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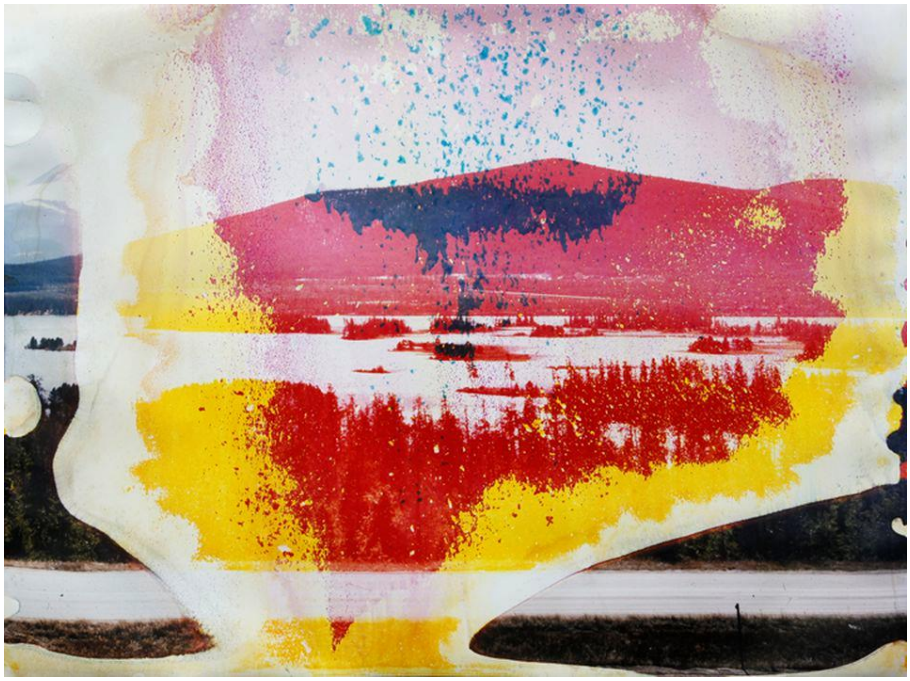
PHOTOGRAPHY REVIEW

At Worcester Art Museum, photo show gives a different lay of the land

‘New Terrain: 21st-Century Landscape Photography’ offers a traditional genre seen in non-traditional ways

By Mark Feeney | May 9, 2024



Matthew Brandt, "Lake Dillon, CO 1," 2011 © MATTHEW BRANDT, COURTESY OF YOSSI MILO, NEW YORK

WORCESTER — It’s in the nature of landscapes to alter over time. Wind and rain erode them. Development turns some into real estate. Climate change affects all of them.

Less obviously, it’s in the nature of landscape photography to alter over time. Drawing a line from Carleton Watkins to Ansel Adams to Robert Adams is easy enough. Yet looking at their work you see how that line can zig, zag, curve, even corkscrew, as a result of changes in equipment, technique, emphasis, locale, even opportunity. Imagine how differently Watkins would have photographed Yosemite if he’d had a station wagon for transport, as Ansel Adams did, instead of pack mules.

The title of “New Terrain: 21st-Century Landscape Photography,” which runs at the Worcester Art Museum through July 7, puts newness, which is to say, alteration, front and center. WAM’s Nancy Kathryn Burns curated the show.

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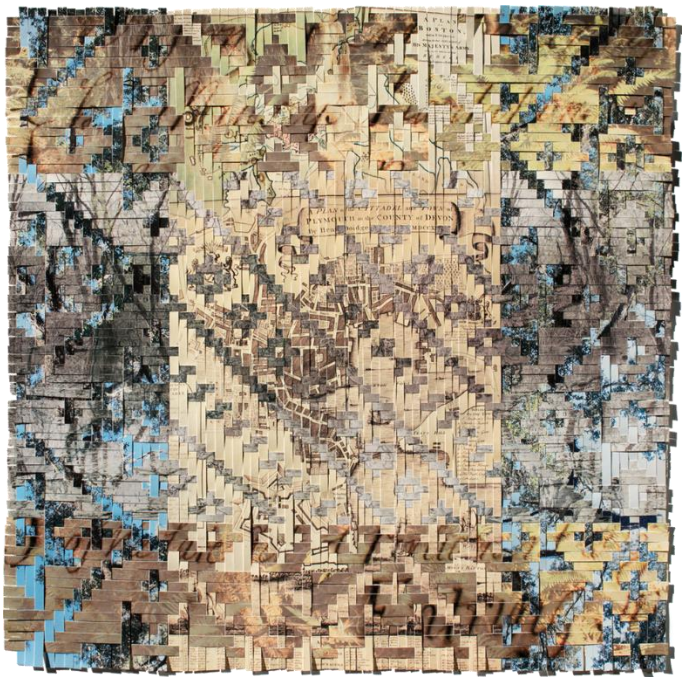

Sarah Sense, "A Plan of Boston," 2023 WORCESTER ART MUSEUM

That newness extends to subject, process, approach, media, even materiality. David Emitt Adams's "111 Degrees, Facing West" takes a traditional process, tintype, and uses it in a very non-traditional way. Tintypes were popular in the mid-19th century, with the photographic images printed on a metal plate. Adams's metal "plate" is a rusted gas can he found in the Sonoran Desert. A sense of place and use of tactility, albeit in no way similar, also inform Sarah Sense's "A Plan of Boston." Sense, who's of Chitimacha and Choctaw descent, combines photographs with two 18th-century maps (one of Boston, hence the title) and, most strikingly, basket-weaving techniques from her Indigenous heritage.

Sense's work is a reminder that landscape, old or new, consists of more than just land. It's figurative as well, and the conceptual element can matter as much as the literal — or even more, as what one might call a moral terroir. Coming into play are matters of heritage, possession, legacy — which is related to heritage and possession but different.

There are some 30 photographs in "New Terrain," ranging in date from 2003-2023, and in their various ways nearly all can be seen to touch on that multiplicity of meanings. Among the exceptions is Adam Ekberg's marvelously deadpan "Lawn Chair Catapult" — the title is head-scratchingly self-explanatory — which is a different kind of layering, of perception and expectation.

Sometimes the treatment of those other, more freighted layers of meaning, and the politics thereof, is subdued. Dawoud Bey's "Untitled #19 (Creek and Trees)" from his "Night Coming Tenderly, Black" series, may be the most moving instance. The series, which shows sites from the Underground Railroad, takes its title from a Langston Hughes poem, "Dream Variations." Bey's unconventional visual approach might also be seen as a version of Milton's "darkness visible."

Adam Ekberg, "Lawn Chair Catapult," 2017 COURTESY OF THE ARTIST AND CLAMP, NEW YORK.

Photographs in the series are notably underlit. This has the seemingly paradoxical effect of involving the viewer more with the image, both in giving a sense of the experience of someone in flight

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Dawoud Bey, "Untitled #19 (Creek and Trees)," 2017COURTESY OF THE ARTIST AND SEAN KELLY, NEW YORK/LOS ANGELES.

under cover of darkness and requiring a greater attentiveness to appreciate what's within the frame. Sometimes the treatment is anything but subdued, as in Dread Scott's "Obliterated Power (Supreme Court)," which shows a darkened, printed-over Supreme Court building ominously looming over an empty plaza in the foreground. The message is plain.

Scott's image recalls Christo and Jeanne-Claudes's "Wrapped Reichstag," another presentation, if far less menacing, of monumental power occluded. One of the more interesting aspects of "New Terrain" is how often the photographs relate to the work of other artists. Sometimes that's in terms of subject. Barbara Ciurej & Lindsay Lochman's "Cola Sea," from their series "Processed Views," takes as point of departure Watkins's photograph "Sugarloaf Islands." Ciurej and Lochman don't photograph the islands. They construct a close simulacrum, out of sugar. The image is a commentary on junk food, right down to tiny decayed teeth substituting for the birds visible in Watkins's original.

The land artist Robert Smithson created his "Spiral Jetty" earthwork in Utah's Great Salt Lake in 1970. The aerial views of the lake and environs in David Maisel's "Terminal Mirage" take Smithson as a point of departure. In fact, "Spiral Jetty," seen very small, is visible in one of the two photos from the series in the show. What most stands out are the pictures' almost-radioactive colors, which jump out all the more, with the photographs measuring 4 feet by 4 feet.

David Maisel, "Terminal Mirage #12," 2005 WORCESTER ART MUSEUM

The tradition of Chinese shan shui landscape painting inspires both Wu Chi-Tsung's "Cyano-Collage 1919" and Yang Yongliang's video "The Clouds," which incorporates both photography and animation. Wu uses scale to even greater effect than Maisel does: The work measures

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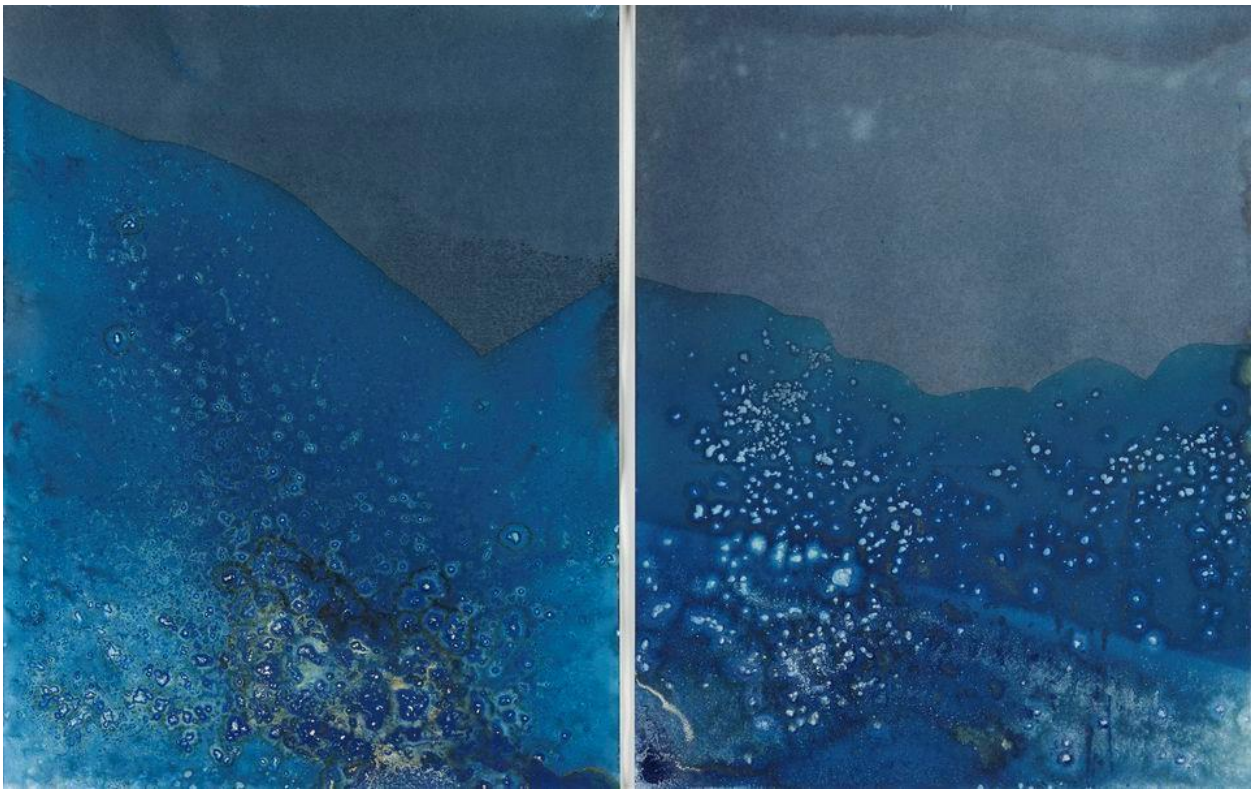
more than 7 feet tall and slightly less than 2 feet wide. Glanced at, Yang's video looks like a rendering of mountains partially covered by clouds. Closer inspection reveals waterfalls, automobiles, pedestrian traffic, high-tension wires, construction cranes. Landscape as static? Not hardly. In a show consistently full of surprises, nothing may be more surprising than Yang's video.

Sometimes the relation to the work of other artists is visual. Paul Vinet's "Infinite Landscape #6" uses gilding in such a way that a contemporary cityscape seems to emerge from a Byzantine or early Renaissance painting. The effect is unnervingly surreal. Silvio Wolf's "Horizon F." is very Rothko, as Kate Greene's "Seascape study no. 3" is very Turner and Matthew Brandt's "Lake Dillon, CO1," from his "Lakes and Reservoirs" series, is very Frankenthaler.

As distinctive as the Brandt is in appearance, it's even more so in execution. In the darkroom, he used water from the lake to bathe the developing image (can't do that with digital). For her diptych "Littoral Drift #3 (Rodeo Beach, CA)," Meghann Riepenhoff did something similar. She took prepared cyanotype paper, like that used by Wu, and held it in the Pacific, using waves and sediment to "develop" the image.



Meghann Riepenhoff, "Littoral Drift #3 (Rodeo Beach, CA)," June 13, 2013. WORCESTER ART MUSEUM

The example here from Anderson & Low's "Voyages (20022)" series also partakes of the ocean, at least by association. They photograph museum-quality ship models in storage. The in-storage part matters, because seen through plastic the vessel here seems lost in fog. One thinks of Emily Dickinson's line "There is no Frigate like a Book" — or, in this case, photograph. The realm that Anderson & Low take us to, dreamscape, is very different from landscape, but by no means unrelated to it.