

One Life – Several Landscapes: An Appreciation of Robert Adams

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"Over the years I have come to believe... that we live in several landscapes at once, among them the landscape of hope, and that though we must usually focus on what is characteristic of the immediate and troubled present, it is rash to say that other geographies are unimportant or even finally separate.¹" Robert Adams

I.

In Japan, as you probably know, there exists a wonderful and humbling (if not downright paralyzing) designation - that of "living national treasure," a governmental honor that's bestowed on people, rather than things. It occurred to me recently, that if such a distinction existed in this country that the photographer and writer Robert Adams would, by this time, have been nominated for it. His name, I found myself imagining, would have been forwarded on - probably repeatedly - to whatever purgatorial list exists for these wise, gentle old people. Handed on up the chain with great warmth and conviction, until it reached the executive committee (composed no doubt of a few road-weary senators, governmental flacks and with the *eminence grise* of Jesse Helms blathering in the background.) And then ... embarrassed confusion would reign, for the committee to it's relief, after reviewing Adams and his work would decide that: first, the man's simply not old enough. "He's not!" they would exclaim indignantly. (And happily for us all, it's true.) Secondly however, unless they were visually illiterate, which of course could be a real possibility, they would have to recognize that the truths that Adams and his beautiful, barbed photographs tell are finally too unsettling and too persuasive for an environmentally vacuous government to raise to sainthood. For Adams - as insightful and eloquent a photographer as any nation might hope to pray up (armed as he is with the history of literature as well as that of photography) is simply too reasoned, too generous and finally too dangerous to be enshrined. (In all honesty though, it should be pointed out that he's been awarded every honor a photographer might aspire to - NEAs, Guggenheims, a Peer Award and now a MacArthur - but still... I think Jesse and the Freshmen might raise a cloud of toxic dust stamping their feet over national hero status.)

Robert Adams' work has been enormously influential, both to a wide viewing public, and also, perhaps particularly, to photographers of my generation. As I have considered it over the years, the work has always seemed

1. Adams, Robert, *Why People Photograph*, Aperture, New York, 1994. pp. 181-182.

a sustaining and challenging mix of beauty, hope, despair, anger and love. It's clear that Adams cares passionately for the American West, his home and window on the rest of the world—and his struggle for the past thirty years has been to suggest new ways of looking at and thinking about this world—what we have lost and what we might do with the ground that remains with us.

He does this in the most self-effacing ways. Given the charged, swirling atmosphere of land politics in the West, I find the tone Adams sets remarkable. He's no dilettante sitting at a reasoned distance. He is in there in the fray—but the voice he uses is one that both indicts and blesses at once. And it's a voice of complicity—he's hard on himself as well. His work, it seems to me, asks us to notice the remarkable gifts we've been given, to see clearly the mess we've made of them, to stop and consider, and then to emerge, determined to recognize and create a landscape that's worthy of the best in us. Not a simple set of observations or requests, and of course not an easy table to set for others to gather round—simply asking such questions often leads to self-righteousness and defensiveness. But Adams weaves a visual and rhetorical fabric that makes common ground and common sense, and he spreads it for us with unusual grace and humility.

Adams is normally a landscape photographer—despite an anomalous but moving book (*Our Lives and Our Children*) on the people who live near the Rocky Flats nuclear weapons plant—and a landscape photographer primarily of the high plains around his Longmont, Colorado home. But his work also ranges throughout Colorado, Wyoming, Nebraska and the Dakotas, up onto the eastern slope of the Rockies, over the rim, into the Great Basin and out to the West Coast. His photographs are often thought of as spare—though this has always seemed as much a function of geography as compositional choice to me—and they are generally small to mid-sized black-and-white prints. It is work that I believe would be accessible to almost anyone.

On an abstract level, the photographs seem a marriage of formal grace and social engagement, images that singly or in series are capable of producing responses ranging from the most spiritual to the most secular—fully dimensioned truths finally, in which fact and beauty conjoin.

He is the author of fourteen books, most of them published by Aperture. In the past year, he has produced three extraordinary volumes—two of photographs and the third, a collection of essays. Each of these is worth spending time with and each is worth repeated visits. Adams, who holds a doctorate in English and writes as convincingly as anyone in the photographic community, has collected much of his writing from the past few years in *Why People Photograph*, his first book of essays since *Beauty in Photography: Essays in Defense of Traditional Values*, came out in 1981. *Listening to the River: Seasons in the American West*, published in fall 1994, is an extended sequence of Colorado landscapes—interrelating photographs presenting a complex, geographically and seasonally shifting set of panoramas. His third book, *West from the Columbia*, 1995 explores new territory: the land and sea around the mouth of the Columbia River as it surges into the Pacific. All told, these books represent a remarkable year's harvest—and though each was many years in the

making, it's a nice affirmation of the MacArthur Grant, a multi-year fellowship that Adams received a year ago.

(And as we go to press a *fourth* book has come to my attention, *Cottonwoods*, 1994, published by the Smithsonian Institution Press - a recent addition to the *Photographers at Work* series. It is a graceful compilation of thirty of the photographs that Adams has made of cottonwood trees over the years - a body of work that spans from the seventies to the present. The book includes, as well, a revealing interview with Adams in which he discusses his feelings for the West, the mix of environmental and aesthetic concerns that fill his work, and his affection for cottonwood trees: their existence and treatment being symbolic in a way, of all that is best and worst about the West.)

II.

Listening to the River is one of the most enveloping photographic books I have encountered. In it, small black-and-white vertical photographs of commonplace Colorado landscape are grouped - up to six photographs per two-page spread—with the images interrelating first one to another, then page to page. Adams' subtitle is *Seasons in the American West* and in the book, a variety of currents are charted: seasonal, geographic, image to image, page to page, until the book [as one finds oneself rolling, bumping, smoothly gliding, dropping precipitously] becomes a river itself.

And it is aural as well as visual: we hear silence at first, the resonance of the plains, birdsong perhaps, then the rustle of leaves, the slap and rattle of water, wind through grass, branches being pushed back as we make our way through the landscape. It is altogether a sensual book, helped in this respect and others, by William Stafford's fine poems, which contribute to a mix of image and text that moves along smoothly—graceful turns, slow eddies, interesting detours, now and then a surprised trout. One feels the heat bouncing up from a stubbled field, cold feet from slushy snow, gentle spring winds, smells of rain and hot asphalt, the rumble of trucks, the prickle of a milkweed pod on the back of a hand, windsung barbed wire.

And the landscape varies—from open prairie crossroads and fields, to suburban streets and homes, to roadside trash, to foothilled heights and back down to fields and the plain. Up and down, back and forth, our vision shifting from side to side to take in these shifting panoramas.

The sequence begins in what seems to be late summer, goes through a quick fall, into winter and mud season, and then an extended spring and summer. Before *Listening to the River*, I had not often seen Adams use a vertical format and never, to my knowledge a 35mm camera, which is wielded throughout in a bobbing, weaving almost corrective way: the same tree or field or horizon seen from slightly different points—a step to the left, two to the right—a way of photographic seeing that closely approximates the way we actually see. The use of the 35mm camera, with all its easy portability, lends

itself well to the idea behind the book, which in essence is a series of walks in places that Adams knows well.

The book has some of the feeling of *Perfect Times/Perfect Places*, Adam's love poem on the relatively unspoiled Pawnee National Grasslands. But *Listening to the River* includes more: junked up mattresses, kids at rivers, geese flying over suburban streets, cottonwoods just hanging onto life beside developments [certainly an Adams icon]—all the flotsam and jetsam of plains culture, washed up by the roads and rivers.

And each image, as always, is beautifully photographed—not in a way that makes one-dimensional "art" of it: 'Look at the texture in that piece of busted wallboard' say—or 'Look at the shadows on that road' [though the recognition of beauty in the most common places is an important aspect of his work.] Just as importantly, and self-evidently, if you look at the photographs the beauty resides in the structure of each image. It is finally the gentle imposition of care and affection onto a place that has either been used utterly carelessly or has not before been carefully seen that matters most. And as Adams makes his inclusive compositional choices, there is a strange kind of reclamation that occurs—and not just for Adams. Reconfiguring and memorializing something he has loved that has been beaten down, or pointing out a sacramental moment that ordinarily would elude us allows this alchemy to take place for us all. The book is not just plastic bags flapping on fences and it's not all meadowlarks—though it's more plainsong than heavy metal. It is mostly a mix that becomes, when seen in it's riffing order—sad, glorious, open, pathetic, backbone shiveringly beautiful, whole, and in the end, redemptive. It's a great and eye-opening year-long walk. Leaves, pebbles and sand might pour out as the pages are turned.

III.

I find Adams' writing rewarding and useful—and the essays that make up *Why People Photograph*, are a fine introduction. As I have said, Adams writes with a clarity unusual in the art world and with an intelligence that ranges widely—literature, politics, American history, the history of photography and painting, religion, native American culture—all are brought to bear on his feelings about photography and its role in contemporary culture.

Adams' writing is simply clear. He is as careful with his sentences as he is with the composition of his photographs—a true parallel existing between the structure of his writing and that of his visual work: both I think finally set out to reveal in simple and transparent ways the wholeness of a complex idea.

"What Can Help," the first of three sections in the book, is addressed to photographers trying to survive in the art world. The chapter titles are, illuminatingly: "Colleagues," "Humor," "Collectors," "Writing," "Teaching," "Money," and "Dogs". He takes all of these things seriously. It's difficult to survive and do one's work and Adams is like the eloquent coach or teacher you never had quite enough time with—experienced, caring, pissed off, funny, eyes

and mind open, opinionated—able to put into words all the shadowy careerist, ethical questions that plague you—and the equally murky self-serving answers you come up with, everything bumping together at three in the morning as you flop around, waking your spouse, wondering why life dealt you the hand of "art photographer" [a deviant and weirdly coded description from the very start] .

But Adams is charitable and generous—and he has helpful advice. The first two essays in the book I think are illustrative. In "Colleagues," he lines out the qualities that he finds admirable in his photographer friends—traits displayed in his own life and work as well: the ability to make compelling pictures; animation and enthusiasm in relationship to subject matter; the fact that these people don't tempt him to envy (see above); their physical courage in dangerous situations, and their mental courage in withstanding the psychic battering such work often produces; their ability to continue on in the face of possible loss of artistic vision; an ability also to retreat in orderly ways when confronted by impossible odds; and finally their awareness of finality and of their placement in the natural world. All of this describes, if you stop to think about it, a kind, generous and committed group of people. We are reminded of what we have. Not only that we are not alone, but that those we travel with are interesting and, for the most part, well intentioned, kind and courageous people. And we need as much of this sort of thinking in the photo community as we can get.

His essay on humor levels a spotlight on both "funny photographs" and those humorous images that have a staying power beyond the punch line. Adams is famous for his lack of patience with juxtapositional, ironic, "pink flamingo" photography that those "in the know" often produce to exhibit cultural credentials in relationship to others not so knowing—a kind of photography that falsely demeans and momentarily elevates simultaneously.

The best funny photographs he says, "have something in common: We can see in them that the subjects know they are part of a joke, and their awareness excuses us from the discomfort that we might otherwise feel in smiling. The pictures are given to us by all parties, and so invite affections and identification rather than ridicule.²" And in this welcoming idea I think he sums up a general credo—almost a photographic golden rule: Be honest, but be kind. Understand your intentions well and treat your subject matter as you would those you love.

The essays that follow include practical advice on how to deal with collectors; the functions that writing best serves in relationship to photography; the schizoid wonder/black hole quality of teaching; a variety of strategies to deal with money, and the usefulness of dogs, in art and as inspiration for all things. The essays are thoughtful, concise and lived out.

The second section, "Examples of Success," contains critical pieces on a variety of twentieth century photographers. They are wide-ranging and often deal with writing that has accompanied a monograph: an ill-considered biography of Weston say, or Szarkowski and Morris' remarkable job on Atget, or Ansel Adams' less than candid biography. Adams also agonizes over the conflicts between artist and subject matter: Weston dehumanizing his nudes, Strand [to

some extent] photographing to point America away from McCarthyism, Adams lapsing into formulaic response late in life.

The thing that sets the essays apart for me again is tone, and the tone comes from the struggle that Adams has clearly gone through to reach his conclusions. He gives the photographer the benefit of the doubt. He has taken the work in; it has become a part of him and the words that he uses are finally generous, even when damning. Temptations are real; life can change one's vision and when work fails there is understanding. More positively, he is profound with praise when work—such as Strand's *New England*; Szarkowski, Morris and Benson's response to Atget; Susan Meiselas' courageous Latin American photographs or Laura Gilpin's particular gifts move him deeply.

The final section, "Working Conditions" examines issues of land and landscape in the West, in both the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The three essays are a concise and sobering summation of what has happened and what we might do. While his stance is by no means overtly political, the ramifications of his thought certainly are, and the sense of loss he conveys is immediate. Adams knew the West well as a child and the West he knew no longer exists. It is this loss finally that I think most informs and motivates his work.

He speaks a number of times about pain, about it being one of the wellsprings of genuinely positive art—of the necessity of experiencing tragedy in order to create wholeness. And Adams' loss [not to be coy] of an Edenic West, is a personal, as well as national tragedy that has produced a generative set of images, images that set out to reclaim a land that only with time and work, can once again inch towards wholeness.

What else finally is one to do—other than grind away in bitterness at home or move off into exile? The latter being an option that Adams examines closely in Strand's life, and one that he and his wife Kerstin finally reject. His final response, like his work, is both practical and meditative. He mentions a number of concrete measures that might be taken legislatively to recreate the space and stillness that once existed in the West, and he talks of creating a long walk, a pilgrimage of sorts that might be taken in the Plains, a contemplative journey in which thought and the natural world might once again peacefully join.

IV.

Adams' new photographic book, *West from the Columbia*, becomes a kind of benediction, in the same way I think some rivers do as they reach the sea. It is a quiet, cradling book. Not a lullaby—in that it's too awake, and not a waking dream either. It's meditative despite its historical notes, a book of safety, despite the condominiums and remnants of first growth forest represented, a book finally I think, about the beneficence of vast rivers and vast seas.

Adams and his wife Kerstin have vacationed in the Oregon town of Astoria for thirty years, a respite, they say, from the damaged plains and mountains of the interior. And in this time he has not often photographed the coastline. It's clear however, that he has stored up ideas. He knows this world well and the wonder with which he deals with it, I think, reflects his memory of a much less troubled West.

There are a number of new things that he considers in this book—the first being place. While the ocean is, in many ways, similar to the plains, it is also of course, quite different. And while Adams has photographed rivers before—even up to the Missouri, there are few as vast as the Columbia. It's interesting to think of the way he might have photographed the tall grass prairie, say in the eighteenth century with its eight to nine foot stalks and blades, the wind patterns rolling through them like water. In them there might have been an equivalence to ocean waves, to tidal surges, to river water meeting the sea. And in *West From the Columbia*, time, immediate split second time, is consistently organized. One waits for clouds or wind or the sun or weather patterns to be just right inland, but the waves in this book are moving fast, and a new kind of visualization is needed to take them in and to make sense of them within this immensity.

He also returns to innovative ideas he has used in the past: as in *Listening to the River*, a number of spreads contain similar views of the same subject matter, creating wide vistas of river, land and sea; as in a number of images from his retrospective volume, *To Make It Home*, Adams tilts the view camera to emotional and formal effect, creating a canted horizon line that in the panoramas particularly, sends us reeling until we are suddenly balanced in new and surprising ways; and, as in *Summer Nights* —a reverie of his on quiet nights near his Colorado home, work is done again in an edgy but still safe darkness.

The work achieved here has often been technically and physically difficult, yet despite difficulties, an effortless quality remains about the sequence, a quality that swings one into natural rhythms—of waves and rivers, days and nights, shifting sweeps of vision and shifting patterns of weather—from bright mornings to foggy afternoons to comforting nights.

And always the rocking sea and the surging river serve to create a visual music—of foghorn, surf, crying gulls, chugging boats, distant bells, children's voices, and somewhere, deep within the mystery of that fathomed onrushing water, the sound even of whale song.

West From the Columbia acts as a blessing because this river and the Pacific Ocean combine to form one for our continent. And Robert Adams, quite simply, has photographed them with great and transparent skill.

In the beauty of river and ocean, in their never ending strength, and in the natural reconciliation of opposites that they represent, grace and exhilaration are given. Unasked for, absolution can be felt, transgressions may seem absolved—and we are sent back into our world, momentarily redeemed, energized and ready for the difficulties that will always confront us. This book, to the beneficent extent that photography is able, serves to do the same.

Footnote

2. Adams, Robert, *Why People Photograph*, Aperture, New York, 1994. pp.23-24.

Adams, Robert, *Listening to the River: Seasons in the American West*, Aperture, New York, 1994.

Adams, Robert, *Why People Photograph*, Aperture, New York, 1994.

Adams, Robert, *Cottonwoods*, Smithsonian Institution Press, Washington and London, 1994.

Adams, Robert, *West From the Columbia: Views at the River Mouth*, Aperture, New York, 1995.