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ARTISTS

# Dana Fritz & John Pfahl

Interview by Brandon K. Ruud

On the occasion of the publication of *Encounters*, a new catalog of the Sheldon Museum of Art's remarkable photography collection—and the accompanying exhibition, which closes on April 28—the museum's Curator of Transnational American Art, Brandon K. Ruud, talks with two of the featured artists, Dana Fritz and John Pfahl, on the exhibition, the character of their work, and the current direction of landscape photography.

**Brandon K. Ruud:** Each of you has a work featured in Sheldon's current catalog and exhibition *Encounters: Photography from the Sheldon Museum of Art*. In your case, John, the image is *Four Corners Power Plant* from 1982. How would you describe this work specifically—and your photography generally—within the framework of the catalog and exhibition? Does seeing it at a removal of three decades in another context give it new or different layers of meaning?

**John Pfahl:** Has it really been three decades? The issues that I was dealing with in my *Power Plant* series remain and have only gotten more attention. For me, power plants in the natural landscape, because of their size and isolated locations, remain one of the most visible examples of humanity's willful domination over the wilderness. It is the arena where the needs and ambitions of an ever-expanding population collide most forcefully with the finite resources of nature. I wanted to make photographs where the tension between the natural world and humanity is shown in a nuanced way, hopefully provoking thoughtful reflection in the viewer.

**BKR:** What about you, Dana? Although *Painted Leaves and Dripping Moss* is a relatively recent image, does some of what John's saying also apply to your work? Are there photographers in

*Encounters* whom you admire or find affinity with?

**Dana Fritz:** Of course. I really appreciate his comments and his work because I am also exploring ideas relating to the issue of the tension between people and the natural world. *Encounters* is an exhibition full of work by photographers I have long admired, and I'm honored to be among John, Terry Evans, Mark Klett, and Richard Misrach in the "Nature and the Built Environment" section, which is organized around ideas that have driven my work for over twenty years. I'm interested in both the form and content of work that I see as part of the landscape tradition in broad terms.

**BKR:** Dana, what role does your study of art and art history play in the construction of your photographs and their compositions? What about landscape and ecology theory? John, it's often noted that you look to historical artworks—paintings in particular—for inspiration and sources, and scholars have called your work "picturesque" and "miraculously beautiful." Are these terms, which have been used to describe landscape for hundreds of years, helpful in understanding the composition of your photographs as well as their subjects and themes?

**DF:** While some viewers may not see this at first, I think of all of the work in my series *Terraria Gigantica* as "landscape,"

and it has certainly been informed by this tradition in painting and photography. The horizontal orientation of all of the images is a deliberate choice, and many of them have a real or suggested horizon.

The very notion of "landscape," especially its etymology, implies—if not denotes—human presence. Any landscape, and indeed any photograph, is delineated by a frame and selected for the viewer. I'm as interested in the idea of a landscape as I am in the actual place and construction of the view. For me it is nearly impossible to discuss landscape photography without also discussing the conditions of the site in view. Our reference point is inherently a human one, so important questions about a location's geography (natural and human phenomena) arise. As I was working on *Terraria Gigantica*, I read work by many writers including Bill McKibben, William Cronon, and Michiel Schwarz, who all point out in very different ways that we have fundamentally altered the planet, and using the idea of "wilderness" as the reference point for nature is not useful to move forward.

**JP:** Aren't all non-Photoshopped photographs truly "miraculous" in a certain sense? The coalescence of subject, light, composition, and meaning in a never-to-be-repeated instant is one of the joys of the photographic process. I have long been interested in nineteenth-century landscape painting and how, for example, Hudson River School artists would depict picturesque scenes and sometimes include minor notes of early American industry. A railroad roundhouse or a plume of smoke as a small part of the composition would be inter-



Dana Fritz. *Painted Leaves and Dripping Moss, Lied Jungle*, 2007. Archival pigment print.



John Pfahl. *Four Corners Power Plant Morning 2*, 1982 (printed 2011). Digital print.



John Pfahl, *Hell's Half Acre, Wyoming #1*, 2010. Digital pigment print. Janet Borden Gallery, NYC.

preted positively as a sign of progress at the time. Nineteenth-century painting is filled with depictions of the so-called Machine in the Garden. Two books that I found incredibly useful for this and other projects were Leo Marx's *The Machine in the Garden: Technology and the Pastoral Ideal in America* (1964) and Malcolm M. Andrews's *The Search for the Picturesque: Landscape Aesthetics and Tourism in Britain, 1769–1800* (1990).

**BKR:** A common refrain in descriptions of both of your work is the impact of humankind on the environment. John, your stated goal—in your words—is to use “the deliberately fostered tension” between these two seeming opposites to get viewers to “think more deeply about the complexity of the issues.” What issues specifically does *Four Corners Power Plant* evoke for you?

**JP:** When I think back to my year in New Mexico, I think of the special quality of light that perfectly delineates vast spaces. But even there, amidst all that beauty, there were significant areas of

environmental degradation. It turns out that the coal-fired pollutants from the Four Corners Power Plant were being carried over hundreds of miles in a direct path to my temporary home in Albuquerque. I love the way that a tiny section of my photograph adds an unnerving note to the deeper meaning of what otherwise might be a gorgeous, but fairly standard, picture of desert, mountain, and light.

**BKR:** Dana, you're exploring what you describe as the false dichotomy between “wilderness” and “the built environment,” given humans' millennia-long interaction with and alterations to the natural world. Would you describe your philosophy as being similar to John's? Like him, do you see “wilderness” and “the built environment” as being interdependent, or are they strictly oppositional?

**DF:** My opinion about the human–nature relationship has evolved significantly because of this project. At first I saw them as more oppositional but now believe it is too late for the idea of defin-

ing nature by our absence. In the book *Next Nature*, Michiel Schwarz writes that what nature is or is not is not the real issue. He thinks it is more important to ask this key question in cultural environmental politics: what kind of nature do we want? This question leads to a discussion about how we should live in order to maintain, restore, or establish the kind of environment we want.

**BKR:** Both of you have spent much of your lives and careers as educators, teaching at the university level. What do you think of fine and studio-art education today? How has teaching inspired your work?

**JP:** Gosh, I haven't taught in almost thirty years. I suppose that students still need to come to the metaphorical pump to be filled up with images, ideas, and inspiration. As for myself, the many great students that I taught have given me the great satisfaction of communicating my craft and love for photography while using them as a great sounding board for my work and ideas.

**DF:** I'm not sure what to say here about the role of studio-art education today because that is a very complicated subject that involves so many aspects including people, facilities, costs, curriculum, and so on. However, I can speak about my own role in the larger enterprise. I currently serve as a teacher and mentor to undergraduate art students with an emphasis in photography and to graduate students from all studio areas. I hope to inspire and challenge them to grow in their technical, visual, and intellectual capabilities so that they will make meaningful artwork and contributions to society. I hope they will apply the critical and creative thinking skills learned in studio classes to all aspects of their lives, not just to their studio work. I want to live in a world of critical and creative thinkers, and I believe that is the most important skill I can teach my students. While it is always challenging, I enjoy teaching and find it draws upon and feeds my own creativity. I can't realistically imagine a better job than the one I have at UNL.

**BKR:** John, your latest series, titled *Métamorphoses de la Terre*, continues to address the landscape, yet you returned to manipulating your photographs, altering landscape elements as in your first series, *Altered Landscapes*. Do you feel affinities between your work and the abstractly patterned landscapes by artists like Ansel Adams and Minor White, both of whose work appears in *Encounters*? Do you think the intention is different when the image is manipulated rather than achieved through so-called straight photography, or is the point you're making the same?

**JP:** I have loved those Death Valley photographs ever since I first saw them about fifty years ago. One of the first places I visited in California was Zabriskie Point. I guess I have always been smitten by structure and patterning in nature. While I was working on my other projects in the West, I made detours to take view-camera photographs of the geological features that were so exotic to my East Coast eyes, not knowing how I would ever use them. I made an effort to read more about geology and learned about the importance of fluid dynamics in the formation of many landscapes. When I revisited some transparencies that I had made of the volcanic fields in Hawaii, I thought of using Photoshop to reliquify lava flows that had solidified after cooling down. The success of these pictures led me to work with other pictures in my files of more colorful examples of sandstone, limestone, and mudstone deposited by the vast inland seas in prehistoric times. Clearly my intentions have evolved since I made the works in my *Altered Landscapes* series, but I am clearly still driven to be somewhat playful with ideas about the landscape.

**BKR:** Dana, in your latest work, you've moved from broad panoramas and fragments with multiple elements to intimate landscape details: from *Terraria Gigantica* to *Terra Minutiae*. How do you explain the progression of your photography?

**DF:** While photographing in formal gardens and large vivaria in the last dozen or so years, I became fascinated by both the compression and illusion of space that is inherent in these constructions. Over this same period of time, I have also been visiting Japan and studying Japanese traditional painting and prints, and I began to think of the ways space and our perception of it is used there. In *Terra Minutiae* I am exploring the concepts of idealized landscape, flatness, space, and scale using bonsai and other small-scale elements as the subjects of the work. My intention is to create black-and-white prints in which photography suggests painting and still life becomes landscape. 📷



Dana Fritz. *Shimpaku*, 2012. Gelatin silver print.