushes past various prominent schools of esthetic thought. The notion of New Topographics looms particularly large. Taken from a 1975 exhibition of the same name, it’s become an umbrella term for an esthetic populated by such diverse practitioners as Bernd and Hilla Becher, and Stephen Shore that challenged the romanticism of Adams’ idyll with pictures of water towers and parking lots, respectively.

Ruwedel’s subtle innovation is one that quietly challenges those challengers. His landscapes contemplate not just a world we’ve altered, but one that will carry on without us.

His most understated and most potent series, to me, is Westward the Course of Empire, a deliberate, archly heroic phrase that speaks to that shift. The series is broad-ranging but focused loosely on movement — rail cuts and roadways, portals through mountains and forests — tracking human progress through the continent’s remaining wilds.

One stirring series presents a grid of near-identical topography: mountain passes, seen from below. Through each lies a path in varying states of usability: one well-kept with tidy crushed gravel; another overgrown but passable; still another yet to be broached, its way choked by boulders and brush. Together, with their eerily synchronous profiles, they cloak the optimism of forging west with a disquieting truth: how, inevitably, what lies ahead slips into what is left behind, as the future becomes the past.

Mark Ruwedel continues at the Ryerson Image Centre, 33 Gould St., until June 28. See ryerson.ca/rie for more information.
Mark Ruwedel
YOSSI MILO GALLERY

At the conclusion of the Civil War in 1865, there were 35,085 miles of operable railroad track in the United States. Eight years later that number had doubled. Midway between these dates, on May 10, 1869, a golden spike joined the rails of the Central Pacific and the Union Pacific railroads at Promontory Summit, Utah. It was near this site that photographer Mark Ruwedel was inspired to begin his series “Westward the Course of Empire,” 1994–2007. This exhibition brought together seventy-five of the small black-and-white photographs, which document the railroad lines, now abandoned, that knit together our country (and Canada) in an unprecedented wave of industrial ambition and governmental largesse. For centuries to come we will be untangling the ramifications of the historical process he charts.

Ruwedel is keenly aware of the palimpsest of physical interventions and imaginative representations that have altered both the landscape of North America’s western half and our perceptions of it. Anyone who depicts these arid plains and craggy mountains today necessarily enters into dialogue with a legion of antecedents, from late-nineteenth-century geographic-survey photographers to Earthworks artists who fanned out across the West a century later; from environmental pioneers like naturalist John Muir and photographer Ansel Adams to contemporary writers like John McPhee; and from atomic scientists seeking uninhabited test sites to real-estate developers hoping to turn ranchland into exurban subdivisions. Ruwedel’s carefully composed images, made with a large-format camera, bear traces of this complex legacy. In the foreground of Deep Creek #2, 1999, for example, a gate in a barbed-wire fence carries United States Air Force signs warning visitors to keep out and identifying the flat territory as a bombing and gunnery range. The lone wooden railroad tie in Carson and Colorado #6, 1997, is complemented by at least seven enormous upturned satellite dishes visible in the background.

The photographs also enter into dialogue with visual strategies familiar to viewers of contemporary art. Ruwedel’s installation of the photographs in small grids by type (tunnel mouths, cuts through rock formations, trestle bridges) recalls Bernd and Hilla Becher’s rigidly sorted documentation of heavy industry. So many straight lines proceeding toward the horizon, denuded first of vegetation and, decades later, of the wooden ties and steel rails themselves, bring to mind the photographic record of Richard Long’s walks in the landscape.

Despite these connections to other practices, Ruwedel’s photographs, with their magnificent placid compositions and unexpected details, encourage one to savor their intrinsic allure. In San Diego and Arizona Eastern #7, 2003, a trestle bridge spans the mouth of a canyon like a dark spiderweb. The tunnel entrance in Columbia and Western #21, 2000, seems like a portal to another world. The concrete pylons depicted in Chicago, Milwaukee, St. Paul and Pacific #30, 2005, stand like an industrial-era Stonehenge in an otherwise empty landscape. Other photographs emphasize how nature has reclaimed some lost ground, subsuming humankind’s hubristic gestures within an inexorable vegetal creep. The give-and-take between man and nature will continue for as long as we persist. “Westward the Course of Empire” is an uncommonly sensitive survey of the evidential traces of that relationship’s recent history and a formidable aesthetic statement.

—Brian Sholis
BLIND SPOT

Standing in Place

Jean Dykstra

An interviewer once asked Robert Adams why he was drawn to trees again and again in his photographs. "Trees smell good, feel good, sound good, and look good," he answered, adding, "And as if that weren't enough, they point beyond themselves. A version of the same thing can be said of the photographs in this issue; they look good, and they point beyond themselves. The photographs here point, some directly, some more generally, to the idea of place. Whether the subject is local or global, the built environment or an untamed landscape, a common thread is the relationship between people and the natural world. It's a topic of some urgency, of course, though none of these photographs are overtly political. Rather they are works of art, and to quote Adams again, since his own life's work is the result of his fierce affection for a place, the American West, art is "an attempt, by fond attention to the world, to find redeeming metaphor in it."

Photography, being rooted in reality, has the capacity to find redemption simply by showing us the world in which we live, in all of its rich and abstruse detail. That's not to say that photography replicates reality. Even discounting the possibilities of digital manipulation, we know the medium is far more complex, more subjective, more nuanced. But for the photographers included here, at least, it all begins in the real world. Whether they have focused on the most banal details of scenes we overlook every day, or on magnificent landscapes we may never see with our own eyes, their photographs draw our attention to a place and hold it there. If, in contemplating these photographs, the notion of stewardship crosses our minds, if we consider our responsibility to those places we cherish, that's probably not an accident.

Consider Roy Arden's photographs of the detritus that has collected next to curbs and on sewer grates, fossils in the most inhospitable environments. Wynn Bulloch's photographs of La Jolla, directly indoors are haunted by the past, too, and by better days. His photographs are palimpsests, suggesting overlapping histories within a single frame. Disparately as they are, all of these photographs leave room for intertwining narratives. If some allude to the intersection of geologic and human histories, they all suggest the intersection of the photographer's history with that of the place itself.

What these photographers have done, in fact, is to embrace and then transcend their own intimate connection to a place. Barbara Bosworth has done it in her photographs of a New England meadow and of the trees that inhabit it. In the tallest part of one tree, a swan of bare branches against a pale blue sky, the limbs become disentangled, and a lone bird sits poised for flight. That tree might be a pure embodiment of Arden's observation. "It's a thing of beauty, pointing beyond itself, literally, toward the bird's flight out of the frame, but also figuratively, toward the way a place becomes a repository of memory, even a redemptive metaphor. But a place is always more than just a metaphor; it exists, and if nothing else, these photographs demand that we look closely and carefully. And, perhaps, that we ask ourselves how lightly we're walking on the earth, and what kind of footprints we're leaving behind. But in the end, Bosworth's photograph, like all of the photographs here, ultimately circles back again from metaphor to the place itself, to a tree in a meadow, in all its singularity.

2. Ibid., p. 34.
Art in Review

Mark Ruwedel

‘Westward the Course of Empire’

Yossi Milo
525 West 25th Street, Chelsea
Through March 14

With new infrastructure high on the national agenda, Mark Ruwedel’s photographs of abandoned rail lines are a cautionary tale. Over 15 years Mr. Ruwedel traveled the American and Canadian West with a large-format camera. In essence he retraced the steps of early photographers of the Western landscape, like Carleton Watkins and Timothy O’Sullivan, whose work fueled the expansion of the railroad industry. “Westward the Course of Empire” romanticizes the age of train travel, to a degree, but with troubling hints of loose ends and progress in reverse.

The presentation tends toward the archival. Each silver gelatin print has a white border that bears the name of the relevant railroad line — Tonopah and Tidewater, Mohave and Milltown — hand lettered in faint pencil. Displayed in grids, the prints are grouped by imagery rather than geography: tunnels, trestles, flatlands. Some of the lines are barely perceptible grooves in the desert; others are deep clefs in the Rockies.

“Westward” seems, at first, like a textbook “New Topographics” survey of natural beauty permanently altered by human industry. Robert Adams, who followed the trail of Lewis and Clark in his recent series “Turning Back,” is a clear influence. But Mr. Ruwedel has also photographed huge land-art projects, including Michael Heizer’s “Double Negative,” and there’s a sense that he sees the railroads as the largest earthwork of all.

KAREN ROSENBERG
MARK RUWEDEL
Ruwedel's modestly scaled black-and-white photographs of landscapes in the American and Canadian West combine the descriptive rigor of classic nineteenth-century survey shots with the more skeptical viewpoint of the nineteen-seventies' New Topographics crew. His results, installed in thematic, twelve-shot grids around the gallery, are as handsome as they are shrewd. Ruwedel documents the now abandoned sites of pioneering railways—trestles, tunnels, cuts, grades—many of which are being reclaimed by the wild. The most dramatic of his photographs depict the paths carved between mountains, reminders of the determined push west and the landscape's gradual push back. Through March 14. (Milo, 323 W. 23rd St. 212-414-0370.)