Robert Adams (1937-)

By Julia Dolan

Robert Adams's photographs of the American West are incisive views of industrial expansion and regional transformation. Based in Astoria, Adams charts in his work the evolution of suburban development and the exploitation of natural resources, balancing despondency with hope in his photographs of a culturally and politically charged western landscape.

Born in Orange, New Jersey, in 1937, Adams moved with his family to Wisconsin before relocating to a suburb of Denver, Colorado, in 1952. Though he at first found the regional landscape bleak, he was enlivened by hiking trips to Dinosaur National Monument and Rocky Mountain National Park and by weekend outings to the Denver Art Museum. Adams moved to California in 1956, where he studied at the University of Redlands and completed a Ph.D. in English at the University of Southern California. In 1961, he began spending summers on the northern Oregon coast with his wife, Kerstin Mornestam.

In 1962, Adams returned to Colorado, where he was an assistant professor of English at Colorado College until 1970. He was deeply affected by the dramatic change in the region's landscape instigated by industrial development and urban sprawl and took up photography in an effort to resolve his feelings for the new terrain. He later explained: "When I was young I went away to school in Los Angeles, a place which even then wasn't part of the West, and when I came back to Colorado I found that some of Los Angeles had come to Colorado. It hurt. Photography eventually became a way to look for a reconciliation." By 1965, after studying with photographer Myron Wood, he was seriously photographing rural and developing Colorado.

New York's Museum of Modern Art purchased four of Adams's prints for its permanent collection in 1969. He was awarded a Guggenheim fellowship in 1973, and his photographs were included in the groundbreaking exhibition *The New Topographics: Photographs of a Man-Altered Landscape*, held in 1975 at the George Eastman House in Rochester, New York. The group show, which confronted and questioned the style of landscape photography, was a critical and influential success.

Returning to Oregon for an extended period in 1985, Adams purchased land in Astoria and spent a year photographing in the region. The Pacific Northwestern landscape, including that along the Columbia River, was an important subject for him during this time. He moved permanently to Astoria in 1997.

Adams's involvement with Oregon has been more than photographic. Together with his wife, he has advocated for environmental causes since the late 1990s, opposing the clear-cutting of Oregon forests and a planned liquefied natural gas plant near Astoria.

Adams has published more than thirty photographic books and has been featured in major exhibitions, including *Photographs by Robert Adams and Emmet Gowin* (1971) and *Mirrors and Windows: American Photography since 1960* (1978), both at New York's Museum of Modern Art. His solo exhibitions include *Turning Back* (2005) at the Haus der Kunst in Munich and the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art. The exhibition *Robert Adams: The Place We Live, A Retrospective Selection of Photographs* began touring in 2010, appearing at venues that include the Vancouver Art Gallery, the Denver Art Museum, the Yale University Art Gallery, Madrid's Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofia, the Jeu de Paume in Paris, London's Media Space, and Fotomuseum Winterthur in Switzerland. In 2003, the Yale University Art Gallery announced the acquisition of Adams's complete master set of photographs.

Sources

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