

From the series, San Quentin Point, 1983



The Western landscape has long been a favorite subject of photographers. In the mid-nineteenth century, Carleton Watkins and Eadweard Muybridge transported heavy and fragile equipment over hazardous terrain to be among the first men to photograph the stunning and still virgin Yosemite Valley of California. Though their primary purpose was documentary, their choices of scene and camera angle stressed the grandeur and majesty of the area.

Lewis Baltz also makes the Western landscape his subject, but his cool approach is closer to Timothy O'Sullivan, another 19th-century photographer, than to Watkins or Muybridge. O'Sullivan traveled with United States survey expeditions making objective, carefully composed photographs of the new Western territories. Like O'Sullivan, Baltz presents the disappearing modern landscape in a spare, documentary style emphasizing maximum clarity. He has been grouped stylistically with other contemporary photographers such as Robert Adams and John Gossage, whose informational approach devoid of emotional overtones has sometimes been called "New Topographics."

If Baltz can be viewed as a spiritual descendant of O'Sullivan, he was equally influenced by contemporary art ideas of the late sixties. He was attracted to the formalist concerns of minimal painters and sculptors, such as Frank Stella and Donald Judd, and also felt an affinity with the new conceptualist attitude toward photography exemplified by such artists

as John Baldessari and Bernd and Hilla Becher. Baldessari uses the camera simply because it is a convenient and expedient medium of expression; the Bechers' photographs are typological documents of water towers and other strictly industrial European structures.

In one of his earliest series, The New Industrial Parks Near Irvine, California (1975), Baltz emphasizes minimalist art qualities of pedestrian architecture. In stark, frontal photographs he explores the relationships of the geometric structural components of the buildings. The photographs also serve as characteristically understated comments on the commercialization of the former Irvine Ranch, one of the largest and most fertile tracts of land in Southern California.

Recognizing the descriptive limitations of the single photographic image, Baltz assembles his photographs in series--the 51 prints in the Industrial Parks portfolio constitute one work whose effect depends on the viewer's cumulative experience of the whole series.

The largest work Baltz has made to date is Park City, a portfolio documenting the development of the nation's largest ski resort in 102 8x10 inch black-and-white prints. Baltz spent over two years on this ambitious project, beginning with shots of the bleak, mine-scarred land and closing with interior views of the shabbily constructed houses and condos awaiting occupation by vacationers. Though Baltz's style is, as always, deadpan, the message is clear. The images speak of a peculiarly

modern attitude toward the landscape--landscape as real estate. (Ed Ruscha dealt with similar ideas in some of his early books, such as Real Estate Opportunities and Nine Swimming Pools.)

During the time Baltz was photographing San Quentin Point (1982-83), it was one of the last undeveloped Bay-front sections of Marin County. (It has since undergone commercial development.) In 59 richly detailed photographs, of which 43 are on view, Baltz depicts the neglected terrain in which leaves, earth, and rocks intermingle with tire tracks, bottles, paper and other debris recording the uncaring human use of the area. Baltz says he was attracted to the site in part because its previous use as a quarry often resulted in confusion between man-made and natural elements. Whereas most of Baltz's earlier work was photographed at eye level to approximate normal viewing, in the majority of the San Quentin Point photographs, he aimed the lens straight down so that the ground fills the frame. The sense of specific place is, therefore, less important than it was in such earlier series as Industrial Parks, Nevada and Park City. In fact, images similar to those in the San Quentin Point series might also be found in other locations. Baltz has stated that here, for the first time, he invites an emotional response and interpretation that goes beyond the facts of the subject matter. The images take on a metaphoric function--the decay, neglect, and entropy depicted in the photographs convey an elegiac mood, a sense of the mortality of all living things.

Baltz was born in 1945 in Newport Beach, California and has lived in Sausalito, California since 1975. He received a B.F.A. from the San Francisco Art Institute in 1969 and an M.F.A. from Claremont Graduate School, California, in 1971. Baltz has been the recipient of two National Endowment for the Arts Fellowships (1973 and 1976) and a John Simon Guggenheim Foundation Fellowship (1976), as well as a U.S.-U.K. Bicentennial Exchange Fellowship in 1980.

In addition to making photographs, Baltz has taught at various California institutions, including Claremont Graduate School, California Institute of the Arts, and UC Riverside. His photographs are in many public collections, among them the Center for Creative Photography, University of Arizona; the La Jolla Museum of Contemporary Art, California; the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York; the Museum of Modern Art, New York; the Philadelphia Museum of Art; and the University Art Museum, UC Berkeley.

Constance Lewallen

Work in MATRIX:

San Quentin Point, 1983, 43 8 x 10" gelatin silver photographs. Collection UAM, anonymous gift in memory of Laurine Howard Cox.

Selected one-person
exhibitions:

Castelli Graphics, NY, '71,
'73, '75, '78, '81, '83;
Corcoran Gallery of Art,
Washington, D.C., '74, '76;
Philadelphia College of Art,
PA, '75, catalogue; Museum of
Fine Arts, Houston, '76;
Grapestake Gallery, S.F.,
'77, '78; Nova Scotia School
of Art & Design, Halifax,
Canada, '79; Werkstatt für
Photographie, Berlin, W.
Germany, '80; San Francisco
Museum of Modern Art, '81.

Selected group exhibitions:

Musée d'Art Moderne de la
Ville de Paris, IX Biennale
de Paris, '75, catalogue;
Baltimore Museum of Art, MD,
14 American Photographers,
'75, traveled, catalogue;
George Eastman House,
Rochester, NY, New
Topographics, '75, traveled,
catalogue; Whitney Museum of
American Art, NY, Biennial,
'77, catalogue; Corcoran
Gallery of Art, Washington,
D.C., Changing Prospects,
'78, traveled, catalogue; The
Museum of Modern Art, NY,
Mirrors and Windows: American
Photography Since 1960, '78,
traveled, catalogue; Corcoran
Gallery of Art, Washington,
D.C., American Images, '79,
traveled, catalogue; Moderna
Museet, Stockholm, Sweden,
Lewis Baltz, Mark Cohen, Eve
Sonneman, '79, traveled;
Museum Moderna Kunst, Vienna,
Photographie als Kunst:
Kunst als Photographie, '80,
traveled, catalogue; The
Oakland Museum, CA, Slices of
Time: California Landscapes
1869-1880 and 1960-1980, '82,
catalogue.

Selected bibliography by the
artist:

The New Industrial Parks
Near Irvine, California.
(New York: Castelli Graphics,
1974.)

Maryland. Essay by Jane
Livingston. (Washington,
D.C.: Corcoran Gallery of
Art, 1976.)

Nevada. (New York:
Castelli Graphics, 1978.)

Park City. Essay by Gus
Blaisdell. (Albuquerque, New
Mexico and New York:
Artspace Press and Castelli
Graphics in association with
Aperture, Inc., 1980.)

Selected bibliography about
the artist (see also
catalogues under
exhibitions):

Davis, Douglas. "Art,"
Newsweek, Dec. 8, '75.

Foote, Nancy. "The
Anti-Photographers,"
Artforum, Sept. '76.

Murray, Joan. "Lewis
Baltz's Formalism," Artweek,
Aug. 27, '77.

Fischer, Hal. "Reviews:
San Francisco," Artforum,
Dec. '78.

Foster, Hal. "Reviews:
New York," Artforum, May '80.

Grundberg, Andy. "Book
Reviews," Art In America, May
'81.

Jeffries, Ian. "Recent
Topographics," Creative
Camera, London, May '81.

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