

**Houston Chronicle** : 'MFAH's new exhibit looks at changing landscapes', by Douglas Britt, July 15th, 2011



## MFAH's new exhibit looks at changing landscapes

By Douglas Britt  
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Ed Ruscha: Courtesy Gagolian Gallery  
Untitled #1 and Untitled #2 (2007-2008)

*Second Nature: Contemporary Landscapes From the MFAH Collection* presents art made since Rachel Carson's 1962 book *Silent Spring* inspired the modern environmental movement.

The work on view at the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, falls roughly into two categories: projects that alter the landscape itself to varying degrees and those that alter landscape imagery through mechanical or digital reproduction.

The first category — most prominently represented by James Turrell's studies for his *Roden Crater* project to transform an extinct volcano into an artwork using light as a medium and Richard Long's *East West Circle*, comprised of stones from a Japanese riverbank — is fairly straightforward. The second category is the one that provides the most memorable — and at times puzzling — moments.

The show makes good use of Ansel Adams, the quintessential American landscape photographer. Made decades apart, his two slightly varying prints, of a 1944 photo, *Winter Sunrise, Sierra Nevada, From Lone Pine, California*, are the exhibit's most senior — and subtle — examples of photographic manipulation.

Adams' 1970 print lightens some of the picture's darkest areas, making them easier to read. Later artists, both photographers and painters such as Mark Tansey, go much further, combining multiple views — sometimes of different landscapes - into a single vista. Mungo Thomson's 2002 *American Desert (for Chuck Jones)* video is an anthology of the famous animator's Road Runner episodes - minus the swift bird and his bumbling nemesis, Wile E. Coyote. They have been digitally removed from Jones' stylized desert, although human activity hasn't. (Whenever a train makes an appearance in the cartoon, the gallery is filled with the sound of its horn and the grinding of its wheels.)

More explicitly, Adams serves as inspiration and foil for younger artists. In Adam Helms' *Undying Glare*, a diorama with a taxidermy buffalo is positioned opposite Helms' monumental charcoal study after Adams' 1944 photo. If, as Adams biographer William Turnage has written, "the places that Adams photographed are, with few exceptions, precisely those wilderness and park areas that have been preserved for all time," you can imagine the buffalo wishing it had found a similarly effective champion.

Some observers may have thought Adams was peddling nostalgia or taking a cue from the Pop artists in 1969 when he allowed Hills Bros. Coffee Inc. to reproduce his *Winter Morning, Yosemite Valley* on one of its cans. But the decision was an earnest move by Adams to spread a pro-environmental message any way he could. And coffee cans were items American consumers were most likely to reuse rather than discard long before "reduce, reuse, recycle" became a popular slogan.

Adams' presence reflects his status as what Turnage calls "the last and defining figure in the romantic tradition of nineteenth-century American landscape painting and photography." But the show lacks a similarly pivotal figure from a more recent tradition of documenting human intervention in the landscape.

True, a number of works refer to land use and its consequences. Along with Thomson's and Helms' pieces, Vernon Fisher's *Movements Among the Dead* (1990), featuring mountains and birds painted in chalklike marks on a blackboard, alludes to ecological fragility in the face of human activity.

And a pair of Ed Ruscha paintings from 2007-2008 lament commercial development's encroachment on once-pristine spaces with uncanny concision and wry humor. Drawing on Ruscha's graphic design background and long-standing practice of using text in his work, *Untitled (#1)* depicts a mountain over which "CO." - the abbreviation for "company" — is superimposed. *Untitled (#2)* gives us the same image, but with a nondescript building blocking much of the view.

I love those Ruscha paintings and hope to see them often when the MFAH gets a new building for modern and contemporary art. But surely an exhibit of post-*Silent Spring* landscape art cries out for Lewis Baltz's seminal 1974 photo series *The New Industrial Parks Near Irvine, California*, which connects minimalist aesthetics with the pre-fabricated environments that were transforming suburban landscapes. The MFAH exhibited the series last year in another collection show. But given its importance, now is hardly too soon to show it again, particularly in a city with its own suburban sprawl.

Also inexplicably absent is Richard Misrach, whose work dramatically records human intervention in the landscape with photographs as beautiful as they are disturbing.

With apologies to Oscar Wilde, to lose one of these crucial figures — both well represented in the MFAH's holdings — from a contemporary landscape show may be regarded as a misfortune; to lose both looks like carelessness.