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Putting 'Great Places' in Their Place



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"Island of Rinja, Teluk Leihokuwadadasami, Komodo National Park, Selat Sumba, Indonesia, October 28, 1999," by Hope Sandrow. (Courtesy of Hope Sandrow and the Nature Conservancy)

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PHOTOGRAPHER Annie Leibovitz appears in a videotaped interview accompanying the new Corcoran Gallery of Art exhibition "In Response to Place: Photographs From the Nature Conservancy's Last Great Places." The artist, famous for her portraits of musicians, movie stars and other celebrities taken for such magazines as Rolling Stone and Vanity Fair, is here represented by a group of black-and-white pictures of the Shawangunk Mountains in Upstate New York, not far from the artist's weekend home. One of a dozen contemporary photographers commissioned by the environmental group the Nature Conservancy to shoot an equal number of endangered landscapes around the world dubbed the Last Great Places, Leibovitz speaks on camera of the occupational hazard inherent in this type of assignment:

"Nature is so powerful, so strong," she says, "it's like any time you really attempt to photograph it, 99..9 percent of the time it's going to look like a postcard."

The problem is, she's right.

Those artists who succeed best in this case are those who make the least attempt to capture the appearance of the physical world. Raw, natural beauty is one thing to shoot (and frankly, it is the easiest thing, or rather, a merely technical thing). A lovely photograph of a landscape -- and there are plenty of them here, including Richard Misrach's gorgeous but empty photos of Nevada sand dunes -- you can get on any calendar or box of blank notecards. Art happens when you find yourself standing before an artist's work asking, "Why am I looking at this?"

Hope Sandrow is one such artist. Shooting in Komodo National Park in south central Indonesia (yes, home to a few thousand of those giant monitor lizards who take their name from the volcanic island of Komodo), Sandrow decided to photograph the water, or rather the movement of the water. Partially submerging her camera and allowing herself to be carried by the powerful tidal currents rushing around Komodo and the smaller, surrounding islands, Sandrow has created works that function as much as abstract paintings as photographs.

They swerve, swell, bob and dip. Land masses, when they appear, are distant and often indistinct. Along with the visceral, color-saturated beauty of the images, they possess a sense of loss of control bordering on terror. The water is in charge, not the artist.

Accompanying the pictures, several of which are displayed as polyptychs, are a series of boxes in the dimensions of the so-called Golden Rectangle, a figure whose numerical roots are based in many natural forms. The boxes contain the chalky remains of ground up coral -- a byproduct of blast fishing, a widespread practice in Indonesia that uses dynamite and cyanide to stun but not kill the exotic reef fish whose live capture is prized by restaurants in Hong Kong, Taiwan and mainland China. To further put her work in context, Sandrow has also created "TIME(space) online," a Web site (www.hopesandrow.com) that functions as a kind of visual diary of her trip.

Similarly, those artists who have decided to look at something other than the natural world, or at least to look at it askance, are the ones whose work has the most resonance. Photojournalist Mary Ellen Mark, as is her habit, shoots people, in this case the people of Alaska's Pribilof Islands and Virginia's Eastern Shore. Barely a glimpse of what we think of as nature or landscape is visible in these poignant pictures of schoolchildren, churchgoers and a sad-faced man clutching a stuffed toy ape, but we are reminded that human beings are as much a part of the ecosystem as animals, vegetables and minerals.

Like Mark, Fazal Sheikh also shoots man. But although the Brazilian peasants residing in the Grande Sertao Veredas National Park are shown holding buds and branches (or the axes used to chop them down), it is their disembodied, weathered hands that reveal the evidence of the unseen soil on which they live and work.

William Wegman, of Weimaraner fame, is still shooting his dogs (second generation Battina, Chippy, Chundo and Crooky). The canine models are what you first look at, not Maine's Cobscook Bay. Even when he hides his preternaturally pliant pooches in the grass or camouflages them with pebbles and drapes them with seaweed, or even shoots one dog's arched back as if it were a furry shoreline, it is the photogenic animals our eyes are drawn to and not the countryside. Because we know his shtick so well, we immediately scan the scene for the joke, but it is the ecology that sneaks in slyly while we're laughing.

Of the "straight" landscape photographs, William Christenberry, Lee Friedlander and Sally Mann stand out: Mann, particularly, for the eerie quality of her Mexican shots, photographed through a large-format, turn-of-the-century camera whose antique lens's optical defects give these pastel color images (a rare departure for Mann) the washed-out quality of someone else's dream viewed through the keyhole of a locked door.

Known chiefly for his photographs of aging southern rustic architecture (self-portraits of a sort, he calls them), William Christenberry once again returns to his native Alabama to shoot the Cahaba River and Bibb County Glades. Although there are no buildings in these pictures, they feel, oddly enough, populated by an absence. Like all of his photographic work, there is the ghostly vibration of dead history lurking in every forest and river bed. Christenberry's gift as a photographer is his ability to capture the spirits of ancestors that seem to inhabit and pass through the abandoned vistas he sees.

As he has done with his best-known photographs of urban street life, Friedlander gravitates toward the layered in his shots taken around the San Pedro River of Arizona. Frenetic with gnarled cottonwood branches and dense undergrowth, his photographs are a staticky haze of gray and shadow that only prolonged viewing brings into resolution. But what comes into focus is not so much a pretty picture as a hidden message of perseverance and the power of age.

To go back to the earlier analogy of blank notecards, the art that works here -- the art that forces you to question its purpose in an exhibition about place -- is not that which tells you merely what something looks like. It is that which uses what something looks like (and just as often what something doesn't look like) to tell you something else entirely: something about time and the inexorable tide of change, to be sure; and something about the unreal nature of the real; as well as something about the conflict inherent in our role as custodians-observers-destroyers of all we survey.