



Shiprock (from the series Fire and Ice)
Joan Myers (American, born 1944)
2012 (printed before 2014)
pigment print
Gift of Joan Myers, 2017
Object number: 2017.5.9

The invention of photography in 1827 changed how we view and understand many different aspects of our world. Amongst these was how we understood places that we may never see in person. As an example, if someone mentions the pyramids at Giza what springs to mind probably isn't a memorized passage of text that describes the pyramids in detail, or even a mental picture created by those words. What probably springs to mind is something like a National Geographic cover featuring a photograph of the pyramids. Early landscape photography tended to be understood in this way, as an accurate reporting of what a place looked like. This more documentary approach to photographing places gave people a representation of a place that was generally regarded as trustworthy and fueled the imagination and curiosity. When you first saw that National Geographic cover, chances are you didn't question if the pyramids were really shaped like that but may have thought that it would be amazing to see them in person one day or wondered about the story of their construction.

Photography's relationship to landscape has continued to change over time with a range of aesthetic approaches and ideas about what landscape photography should be existing and overlapping each other at various times. Looking at a few of these can help to demonstrate these changes and maybe understand our own changing perspectives on the land around us. The views of the photographic landscape we'll look at relate to how humans view not only the land around them, but their own relationship with that land.

In the Modernist movement depictions of the landscape ranged from urban street scenes to wild mountain ranges. In the United States, landscape photography of the

world outside our cities took on an idealized view of wilderness, one that showed the landscape as unspoiled and without sign of human contact. This depiction of the land came from a European view that often focused on the American West as a land that was waiting to be explored, missing the fact that indigenous people had already lived there for untold generations. This romanticized view of a landscape that was beginning to fade into myth and memory as cities and highway systems grew across the country found an eager audience and, in some cases, became a part of the early environmental movement with groups like the Sierra Club.

In the Post-Modern era, photography began to look at landscape in a different way. What Modernist landscape photography avoided became the focus. The presence of human activity in the landscape became important to document, examine and consider. Pristine mountain vistas were replaced with the edges of suburban sprawl, agriculture, construction projects, and parking lots. Human presence in the landscape was a fact to be examined and the intersection between a receding natural landscape and our built environment became an area of focus and consideration.

Contemporary landscape photography, the work that is being created today and in the recent past, may take years to define, but there are a few views on the photographic landscape that can be pointed to that connect to past ways of seeing. Where we have seen pristine wilderness followed by the interaction of wilderness and the built landscape, we now often see an examination of the impact of human presence on the landscape in both beautiful and concerning ways. Some landscape photography finds beauty in the environment that humans have designed, looking to city skylines as others may look towards mountain ranges. Other photography looks to the environmental impact of human development on the landscape, focusing on images that reveal a very different reality from the pristine wilderness of the Modernists.

These are just a few examples of the kinds of forms landscape photography can take. Beyond that there are urban landscapes, micro landscapes, astral landscapes, and social landscapes just to name a few more. Landscape really boils down to what is around a photographer (or the areas they seek out) and what is important to them about that area. A landscape photograph may show a concern the photographer has, a curiosity, a passion, or even simply reflect what they find aesthetically appealing.

Activity:

In the previous section we looked at some examples of concepts that can be found in landscape photography, now let's address some techniques for making landscape photographs.

Horizon Lines

Most, but by no means all, landscape photographs have a horizon line. For images that do include a horizon, the question is where to put it in your composition. There are some common ways to deal with the horizon, but no rules that anyone has to follow. It's not unusual for a horizon line to align with the rule of thirds in a composition, meaning that the horizon will be either a third of the way up from the bottom of the image, or a

third of the way down from the top of the image. Usually this creates a good visual balance between the sky and the land, with whichever is more important for the image occupying the larger area. If the landscape you are photographing has a flat horizon, such as a corn field or a line of similar roofs in a city, arranging the horizon to line up with the rule of thirds seems pretty easy, but what do you do with a horizon that is far from flat or straight? Sometimes the angle of buildings or landforms makes a flat horizon impossible, or just not that interesting. When using the rule of thirds for a jagged city skyline or a line of mountains its perfectly ok to have some elements above and below that imaginary line. Use the line as a guide and see if making elements above and below it roughly equal looks good. If something doesn't look quite right, try tilting the image up or down to change where the horizon line lands. Remember, these are guidelines you can experiment with, not laws you must follow to the letter.

There are times when your landscape doesn't really need much actual land in it, or sky for that matter. Often this is the case when having more sky or earth will detract from the focus of the image. In some instances, a photographer may choose to eliminate the sky all together and only focus on the earth. In the case of the sky or elements that rise above the ground needing to be the focus, many photographers will still include a small strip of the ground at the bottom of the image to keep the composition anchored. When leaving a little land at the bottom of the image, consider how much is necessary for that strip to make sense in the context of the rest of the image. A great example of this kind of composition can be found in Anne Noggle's *Untitled (Gravel Chute)*. The low angle of the image frames the white industrial building between the dark, swirling clouds above and the clouds of dust at its base. At the very bottom though we see a barbed wire fence line with tall grass and weeds beneath it. These last elements keep the building from simply floating in the clouds while adding clues about the kind of building or location where the photograph was taken.



Untitled (Gravel Chute)
Anne Noggle (American, 1922 - 2005)
circa 1963–69
gelatin silver print
Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Chester Pease, 1976
Object number: 3445.23PH

Placing important elements of an image directly in the center of the image sometimes doesn't work well, but landscape images often do exactly that very successfully with the horizon line. Placing the horizon line along the center can create balance or tension within an image. Look at the content of your frame both for what is there in terms of importance and for how those elements relate to each other visually. For example, in Patrick Nagatani's photograph *Gila River, Canal Camp, Japanese-American Concentration Camp, Arizona, March 25, 1995 / GRC-4-18-24* the horizon line is close to the center of the image. The remains of the Japanese-American concentration camp feel both emotionally and visually heavy. Giving the open sky equal space in the composition helps to balance the image and to give the viewer space to consider the camp's remains and their implications. *Wheatfield* by Lawrence McFarland similarly divides the composition, balancing the strong lines in the wind-swept wheat on the bottom and the rounded shapes of the cloud covered sky above.



Gila River, Canal Camp, Japanese-American Concentration Camp, Arizona, March 25, 1995 / GRC-4-18-24 (from the series Japanese American Concentration Camps)

Patrick Nagatani (American, 1945 - 2017)

March 25, 1995

chromogenic print

Gift of Patrick Nagatani, 2017

Object number: 2017.12.62



Wheatfield
Lawrence McFarland (American, born 1942)
1976
gelatin silver print, selenium toned
Museum purchase, 1983
Object number: 1983.40.3

Moving the viewer through the image

The topic of how a viewer will visually move through your image may not be the first thing on your mind when composing your image of a mountain vista or an old drive-in movie theatre sign on a small rural highway, but it is something to consider. An image can be made easier or more difficult to explore based on how elements within the image lead the viewer from foreground to background and side to side within the frame. Landscapes often allow a little time when framing a composition, so pause for a moment and try to observe how your eye moves through the image. Did your eye rest somewhere you didn't like? Did you easily work your way through the image? Did you come to rest on the most important element in the image? If you don't like the way your eyes moved through the image or where you found your attention resting, try changing the composition a little. Lines, both literal such as the stripes on a roadway or implied such as following someone's gaze, can create a kind of visual pathway to move the viewer's attention around the frame. Elements that don't relate visually to the rest of the image can act like roadblocks to how you move through an image.

Joan Myers and Anne Noggle lead the viewer through their images extremely well in the images below. In her image *Shiprock*, Myers places a large rock in the center foreground which could put a halt to the viewer if it weren't for the strong relationship that the stone has with Shiprock in the right background and the long stone wall to the left. The foreground stone is similar in shape to Shiprock and echoes its appearance due to color and the lighting on each. The long stone wall likewise relates to the stone in

color and lighting but connects with Shiprock because of the line formed by the top of the wall. All of these elements combine to create a triangular composition that that moves the viewer around the entire image. In *Untitled (Garage Doors)*, Noggle uses both implied and literal lines to move the viewer throughout the image. The roof lines, power lines and curbs of the image bring us from the right foreground through the image towards the left background. If these were the only lines, it would be easy for us to overlook the left foreground of the image. There, Noggle has placed a dog's head in silhouette, creating an implied gaze and the darkest part of the image. The dog seems to be looking towards the truck with camper on the opposite side of the street, which stands out as break in the repeated forms of the garages and feels like a bright spot in the image, moving us between light and shadow as we move between the camper and the dog.



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Untitled (Garage Doors)
Anne Noggle (American, 1922 - 2005)
1970
gelatin silver print
Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Chester Pease, 1976
Object number: 3428.23PH

Keeping these composition techniques in mind try to make three distinctly different kinds of landscape photographs, such as those discussed earlier. See if you can make each of these during your normal day, although making a special trip to create an image that pops into your head certainly isn't discouraged. Walking to school, work, or the local park will work just fine though.

1. Create a landscape photograph of the natural environment. See how much evidence of human presence you can leave out of the image. This landscape can be big, or it can be small, which may make leaving out signs of human beings easier especially if you live in a city.
2. Compose a landscape that shows nature and the built environment interacting. Thinking big or little in this case could help you create some very different, and very interesting images.
3. Create a landscape image that is entirely about the environment created by humans. This can be a cityscape or an urban landscape, but it doesn't have to be. Interpret "environment created by humans" however it makes sense to you.