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Galerie des Beaux-Arts, Bordeaux, 28 Aug. - 10 Nov. 2014

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Review of *Road Trip: Photography of the American West*

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- ¹ Last year saw the half-century anniversary of the Sister Cities partnership between Los Angeles and Bordeaux. As part of the celebrations in Bordeaux, the city's Beaux-Arts Museum hosted the exhibition *Road Trip: Photography of the American West*, borrowed from the permanent collection of the Wallis Annenberg Photography Department at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA).¹ A selection of one video projection and 81 photographs by 55 artists were on view at the Beaux-Arts Gallery between 28 August and 10 November 2014. These works of art had never been presented in France, although some of the great names of American photography were exhibited in the 2001 show *Made in USA* at the same Gallery in Bordeaux and in recent collective or solo exhibitions elsewhere in France, as summarized by Sophie Barthélémy, Director of the Beaux-Arts Museum of Bordeaux, in her foreword to the exhibition catalogue. *Road Trip: Photography of the American West* thus pushed forward a recent interest in and increasing popularity of Western American photography in France, following the Robert Adams retrospective *The Place We Live* at the Jeu de Paume (11 February–18 May 2014), the Lewis Baltz exhibition *Common Objects* at the Bal in Paris (23 May–24 August 2014), and collective exhibitions such as a show presenting photographs from the MoMA's collection at the Musée national d'art moderne in Paris in 1996, or *Visions of the West: Photographs from the 1860-1880 Exploration* at the Musée d'art américain in Giverny in 2007, *The Mythology of the West in American Art 1830-1940* presented in Rennes and Marseilles in 2008, as well as the exhibition showing more than 300 photographs of the American Seventies at the Bibliothèque Nationale de France in 2008. It should be added that, of course, other regional museums and galleries have also regularly hosted solo exhibitions of some of these photographers. The exhibition history at the Galerie du Château d'Eau in Toulouse, for example, shows these trends rather clearly. This specialized photography gallery hosted exhibitions of Edward Weston (1975), Minor White (1976), Imogen Cunningham (1977), Paul Strand (1981), Edward S. Curtis (1986), Paul Caponigro (1989), and Walker Evans (1990). The revival of interest in the American

West is exemplified by *Pursuit*, the work of French photographer Richard Pak (see its review in Adrien 2012), presented at the Château d'Eau in late 2012.

- 2 Michael Govan, CEO and Wallis Annenberg Director of LACMA, points out in his foreword to the catalogue that, covering all periods and all major artists of this medium, the photography holdings of the LACMA are able to present the photographic perspective on the documentation and interpretation of the American West uniquely. This advantage made it possible for *Road Trip* to go very clearly beyond the mere presentation of the founding myth of the conquest of the American West, highlighted in some of the earlier collective exhibitions in France. The result was a visually engaging, stripped-down and well-organized overview of a purposely limited number of emblematic images.

Spatial organization of the show

- 3 The organization of the exhibition needs special discussion since the material was structured in a way that made the main message of the show clear: this road trip pushed visitors to think beyond the myth of the American West, thus going beyond representations of the breathtaking natural beauty of the region and its artistic representations in various photographic styles towards the reinterpretation of the land in terms of contemporary human culture. The photographs were arranged on two floors: the ground floor presented two sections around establishing and representing the myth, *Making of a Myth: the Early Topographs* and *Photography as Art: Pictorialist Visions*. The first floor showed the third section, *Beyond the Myth: Street Photography and the "New Topographs"* ending with a final partition of contemporary works on *Staging the Artistic Gesture* and *The Sublimated West*. The photographs in each section were arranged in near-chronological order which made reading the show easy. But there was an even more felicitous choice of arrangement that revealed the great amount of thought and care put in the show. Within the sections, images were hung in "brackets", groups of two to six photographs. On the one hand, they were hanging together when they shared esthetics or a theme. For instance, a bracket of four images around the theme of "built abstraction" included Aaron Siskind's *Industrial Abstraction* (1932) and Edward Weston's *Plaster Works* (1925); similarly, the three images from Ed Ruscha's 1967 series, *Parking Lots*, were hung on a wall of their own. On the other hand, photographs were hung more in isolation either when they were iconic in their own right or when they were the counterpart of other images on the opposite wall. Such iconic images as Dorothea Lange's *Migrant Mother, Nipomo, California* (1936) or Miles Coolidge's monumental 332 cm-wide strip photograph, *Near Lemoore* (1998), had considerable space around them. Brett Weston's static *Mono Lake (#6)* (1955) was hanging alone on a wall of its own, facing the five shots from Ansel Adams' dynamic *Surf Sequence* (ca. 1940) across the gallery space: thus, the crystal-clear image of the snowy section of a shore with the perfectly calm wrinkleless reflecting surface of the lake was hanging opposite five equally sharp shots of the geometrical abstractions formed by waves coming to the shore.

Brett Weston
United States, 1911–1993
Mono Lake, California (#6), 1955, printed 1990

IMAGE: 18 7/8 × 23 1/4 IN. (48 × 59.1 CM)

GELATIN SILVER PRINT

RALPH M. PARSONS DISCRETIONARY FUND

M.2003.30

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Ansel Adams
 United States, 1902–1984
Surf Sequence, c. 1940, printed after 1972

FIVE GELATIN SILVER PRINTS (#5 SHOWN HERE)

IMAGE: 11 × 14 IN. (27.9 × 35.6 CM)

M.2008.40.49.1–.5

**THE MARJORIE AND LEONARD VERNON COLLECTION, GIFT OF THE ANNENBERG FOUNDATION AND
 PROMISED GIFT OF CAROL VERNON AND ROBERT TURBIN**

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- 4 While this choice of arrangement often meant that photographs by the same artist could be presented in different brackets, it all the more highlighted the different sensitivities of the artists throughout their career. This principle had particular consequences for artists that treated many disparate themes, such as Aaron Siskind, Edward Weston, Paul Strand, Max Yavno, and Robert Adams. This was the case for Alma Lavenson, whose *Grain Elevator* (1929) and *Indian Ovens, New Mexico* (1941) were shown in different brackets since the first presented an excellent example of the pictorialist interest in soft-focus geometrical volumes, while the second was a sharp-focus play with chiaroscuro effects on a geometrical arrangement of Native American architecture in a truly modernist fashion.

The groundfloor sections

- 5 *Road Trip* opened with a single image, Dennis Hopper's *Double Standard* (1961), in an antechamber of its own. The image, also figuring in Hopper's film *Easy Rider* (1969), set the scene for the whole exhibition since it was metaphorical on many levels. At the iconographic level, it is a typical (and now famous) car-scape, shot through the windscreen of a car, making reference to the car culture that had long come to

dominate the American West by the 1960s. It shows a junction with a Standard service station at a corner with two hoardings reading “STANDARD”, hence the literal meaning of the title. In the rearview mirror the viewer can see what is behind the car, adding the idea of looking back in space and, by extension to the gallery space, in time. Finally, the service station is wedged between two wide diverging avenues, the choice between them facing the driver. The photograph was thus an invitation to take full measure of the many roads and multiple interpretations of the visual representations of the American West on view in the show.

Dennis Hopper
United States, 1936–2010
 Double Standard, 1961, printed later

GELATIN SILVER PRINT
IMAGE: 16 × 24 IN. (40.6 × 61 CM)
GIFT OF BOB CREWE
AC1994.167.2

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- 6 In the first section, *Making of a Myth: the Early Topographs*, Carleton E. Watkins's *Eagle Creek, Columbia River (Oregon)* (1867) captured a period in the American West shortly before the completion of the transcontinental railway in 1869. It shows a section of railway tracks under construction in the lower right, with a horse cart and three male figures, among the towering trees of the pristine forests of Oregon along a stretch of the Columbia River. The building in the middle and the roof of the building on the left shine out in a razor-sharp bright white. This picture of the balance between nature and what is man-made captured the spirit of the optimistic view of America's progress into the West, laid down in the contemporary 19th century ideology of Manifest Destiny.

Carleton E. Watkins
 United States, 1829–1916
Eagle Creek, Columbia River, 1867

ALBUMEN PRINT

IMAGE: 15 7/8 × 20 3/4 IN. (40.3 × 52.7 CM)

**THE MARJORIE AND LEONARD VERNON COLLECTION, GIFT OF THE ANNENBERG FOUNDATION AND
 PROMISED GIFT OF CAROL VERNON AND ROBERT TURBIN
 M.2008.40.2304**

- 7 John K. Hillers' *Eroded Sandstone* (ca. 1870) played with a clear reference to Classical ideals and aspirations: the eroded stone resembles the Egyptian sphinx. The Classical esthetics in this picture had parallels to Richard Misrach's 1975 *Untitled* picture showing a tall cactus much in the shape of a Greek Ionic column. The third photograph hanging in this section was *The Vanishing Race (Navajo)* (1904) by Edward Sheriff Curtis, an iconic image referring to the tragically somber aspect of Manifest Destiny: the dispossession and disappearance of Native American people in the wake of the Western expansion of the United States. Bramly (1990) pointed at the irony that the Native Americans in this picture were riding away on horseback, one of the cultural goods brought in by the Europeans. These images summarized three main aspects of the period: the Western expansion into pristine lands, the natural wonders of these regions and the beginning of a nostalgic sentiment of loss that followed this expansion into Native territories.

Edward Sheriff Curtis
United States, 1868–1952
The Vanishing Race (Navajo), 1904

PLATINUM PRINT

IMAGE: 6 × 7 7/8 IN. (15.2 × 20 CM)

THE MARJORIE AND LEONARD VERNON COLLECTION, GIFT OF THE ANNENBERG FOUNDATION, ACQUIRED FROM CAROL VERNON AND ROBERT TURBIN

M.2008.40.579

Anne Brigman
 United States, 1869–1950
The Soul of the Blasted Pine, 1908

GELATIN SILVER PRINT
IMAGE: 7 5/8 × 9 5/8 IN. (19.4 × 24.5 CM)
RALPH M. PARSONS FUND
M.2001.8

© ANNE BRIGMAN

- 8 *Photography as Art: Pictorialist Visions*, the second section, began with three photographs of evocative shapes or groups of trees. Anne Brigman's *The Soul of the Blasted Pine* (1908) depicts a pine trunk destroyed by lightning, with a female nude emerging from it pointing upwards with her left hand. With *The Vanishing Race (Navajo)* (1904) still in view, Brigman's image recalled Native American beliefs, as interpreted in pictorialist photography. The next group of photographs showed the departure from pictorialism and the influences of Cubism and purist esthetics: *Ranchos de Taos Church, New Mexico* (1931) and *Abandoned Church, New Mexico* (1932) by Paul Strand, who spent some time there between 1930-32 (Claas 2011), *John Bovingdon* (1929) by Imogen Cunningham or Lavenson's *Grain Elevator* (1929). This partition of the section was rounded up by *Nude* (1936) and *Dunes, Oceano* (1936) by Edward Weston hanging together, complementing each other. Natural and constructed features of the landscape of the American West served as inspiration for the sharp-focus esthetics of many of these artists, who eventually gravitated around the first truly Western American school of photography of the early 1930s, the San Francisco-based Group f/64. Charles Sheeler's *Boulder Dam, Colorado* (1939-1940) depicts Hoover Dam, a major feat of industrial engineering, built during the Great Depression, when the American West played a crucial economic role in providing work at public construction sites. A number of sometimes bucolic landscape photographs by two further giants of this movement, Ansel Adams and Brett Weston, as well as surrealist images by Minor White covered the walls dedicated to

landscape photography. *Moonrise, Hernandez, New Mexico* (1941) by Ansel Adams captured many of the references of this period of Western American photography. It depicts the moon rising over a small settlement with a church, architecturally strongly reminiscent of Strand's *Ranchos de Taos Church* (1931), and shiny white crosses of the nearby cemetery, at the foot of a vast mountain range. The snow-capped mountain range, the moon, the white crosses and the whiteness of the clouds added a spiritual reading to the image, especially considering that the settlement was in Native territories. This spiritual aspect strongly resonated with the style of Minor White, whose images were hanging just next to it.

Ansel Adams

United States, 1902–1984

Moonrise, Hernandez, New Mexico, 1941, printed 1948

GELATIN SILVER PRINT

IMAGE: 15 × 18 1/2 IN. (38.1 × 47 CM)

THE MARJORIE AND LEONARD VERNON COLLECTION, GIFT OF THE ANNENBERG FOUNDATION AND
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M.2008.40.56

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- 9 The theme of the Western car culture appeared in a bracket of four images including *First Drive-in Theater* (1935) by John Gutmann and *Miller Brothers Super Service Station* (1930) by Walker Evans. The latter was an excellent example of his signature fascination with vernacular American iconography: hoardings, billboards, the interaction of the urban and the written texture, as Gilles Mora (1990) discusses. The last picture on leaving these sections was Dorothea Lange's *Migrant Mother, Nipomo, California* (1936) – in fact, a preparatory study for the iconic version of the same image, from a different angle and setting.

Dorothea Lange
 United States, 1895–1965
Migrant Mother, Nipomo, California, 1936

GELATIN SILVER PRINT

IMAGE: 7 5/8 × 9 1/2 IN. (19.4 × 24.1 CM)

THE MARJORIE AND LEONARD VERNON COLLECTION, GIFT OF THE ANNENBERG FOUNDATION AND
 PROMISED GIFT OF CAROL VERNON AND ROBERT TURBIN
 M.2008.40.1221

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The first floor section

- 10 The entry to the first floor was marked by Laura Gilpin's *The Rio Grande Yields its Surplus to the Sea* (1960). Shot against the sun, the Rio Grande shows its silver zigzag meandering through the black lower foreground towards the wavy fishscale-like texture of the sea across the middle of the image, under humid blurred skies in the top section. It is like an invitation to continue the journey on the terrain and to (re)interpret the landscape's symbolism.
- 11 The third section of the exhibition, *Beyond the Myth: Street Photography and the "New Topographs"*, showed the shift towards street photography, a revised perception of beauty where the banal became the new sublime, leading to a focus on the expanding suburbs, shopping centres and industrial parks and their interaction with nature, captured by artists in another Western American movement, the New Topographic style. Images of car culture and being on the road, such as Danny Lyon's *Yuma* (1962), Anthony Friedkin's *Clockwork Malibu/Rick Dano on the Highway* (1977) or the three pictures selected from Ed Ruscha's *Parking Lots* (1967) series, continued the theme of car culture introduced by Evans's photograph. But while Evans concentrated more on the written texts on hoardings and advertisement boards around a gas station, the other

images showed car culture against its natural backdrop, in its social context or in its abstractionist aspects. Therefore, all these images set elements of the American car culture within a landscape of some sort: in *Yuma*, a huge truck is stationed along the highway that cuts through light-colored sand dunes, while Ruscha's is a series of aerial photographs showing geometrical shapes and white lines visible when looking down on empty parking lots.

Danny Lyon
United States, b. 1942
Yuma, 1962, 1979

GELATIN SILVER PRINT
IMAGE: 8 3/4 x 13 IN. (22.2 x 33 CM)
THE MARJORIE AND LEONARD VERNON COLLECTION, GIFT OF THE ANNENBERG FOUNDATION, ACQUIRED FROM CAROL VERNON AND ROBERT TURBIN
M.2008.40.1341
© DANNY LYON / MAGNUM PHOTOS

Edward Ruscha
United States, b. 1937

Parking Lots (Intersection of Wilshire Blvd. & Santa Monica Blvd.) #30, 1967, printed 1999

From the portfolio *Parking Lots* #1–#30, 1999

Gelatin silver print

Image: 15 × 15 in. (38.1 × 38.1 cm)

Ralph M. Parsons Discretionary Fund

M.2001.27.30

© EDWARD RUSCHA

- 12 Another major theme consisted in showing various aspects of the built environment, especially suburban housing, from post-Depression *Defence Housing* (1941) by Marion Post Wolcott to *New Housing, North Denver, Colorado* (1970) by Robert Adams. Perhaps the most emblematic photograph in this theme was Julius Shulman's *Case Study House #22* (ca. 1960) showing a nightscape viewed from outside the lit interior of a modern, rather minimalist contemporary salon where two seated women are looking at each other, with their back to the glass walls overlooking a vast and flat cityscape, with the grid layout of the streets clearly visible. The glass walls make it possible for the inhabitants to feel inside and outside at the same time.

Julius Shulman
 United States, 1910–2009
Case Study House #22, 1960, printed later

GELATIN SILVER PRINT

IMAGE: 14 7/8 × 12 1/16 IN. (37.8 × 30.6 CM)

**GIFT OF THE ARTIST AND CRAIG KRULL GALLERY IN HONOR OF ROBERT SOBIESZEK
 M.2005.191**

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- 13 The esthetics of New Topography was represented by *East Wall*, *Nees Turf Supply Company*, 38T Pullman, Costa Mesa (1974) by Lewis Baltz and the two *Untitled* (1980, 1982) images by Judy Fiskin that were not unlike the photographs by the Bechers. Nature, and especially its interaction with or impact on the built environment, was far from absent in this part of the exhibition. Joel Sternfeld's *After a Flash Flood, Rancho Mirage, California, July 1979* and Richard Misrach's *T.V. Antenna, Salton Sea, California* (1985), two of the few colour photographs exhibited, both found esthetics in water-induced natural disasters. Joe Deal's *Backyard, Diamond Bar, California* (1980) was a reflection on the interaction of housing and nature in a photograph showing not an inch of the original natural ground around a typical California home: the backyard had been planted with young trees and covered artificially and uniformly with bright sand, otherwise typical of the region.
- 14 The final brackets, *Staging the Artistic Gesture* and *The Sublimated West*, presented contemporary reflections on how the natural landscape became an object in its own right. John Pfahl's pictures from his 1977 performative series showed various landscapes with a human touch: for instance with a red string in the foreground imitating the mountain range in the background in *Monument Valley with Red String, Monument Valley, Utah*, and with a pair of laces stretched out in the foreground having the same texture as the waves coming to shore in the top half in *Wave, Lave, Lace*,

Pescadero Beach, California. Similarly, John Divola's 1978 performative series *Zuma One*, from which the photo *Zuma #38* was exhibited, examined the relation between nature (the Pacific Ocean here) and man-made objects like a building on the shore exposed to the elements and captured at various stages in its decay. *Zuma #38* expressed a very different relation to nature than *Eagle Creek* (1867) by Watkins in which man was conquering pristine lands. There was a totally different sense of balance here: nature reappropriating man-made constructions and offering an escape, both visually and mentally. Leaving the exhibition, the toy cowboy figure on horseback against an orange-brown backdrop in David Levinthal's *Untitled* (1988), bid the visitor farewell, in a humoristic wink to Western American iconography referenced in Pirkle Jones' *Cowboy, Arizona* (1957) as well as the video *Hardcore* (1969) by Walter de Maria in the show.

John Divola
United States, b. 1949
Zuma #38, 1978, printed 1982

From the portfolio *Zuma One*, 1977–78
Dye imbibition print
Image: 14 7/16 × 17 7/8 in. (36.7 × 45.4 cm)
Ralph M. Parsons Fund
M.86.51.3

© JOHN DIVOLA

Concluding observations

- 15 It was striking to observe that many of the greatest photographers who represented aspects of the West came from elsewhere: from the East Coast came Robert Adams, Walker Evans, Dorothea Lange, Danny Lyon, John Pfahl, John Shulman and Paul Strand,

while Robert Frank was born in Switzerland, and Miles Coolidge in Montréal. The other group of artists consisted of photographers born and bred in the West like Ansel Adams, Lewis Baltz, Thomas Barrow, Imogen Cunningham, Judy Dater, John Divola, Anthony Friedkin, Lee Friedlander, Laura Gilpin, Alma Lavenson, Richard Misrach, Wright Morris, or Edward Ruscha. In this respect, the single image by Friedlander chosen to be shown, *Untitled* (1965), stood out: it was in fact taken in New York rather than the West (see, for instance, Malle 1987, plate 16), and it was the only photograph in the exhibition showing the American flag.

- 16 Many of the photographs on view also make direct reference to images in other media, such as painting in the style of Abstract Expressionism and sculpture or land art à la James Turrell (currently on show at the LACMA). Dennis Hopper's shot also figures in his film, *Easy Rider* (1969). This made the exhibition all the more vibrant and rich in associations. With such an all-encompassing representation of the photography of the American West, it really is hard to find names that were absent from the show. Larry Sultan could come to mind, but then he has a retrospective exhibition on at the LACMA until March 2015. The exhibition made visitors contemplate the iconography of the American West and discover many artists that were no doubt new revelations to the general public in France. It left visitors with a sense of intimacy with the American West, its paradoxes, and its aspirations.

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NOTES

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