

A Burnt Orange Sky: Photography in the Anthropocene

Tyler Stallings

In the mid- to late-twentieth century, landscape photography was characterized by two trajectories. The first, which developed in the first part of the century, depicts nature as primeval, where humans are unseen for the most part, whether seascapes or desert locales. This view was often in service to environmental preservation efforts, epitomized by photographers such as Ansel Adams and Edward Weston. Then, in 1975, a landmark exhibition, *New Topographics: Photographs of a Man-altered Landscape*, dealt with what had been absent in images, hovering just outside the frame—human intervention in the landscape. Instead of transcendental scenery, industrial parks, factories, and urban sprawl came to the foreground. Three of the ten photographers included in that exhibition—Robert Adams, Lewis Baltz, and Joe Deal—are also represented *In the Sunshine of Neglect: Defining Photographs and Radical Experiments in Inland Southern California, 1950 to the Present*.

This essay, *A Burnt Orange Sky: Photography in the Anthropocene*, extends these competing approaches from late-twentieth century photography into the twenty-first century by discussing the photography included *In the Sunshine of Neglect* within the context of the Anthropocene.

This is a new term that the field of geology has been considering for nearly twenty years. Presently, we are still in the Holocene epoch, which started 11,700 years ago as the glaciers of the last ice age receded enabling complex human civilization. However, some geologists have argued that humans now affect the earth more than natural forces. In order to argue for a new epoch, geologists require an environmental golden spike, as they call it, a marker of change, the evidence of which can be found around the globe. In light of their new definition, they focus on the first detonation of a nuclear weapon conducted by the United States Army at 5:29 a.m. on July 16, 1945 as part of the Manhattan Project, also known as Trinity. The blast, along with subsequent ones, spread distinctive radiation around the globe, a clear mark of mankind upon the earth, detectible millennia from now when future archaeologists dig through sediments yet to be.

The majority of the *In Sunshine of Neglect* artists were born in the Anthropocene, that is, after 1945, the year for the Anthropocene's designated golden spike marker. In addition, the preponderance of images from these artists selected by curator Douglas McCulloh present terraforming of the earth on such a scale that the effects of humans will survive through many

eras. In this light, both the artists and their work can be recast as examples of “Anthropocene photography,” a retroactive label based on this newly defined era.

What led up to the atomic bomb, the Anthropocene’s golden spike? It was the human discovery of not only of how to tend a chance-ignited fire, but also how to create fire itself.

The discovery of fire by humans has led to technical marvels from rudimentary metal tools to satellites. It has allowed us to break down the hard fibers of plants and animal meat which improved nourishment to our bodies exponentially. While it increased our warrior strength with better weapons, it also increased our effect upon the earth. We have spread to every land mass, bringing wheels, sundials, gunpowder, trains, automobiles, nuclear weapons, and the internet. It has also brought us closer to cleansing the earth of humans ourselves through the same fire. Human ignition of fire has led to an overriding human imprint on earth, hence, the Anthropocene; and, hence, part of this essay’s title, *A Burnt Orange Sky....*

In Sunshine of Neglect includes several artists who have captured images of fire that embody both the ingenuous human pursuit of it that led to civilization as we still know it, and also images of fire out of control, as a result of our advancement. In effect, the presence of humans also means the presence of fire.

Will Connell’s *Kaiser Steel Mill* and *Kaiser Steel Furnace* (1958) are images that take us back 6,000 years, when humans discovered the necessary temperature for extracting metal from its ore, including silver, iron, and copper. A knowledge of smelting led to hard implements in the Bronze Age when copper and tin were combined, coin currency, and armaments—the ingredients of human progress.

Connell’s factory settings also harken back to the beginnings of the Industrial Revolution in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. It was a time when a real sense of human mastery of the world gained steam literally, with the invention of the steam engine. It was a time when there was both an increase in the production of material products, which improved the lives of many people, and also technological changes that required more of earth’s resources. This process has continued until the present, buttressed with escalating privatization of land and unaccountable corporations and nations.

Twelve years later, in 1970, **Judy Chicago** created some of her first *Snow Atmosphere* prints. These photographs document her site-specific pyrotechnic performance pieces. The works in *In the Sunshine of Neglect* document a performance in the San Antonio Canyon above Claremont where she used smoke-emitting flares to temper the dry, sharp edges of the landscape. For Chicago, her intention was to “feminize” the landscape through her action; made

during a time when men occupied most of the positions of power in both the general culture and in the art world too. But, it was also an action that was emblematic of the rising voice of feminists and women in the art world then, often through performance, working outside the patriarchal structures of galleries and museums. The bottom line is that Chicago highlighted creation and beauty with *Snow Atmospheres*, rather than destruction and utility.

The settings that Connell and Chicago depict are dichotomous, the former destructive and the latter creative. However, the images in of themselves are beautiful in their emphasis on primordial fire and effervescent smoke. In a sense they have taken **Ansel Adams'**, whose work is also in the exhibition, emphasis on an Eden-like quality of nature absent of human presence, and found beauty in human-generated fires.

Perhaps **Richard Misrach's** *Desert Fire #1* (1983) best embodies this notion in *In Sunshine of Neglect*. It is from a portfolio he calls the *Desert Cantos*, in which he has captured the adverse effects that *Homo sapiens* has had on the deserts of the U.S., ranging from environmental degradation to nuclear test sites. The choice of "cantos" is his way of evoking not only the idea of chapter breaks, but also a poetic, literary tradition. In this work, the beauty of an uninhabited desert is presented, underscored by the immersive experience of the large-scale photo, yet there is a fire. Its isolation within the landscape suggests that it could either be controlled burning by humans or a large-scale accident. In spite of the mystery of its source, the work evokes an ominous atmosphere in which humans have abused the western landscape; the region of the country often torn between conservation and extraction of resources as a result of its vastness and much of it being under federal jurisdiction.

Ansel Adams was only fooling himself and us with images that evoked a timeless, virgin wilderness, absent of sightseers. For a very long time, the wilderness has been both used and managed by humans. Today, even where there are few roads, there is management: wildlife is kept to certain population levels, fires are suppressed, non-native species of flora and fauna are removed. Wilderness management exemplifies extraordinary human influence on the landscape.

Yet, in California, despite this management, fires have increased and become more intense and while a few occur naturally, most are started by humans, either by mistake or intentionally. They are intensely hot as a result of a build-up of fuel from both management practices and drought, enhanced by the climate change brought on by humans. Some of the intense destruction and increased cost is due to the urban sprawl of more humans expanding cities and building homes closer to the fuel.

In the Sunshine of Neglect features several photographers who are also photojournalists documenting the fire seasons from Northern and Southern California.

Stuart Palley photographed two fires in the San Bernardino National Forest. *The Etiwanda Fire* (2014) was caused by an escaped illegal campfire, and *Lake Fire Meadow* (2015) is also believed to have been human-caused. They are part of his large-scale collection of California wildfires, *Terra Flamma: Wildfires at Night*. His nighttime work uses long exposures to capture flaming illumination, as if he were tracing the trajectory of stars which have fallen to the ground, as well as the destructive impact on the landscape.

Noah Berger's *Embers From the Blue Cut Fire* (2016) also documents the beauty and tragedy of peripatetic wildfires in the Cajon Pass, San Gabriel Mountains, and Mojave Desert in San Bernardino County. Palley's and Berger's images, when considered collectively, are post-apocalyptic in their increasing familiarity. Such scorched-earth scenes are now becoming part of our visual vocabulary, at least in the West, reinforcing a sense of the Anthropocene being visited upon us, with all its ash-laden forests and fire clouds in the distance.

But humans are not necessarily going to be erased from the landscape. There will just be fewer of them in these areas if the fires continue. **Rachel Bujalski's** photographs featured in *In Sunshine of Neglect* focus on John Hockaday, who has lived off the grid in the Cajon Pass for many years, and has written books that explore the region's history. He had a very close call with the 2016 Blue Cut Fire, the same one documented by Noah Berger. He saved his home by drenching it with water from a garden hose.

Continuing to weave this fiery narrative of a nascent Anthropocene photographic tradition, the survival of Hockaday presents us with an end to a classic narrative found in ancient mythologies and religious tales, often still recounted as if true: fire not only destroys but also purifies. It is a story of renewal, rather than an ending. It brings about change, which will be led by the human survivors (who are, of course, the ones telling these stories of destruction and renewal for their own benefit and hope). Hockaday is a version of the Old Testament Noah, but instead of surviving a cleansing flood, he endured fire.

Perhaps this tale of renewal is best told through the photographic medium. A photograph keeps in the present what was once in the past, both a time and a place. It is this indexical quality that can aid memory and help reinforce and shape our identity.

In this sense, **Christina Fernandez** goes beyond the indexical by overtly collapsing various time periods into a single photographic image that evokes both the landscape and the history that unfolds on it. In Agua Mansa she found a small, abandoned house trailer and documented it over time. Six months into her project, it burned. She composited the different

time periods into one photographic image, *American Trailer* (2018). There is a singular trailer that is intact, once used, now cast-off, viewed at the left, but by the time your eyes have reached the right of the photograph, the trailer is blackened from the soot of the fire that consumed it. She uses the verisimilitude of photography to confound our sense of what is real and not. It is a remembered place rather than a real place.

Constructing photographs in this manner may become the standard as the Anthropocene advances: stitching together fragments left over from fires that cleanse the earth of some of us and show us how our evolution has gone too far.

In the Sunshine of Neglect reinforces what the *New Topographics* artists emphasized, and intuited as more honest, which is the inseparability of humans and nature. We are part of and affect nature simultaneously. The built and managed landscape is nature in the Anthropocene. Instead of images of sublime landscapes that aim to transcend time and place, the human interaction with the landscape takes its place in the foreground. Instead of lava emerging from the core of the earth, spreading over the planet, as it did millions of years ago, we have Kaiser Steel spilling its blazing, metal contents, and we have wildfire. Beauty and harmony can be found still, but there is more for photographers to consider since the Anthropocene's demarcation in 1945 by a radiated mushroom cloud.

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Author Bio

Tyler Stallings' curatorial work focuses on political, social, and popular culture themes. Currently, he is director of Orange Coast College's Frank M. Doyle Arts Pavilion. He was Artistic Director at UCR ARTSblock's Culver Center of the Arts (2007-2017), and was chief curator at Laguna Art Museum (1999-2006). At UCR ARTSblock, he curated or co-curated: *Truthiness: Photography as Sculpture* (2008), *Intelligent Design: Interspecies Art* (2009), *Your Donations Do Our Work: Andrea Bowers and Suzanne Lacy* (2009), *The Great Picture: The World's Largest Photograph & the Legacy Project* (2011), *Margarita Cabrera: Puslo y Martillo (Pulse and Hammer)* (2011), *Lewis deSoto & Erin Neff: Tahquitz* (2012), *Free Enterprise: The Art of CitizenSpace Exploration* (2013), *Mundos Alternos: Art and Science Fiction in the Americas* (2017), and *Yunhee Min & Peter Tolkin: Red Carpet in C* (2018). Other notable exhibitions elsewhere include *CLASS: C presents Ruben Ochoa and Marco Rios: Rigor Motors* (2004), *Whiteness, A Wayward Construction* (2003), *Surf Culture: The Art History of Surfing* (2002), *Desmotherism: Ruben Ortiz Torres* (1998), and *Kara Walker: African't* (1997). At The Doyle, he has organized *Amy Elkins: Photographs of Contemporary Masculinity* (2018), *Elizabeth Turk: ThinkLab .002: Extinct Bird Cages* (2018), and *Stargazers: Intersections of Contemporary Art and Astronomy* (2019). He co-edited the anthology, *Uncontrollable Bodies: Testimonies of Identity and Culture* (Seattle: Bay Press, 1994) and is the author of an essay collection, *Aridtopia: Essays on Art & Culture from Deserts in the Southwest United States* (Blue West Books, 2014). tylerstallings.com



Will Connell, Kaiser Steel Furnace,
Archival Pigment Print, 1950s (being researched)



Will Connell, Kaiser Steel Mill,
Archival Pigment Print, 1950s (being researched)

NOTE: Intended to be paired with Allan Sekula's diptych *Kaiser steel mill being dismantled after sale to Shougang Steel. People's Republic of China. Fontana. California. May and December 1993.*



Judy Chicago, *Snow Atmosphere*,
Archival Pigment Print, 1970, printed 2011



Judy Chicago, *Snow Atmosphere*,
Archival Pigment Print, 1970, printed 2011

These photographs document Judy Chicago's site specific pyrotechnic performance piece titled "Snow Atmosphere." On February 22, 1970, she placed scores of commercial grade, pure white, smoke-emitting flares in the rugged upper reaches of San Antonio Canyon above Claremont. (She had become a licensed fireworks technician to undertake her increasingly ambitious pyrotechnic works.) At a time when the southern California art scene was dominated by men, Chicago's stated aim was to transform, to soften, and, for a short time, to feminize an entire landscape.



Richard Misrach, *Desert Fire #1*
Dye Destruction Print, 1983



Noah Berger, *Embers From the Blue Cut Fire*, Chromogenic Print, 2016



Stuart Palley, *The Etiwanda Fire*
Archival Pigment Print, 2014



Stuart Palley, *Lake Fire Meadow*
Archival Pigment Print, 2015



Rachel Bujalski, John Hockaday on his Porch, Cajon Pass, CA,
Archival Pigment Print, 2018



Rachel Bujalski, John Hockaday in his Living Room, Cajon Pass, CA
Archival Pigment Print, 2018

Rachel Bujalski's photographs of John Hockaday and his property arose from her longterm project photographing Californians who live off the grid.

Hockaday has lived for years in the oldest house in the Cajon Pass, more specifically in narrow side canyon above the Cajon Pass truck scales variously known as Coyote Canyon, East Cajon Canyon, or Crowder Canyon. A former construction worker, Hockaday's become an avid historian of the Cajon Pass. Until the 2016 Blue Cut Fire nearly took his house, he spent several years living off the grid. He managed to save his home using a garden hose. Bujalski summarizes: "At 86, he still lives in his house, content to be in a place he has studied and written two history books about."



Christina Fernandez, *American Trailer*, TBD, 2018

Christina Fernandez repeatedly photographed and rephotographed a particular trailer in a travel trailer wrecking lot in Riverside. (On the banks of the Santa Ana River just two miles downstream from Lewis DeSoto's *Tahualtapa*.) She describes the work as about "the notion of home, aspiration, yearning."

Over the course of the project, the trailer burned. Fernandez then decided to assemble a composite photograph which essentially grades from an intact trailer at left (and interior visible through window), to a burned shell at right.

The version above is not a final image but an incomplete roughed-in mockup.