ESSAY REVIEW
Picturing the American West

*The American Space: Meaning in Nineteenth-Century Landscape Photography.* Edited by *Daniel Wolf.* (Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 1983. xii, 122p. Illustrations. $60.00.)

*Carleton Watkins: Photographer of the American West.* By *Peter E. Palmquist.* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, for the Amon Carter Museum, 1983. xviii, 234p. Illustrations, appendices, bibliography. $70.00.)

*The Photographic Artifacts of Timothy O'Sullivan.* By *Rick Dingus.* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1982. xvii, 158p. Illustrations, bibliography, index. $45.00.)

During the 1860s and 1870s, the vast and variegated landscape of the American West was gradually taking concrete shape before the eyes of the East. From the grandly picturesque canvases of Bierstadt and Moran to the simplified iconography of Currier and Ives, images of the mysterious West entered the visual marketplace. But Americans wanted to get closer yet to the real thing: panoramas of the West had been popular decades earlier; during the Centennial, visitors were offered something even better—a three dimensional scale model of the Western landscape, made out of plaster by the photographer William Henry Jackson. But if there was a limit to how much of the West you could recreate as a tangible substance, there was no limit to the number of images the photographer could take (the Photography Annex at the Centennial was filled with them), images that could work wonders for the armchair traveler. As the Reverend H.J. Morton had noted ten years earlier in the leading photographic journal of the day, *The Philadelphia Photographer,* such views "open before us the wonderful valley whose feathers far surpass the fancies of the most imaginative poet and eager romancer. . .without crossing the continent by the overland route in dread of scalping Indians and waterless plains" (Palmquist, p. 19).

Over the past decade, nineteenth-century Western photography has been receiving increasing scholarly and curatorial attention, beginning with the sweeping exhibition and excellent catalogue done by Weston J. Naef and James N. Wood, *Era and Exploration: The Rise of Landscape Photography in the American West, 1860-1885* (1975). Now three new books add significantly to the subject, answering many questions and posing some additional ones along the way.
Carleton E. Watkins was among the first to photograph the Yosemite Valley (1860s), and his photographs were recognized universally as perfect representations of the art of landscape: sublime vistas of the valley, combining waterfalls, mountain views, and the principal features of the place in picturesque compositions that rivalled (as they drew upon) the conventions of landscape painting. Peter E. Palmquist’s exhaustively researched biography of the photographer, *Carleton E. Watkins: Photographer of the American West*, gives us a much more complete picture of his life and career than we have previously had: his early use of the camera in various court litigations regarding real estate; the rigors of working in the field with the wet-plate technique; the triumph of the Yosemite images, which convinced Congress to preserve the place as a national park; the financial debacle in the 1870s that resulted in his negatives being seized by a creditor, and Watkins having to reshoot his famous views in order to have something to sell; the pathos of his later years, when he grew blind and, after the 1906 earthquake in San Francisco, had to be led from his burning studio just a day or two before he was to complete the sale of his work to a museum (there is an eerie photograph of the moment in the book); and the final years alone in an insane asylum, to which he’d been consigned by his wife and daughter.

Not a happy story.

Yet Palmquist and Martha A. Sandweiss (in the foreword) argue, contrary to Weston Naef’s thesis that Watkins peaked in the 1860s with his first Yosemite survey, that the high quality of Watkins’s work continued unabated through the eighties, moving in the direction of a proto-modernism in which he more and more imposed an abstract order on the image. What is more, they enlarge their serious consideration beyond the well-known Yosemite images to encompass a whole body of commercial work usually ignored by commentators. For one of the ways Watkins kept his operation going financially throughout his career was by the contracts he filled for a number of wealthy clients in California (he was a longtime friend of the railroad potentate Collis P. Huntington) who hired him to photograph their estates and industrial enterprises. The resulting commercial work, Sandweiss argues, has all the interest of the landscape photographs and should be seen as an equally high achievement in the contemplative art of photography.

Coincidentally, Thomas Weston Fels, at the Clark Art Institute (Williams College) produced in 1983 an exhibit and catalogue on Watkins that also featured this enlarged view of his career. Fels creates an intellectual framework for the bifurcation, in which the two bodies of work—the picturesque nature views and the commercial landscapes—are seen to reflect the major split in American consciousness between preservation of the garden-wilderness and exploitation of it. Where Palmquist and Sandweiss see Watkins’s work as
continuous, Fels sees it as divided: nature as cathedral vs. nature as hell. Both
the Palmquist volume and Fels catalogue are proposing an important revision
in our view of Watkins, but neither goes quite far enough in making its case or
in explaining what needs to be explained. For whether we see Watkins's
mining photographs, for example, as images of hell, or as images of order
seems to depend more on the interpretive context than on any historical one.
Fels uses Leo Marx; Sandweiss and Palmquist use a post-modernist aesthetic
that frees the artist from ideology.

But what is needed is, precisely, an understanding of Watkins's own social,
political, and intellectual context. When he photographed workers in a mining
operation, for example, was he composing a contemplative shot because his
clients would have expected something prosperously tranquil or because his
own sensibility required him to order a landscape, no matter what was in it?
Who knows? We lack some essential documentation of Watkins's purposes,
falling which the photographs are more mute than we would like them to be,
and thus subject to the fallible, cupped ears of the interpreter.

Turning to Timothy H. O'Sullivan, one discovers a life and art having little
in common with his contemporary Watkins. O'Sullivan learned his trade from
Brady, worked with Alexander Gardner photographing the Civil War, and
spent the remainder of his life in one way or another working for the U.S.
Government—first as photographer to Clarence King's Geological Explora-
tions of the Southwest (beginning in 1867) and then serving similarly in Lt.
George M. Wheeler's explorations of a different part of the region, com-
mencing in 1871; when he was not in the field, he was printing in Washington
for the surveys, winding up at last (in 1880) as photographer at the Treasury
Department, a job he resigned only months later when he contracted tuber-
culos of the lungs. He died at forty-two.

If O'Sullivan's career was thus different from Watkins's so was his craft. It
is not just that O'Sullivan generally worked in a smaller format (8" x 11"
approximately); he also worked in a very different landscape from Wat-
kins's—a harsh and barren wilderness of rocks and deserts, where trees were
rare and mosquitoes (although they don't show up on the plates) an abundant
source of grief and illness. Even when O'Sullivan had a waterfall to photo-
graph, it was more likely the awesome Shoshone Falls rather than the prettier
ones Watkins pictured. Not surprisingly, O'Sullivan has been called the least
picturesque of Western landscape photographers (by Naef), even placed
outside the picturesque tradition altogether (by Joel Snyder, in his important
catalogue, American Frontiers: The Photographs of Timothy H. O'Sullivan,
1867-1874 [1981]). The pleasures of O'Sullivan are other than inviting,
hospitable, bucolic Western scenes, and perhaps for this very reason his work
has become of increasing fascination for contemporary viewers. Yet we know
so little about O'Sullivan (in hard facts) that writers drawn to his work are driven to acts of creative bookmanship: James Horan (in 1966) writes a biography of O'Sullivan that is at least as much about Matthew Brady (whom we do know much about); Snyder places the photographer in the influential company of geologist Clarence King. Now Rick Dingus has taken an approach that seeks to reconstruct the acts of O'Sullivan in the field, and it promises much.

For Dingus has approached O'Sullivan not simply through existing images and available archives (precious little of the latter); rather, Dingus has gone into the pictured landscape itself, rephotographing many of O'Sullivan's famous views from as exactly duplicated a position as he could obtain, revealing not only the changes in the land in the hundred years since O'Sullivan, but also the optative context of O'Sullivan's images. (Much of the work was done as part of the larger Rephotographic Survey Project in the Southwest.) By juxtaposing Dingus and O'Sullivan, we can observe the latter's choices more clearly: the degree to which he tilted the horizon in setting up the shot in order to emphasize an angle in, say, a rock outcropping; the masking of background in order to accentuate the outline of a geological feature; the distortions of perspective that result from the camera's inevitable flattening of space, producing images that are far from exact as guides to mapping the landscape. Dingus's point is that O'Sullivan was not "neutral" in his depictions, that he often sacrificed information in order to achieve a more expressive image (pp. 35-36; 45-46). We have known this before about O'Sullivan, but it has not previously been so meticulously demonstrated.

Moreover, Dingus places O'Sullivan's practice within an illuminating cultural context, by noting its congruity with both the scientific and the aesthetic conventions of the time: for it was not uncommon for the nineteenth-century scientist to "subdue or enhance certain features of the environment" in order to "convey the truth as he saw it" (p. 55). What is operating in both scientific and aesthetic representation, Dingus affirms, is a kind of Ruskinian ethos, whereby truthfulness to nature means not any literal imitation but an expression of our "emotions, impressions, and...thoughts" of the thing (Ruskin, quoted on p. 52). To what degree that geologist Clarence King, an avowed Ruskinian, as much aesthete as scientist, influenced O'Sullivan during their long periods together in the field, we can only surmise. O'Sullivan was given broad themes, apparently, but otherwise was on his own in taking specific shots; still, Dingus finds him, in the occasional journalistic article, echoing King's theories of geological mutation. (King advocated catastrophism, as against the more gradual changes of uniformitarianism.)

Dingus reaches out to a wide range of nineteenth-century thought in his attempt to contextualize O'Sullivan (Melville gets his warmest endorsement),
but the effort may tell us more about Dingus than about O'Sullivan. What is most interesting as evidence of O'Sullivan's thinking is the set of captions O'Sullivan wrote (or so Dingus argues convincingly) to accompany Wheeler's *Geographical Report* (1879), which offers information about the images from a variety of angles: scientific, adventure, historical. Dingus's analysis of the text is scanty, but it would seem from the passages quoted that O'Sullivan does evince a Ruskinian synthesis in his perceptions: "Above the river-bed the boundary walls rise a mile or more in height, sometimes abrupt and over-hanging, again receding in benches or terraces which are gigantic stairs climbing to the surrounding plateaus" (O'Sullivan, quoted on p. 99). Our understanding of O'Sullivan might well be deepened by more extensive analysis of the captions.

The Dingus and Palmquist volumes are both published by the University of New Mexico Press, and they are handsomely illustrated with high quality plates and smaller reproductions embedded in the text. (Though I must say I found the separate groupings of plates in the O'Sullivan volume confusing to use.) With Daniel Wolf's *The American Space: Meaning in Nineteenth-Century Landscape Photography*, we have the handsomest book of the three, with 110 plates printed in superbly detailed brown and black duotones. This is more than a splendid coffee-table book, but less than a scholarly tome (the subtitle is misleading). It is chiefly a collection of magnificent images of the West by some twenty-two photographers. (More than half are by Watkins, O'Sullivan, and William Henry Jackson.) The only disconcerting thing about the format is that regardless of their original dimensions, all the images are printed at about the same size; to find out what was originally a mammoth plate photograph (16" by 20") and what a 5" by 7" you have to look back to the "List of Plates," an awkward process.

*The American Space* does contain some notes on photographic processes and on the camera operators (only the nine chief ones), but the most suggestive feature of the volume is its arrangement of images: they are divided into two main groupings: "Nature," consisting of the subdivisions "Space," "Rocks," "Trees," "Waterfalls," and "Light"; and "Man and Nature," consisting of "Indians," "Man and Space," "Trains," and "Growth." That in itself is an interesting statement of how the nineteenth-century photographer saw the American landscape: as a catalogue of conventions for organizing spatial experience. What is additionally interesting is the arrangement within the categories, for Wolf has grouped the images on facing pages so that they comment on each other: most frequently as ways of organizing pictorial space; but also as ways of marking the human presence in the landscape—e.g. Butterfield's photograph of a mountainous vista with an artist and easel in the foreground, facing on the opposite page Jackson's famous "North from Berthoud Pass," in
which a leather-fringed scout with rifle stands heroically on the near ground before us, mountains and valleys behind him. But nothing is made of these arrangements in the text; they are left for us to contemplate. The juxtapositions are as suggestive—or mystifying—as Weston Naef’s “Counterparts” exhibit at the Metropolitan in New York a couple of years ago—but in that case one had the benefit of an explanatory catalogue by Naef.

What one does have by way of text in *The American Space* is an introduction by Robert Adams. Adams, a photographer in his own right, and the author of the literate *Beauty in Photography: Essays in Defense of Traditional Values*, is always interesting, though this is not his most interesting effort. He calls attention to space itself as an element in the structure of nineteenth-century landscape photographs, claiming that photography surpassed painting by virtue of its inability to include what was not there (the painters imposed “Switzerland” on the American land). Adams, finding romantic art in general disquieting, sees O’Sullivan as the greatest (i.e. least romantic) of Western photographers, the embodiment of classic order, austerity, quietness. Adams is implicitly arguing against Joel Snyder’s thesis that O’Sullivan echoed King’s philosophy of catastrophe rather, Adams sees O’Sullivan as seeking in the West “an order larger than the one he saw blasted away” in the Civil War (p. 9). It is a speculation that cannot be proven either way. About Watkins, Jackson, and the others, Adams has little to say.

If the photographs of a hundred years ago served the Eastern armchair traveler as substitutes for travel, that day is long past; the mark of man on the land has by now been all too visibly made, a picture of presence that Adams himself has subtly recorded in his own series of photographs, *From the Missouri West*. And as the land has changed, so has the function of the photographer. Yet besides Adams there are Joseph Deal and Robbert Flick, among others, who continue to work in the Western landscape tradition, their work all the more interesting because of our understanding of how they have drawn on, and modified, their predecessors. It is evident that Watkins and O’Sullivan and others can still speak to us, and not only in terms of our nostalgia for a changed landscape. With these three books we have added much to our understanding of their purposes, but there are still many unanswered questions about what was going through their minds when, on desert floor or mountain top, they opened the shutter on the view before them. And more questions left about how their contemporaries saw what they had captured.

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