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## Essay

“Landscape Photography: Cycles of Destruction”

**Abstract:** In this essay, we argue that the landscape photographs in our checklist make sense together as an exhibition because they tell a story of vulnerability as a process of (a) degradation, (b) healing, and (c) scars. Framing our essay as a response to real-world questions, we also argue that these photographs can reshape current understandings of mental health and environmental justice because of how they enable viewers to be dynamic thinkers. In part (a) of vulnerability, we show how the photographs position the viewer to empathize with the land as the land suffers from external damage. In part (b), we show that the photographs respond to degradation as a result of the viewer, who can create the implicit idea of healing through their aesthetic interpretation. In part (c), we show how viewers can respond to the photographs as they currently undergo degradation or healing, which gives them the agency to apply our exhibition themes to the real-world.

In CNN’s advertisement for their 2021 New Year’s Eve special, Andy Cohen and Anderson Cooper sang to a wide audience of Americans that “with a little luck...2021 might not suck.”<sup>1</sup> These lyrics typify the fact that many of us understand 2020 to be a year of unprecedented pain due to the pandemic, racial injustice, and other collective struggles.

Although CNN intended their New Year’s event to be casual and humorous, they nonetheless promulgated a philosophical message by introducing a specific definition of *vulnerability*. The

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<sup>1</sup> @CNNPR. “With a little luck...CNN.” *Twitter*, 18 December 2020, <https://twitter.com/CNNPR/status/1340094680365711362>.

video showcased vulnerability as a kind of impotence—in which people can only rely on “luck,” with the only response to 2020 being that it “sucked.” While we agree with CNN that we should reflect on our past year with emotion and care, we also believe there should be spaces for a more optimistic interpretation of vulnerability.

With this in mind, the questions for our exhibition project are: What do the photographs in our checklist teach us about the concept of *vulnerability*? And how does this definition contribute to the other definitions today? We argue that our photographs make sense together as an exhibition because they represent vulnerability as an ongoing process of *degradation*, the *healing* that follows, and *scars* that the process leaves behind. We also believe this definition is more hopeful than other definitions in popular culture for today’s culture because it galvanizes us to become active and creative agents.

For context, our exhibition includes seven landscape photographs. We chose to focus on this genre because, from a formal standpoint, the photographs can be conceptual and indirect analogues for the viewer as they make the photographs relevant in their own terms. Secondly, in terms of theoretical context, the photographs inherently connect with themes of environmental activism. Our exhibition, then, pursues both aims by showcasing themes of (a) mental health and (b) environmental injustice. The former theme gives viewers the freedom to empathize with the land (i.e., the formal aspect), while the latter shows how we humans can become compassionate spectators of the environment who want to create change (i.e., the theoretical aspect). While it might seem odd to pursue two purposes in one exhibition, we believe this framework can allow our exhibition to be creative. In the words of nature photographer Michael Light, “I want environment documents to...reflect complexity...‘nature porn’ serves a purpose...but it’s not a serious engagement with the environment.”<sup>2</sup> In other words, we don’t

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<sup>2</sup> Smyth, Diane. 2010. “River Deep, Mountain High.” *British Journal of Photography* 157 (April): 30–41. <https://search-ebshost-com.libproxy.scu.edu/login.aspx?direct=true&db=aft&AN=505315674&site=eds-live>, p. 30.

want to provide *one* interpretation but rather to “reflect complexity” by portraying themes that can be analogous to, yet distinct from, each other.

To manifest the process of vulnerability, we organize each photograph to show that they are working in a conversation with each other. The first three photographs represent *degradation*—which we interpret to be an outside force that imposes itself on a subject and thus renders the subject powerless. The Oxford English Dictionary has one definition of vulnerability as the state of being “open to attack,” which, like our definition, implies a relationship between a subject and an outer force.<sup>3</sup> Particularly, we chose the word degradation over, say, ‘destruction,’ because of its accurate emphasis on time. Today’s struggles can feel uniquely gradual due to the lofty goals we face as a society; for example, Dr. Fauci says that we may need to wear masks even in 2022, which could further exacerbate our mental health struggles.<sup>4</sup> In our visual analysis, we believe the photographs call on the viewer to recognize degradation through the photographs’ subjects. *Camp 3 at Lake Powell*, our first photo, represents an “ecological mistake”<sup>5</sup> when a dam in Glen Canyon slowly but surely caused an agglomeration of water from the Colorado River to create Lake Powell.<sup>6</sup> This photograph is a microcosm of Mark Klett’s photographic tradition that “responds to historic images” as the viewer discerns this gradual change—Lake Powell’s 17-year transition that has now eclipsed the surrounding canyons.<sup>7</sup> The second photo, *Desert Fire #77*, similarly refers to environmental destruction. In contrast to the previous photo, the use of color and the close-up camera angle place the fire at the forefront as it seems to move

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<sup>3</sup> “Vulnerable, adj.” *OED Online*, Oxford University Press, December 2020, [www.oed.com/view/Entry/224872](http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/224872). Accessed 22 February 2021.

<sup>4</sup> Money, Luke and Rong-Gong Lin II. “We might need to keep wearing masks into 2022 to defeat COVID-19,” *Los Angeles Times*, 22 February 2021, <https://www.latimes.com/politics/story/2021-02-22/anthony-fauci-2022-mask-use>.

<sup>5</sup> Swensen James R. 2018. “Drowned River: The Death & Rebirth of Glen Canyon on the Colorado, By Mark Klett, Rebecca Solnit, and Byron Wolfe, Santa Fe: Radius, 2018. 212 Pp. Cloth, \$65.00.” *Utah Historical Quarterly* 86 (4): 374–75. doi:10.5406/utahhistquar.86.4.0374.

<sup>6</sup> Swensen, James R. “Drowned River: The Death & Rebirth of Glen Canyon on the Colorado,” *Utah Historical Quarterly*, vol. 88, no. 4, Fall 2018, pp. 374-375. p. 374

<sup>7</sup> Klett, Mark. “Bio.” *MARK KLETT*, <http://www.markklettphotography.com/bio>. Accessed 22 February 2021.

towards the plants in the background. And lastly, for *Taos Land Use Project, New Mexico*, the context places the photograph as part of the FSA New Deal funding for the arts; the photograph, then, aims to depict the drastic effects of the Great Depression on the people and the environment.

As a response to this degradation, we want to show that people can also be vulnerable by admitting their weakness and thereby finding ways to *heal* as agents. These photographs can inspire the viewer to respond to damage—whether it involves helping the environment, asking a friend how they are doing, or participating in self-care by recognizing struggle in their own lives. We extrapolated this aspect of our definition from Brené Brown’s famous TED Talk on vulnerability, in which she says that vulnerable people “let [themselves] be seen.”<sup>8</sup> This definition is deliberately in the passive voice to indicate that there must be a person to create the healing of another person (which could be the agent themselves or, say, a friend.) In *Stone Mother, Pyramid Lake*, there is a narrative context from a traditional story in Paiute culture in which Stone Mother sheds her tears to create Pyramid Lake.<sup>9</sup> Even though the government has now closed the lake to the public due to environmental damage to the stones, the photograph still creates a permanent image of Stone Mother; the viewer, then, can reimagine her through the subject. In *Erosion destroyed hillside, 1/1/1938*, the photograph positions the viewer so they can notice that the land is a hillside and that there is a clear sky above them. A hillside, in general, has land on the other side of the hill beyond the viewer’s direct gaze; and the sky’s tones in juxtaposition with the dark tones reveal a new sense of clarity. These observations of *Erosion destroyed hillside, 1/1/1938* generate a hopeful interpretation that is not obvious but still present.

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<sup>8</sup> Brown, Brené. “The power of vulnerability,” uploaded by TED, 3 June 2011, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iCvmsMzIF7o>. Minute 00:19:16.

<sup>9</sup> “Stone Mother.” Stonemother Story. Time Immemorial. Accessed February 24, 2021. <http://plpt.nsn.us/story.html>.

While we want to promulgate a positive message of hope, we also recognize the inevitable *scars* that document the vulnerability process. This last stage of our exhibition is a *sub specie aeternitatis* view of our exhibition to teach the viewer that degradation and healing are inevitable parts of the vulnerability process. More to the point, our exhibition shows that degradation and healing are not distinct themes but work in conversation with each other. In this part of the exhibition, the viewer gets to decide which of those themes are present in the photo. For example, in Adams' *Yosemite...California*, the subject of the waterfall is a paradox—the white, strong stream only exists because of the eroded rocks—and the viewer can resolve that paradox themselves (whether this is an example of degradation, healing, a combination of the two, or something more complex). In our next photo *Aspens, New Mexico*, Adams shared no narrative behind its creation; he just “stumbled upon” an interesting scene and decided to capture it.<sup>10</sup> The viewer has the freedom, then, to create its meaning. And the composition can be ambiguous. Formally, the white tree stands in the foreground in juxtaposition with the black behind it. It's not clear whether the white tree will be engulfed or whether it is expressing itself proudly because of the black background. For the mission of the de Saisset Museum, this stage can especially advance Jesuit education. For it aims to motivate college students and every other audience member to be critical thinkers and thus use the exhibition to inspire action in their worlds.

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<sup>10</sup> “Aspens, Northern New Mexico, 1958,” *The Ansel Adams Gallery Village Mall*, <https://www.anseladams.com/ansel-adams-aspens-new-mexico/>. Accessed 22 February 2021.

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