

Thoughts on Landscape

Collected Writings and Interviews

Frank Gohlke



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TUCSON, ARIZONA

THOUGHTS ON LANDSCAPE Frank Gohlke
www.holartbooks.com/books/a-024.html

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First Edition

Printed in the United States of America

on FSC Mixed Sources certified, 30% PCW recycled paper

Cover image: Frank Gohlke. Near Leominster, Massachusetts,
looking northwest. From *42.30 North: A Line on the Land*, 2002.

Cover design: Andrew Sloat

“Stories in the Dirt, Stories in the Air” by Frank Gohlke, from *Accommodating Nature: The Photographs of Frank Gohlke* by John Rohrbach (Center for American Places and Amon Carter Museum, 2007); and “Measure of Emptiness” by Frank Gohlke, from *Measure of Emptiness: Grain Elevators in the American Landscape* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992). Reprinted by permission of the publishers.

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Library of Congress Control Number: 2009938204

ISBN 978-1-936102-06-8

ISBN 978-1-936102-07-5 (hardcover)

ISBN 978-1-936102-08-2 (ebook bundle)

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#A-020

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A Volatile Core

[1985]

SOME FACTS: ON MAY 18, 1980, Mount St. Helens in the Cascade Range of southwestern Washington state erupted explosively, two months after the first signs that a 123-year period of dormancy was ending. An earthquake caused the weakened north face of the mountain to avalanche into the Toutle River valley, instantaneously releasing the pressure on the upwelling magma below. The result was a lateral blast of incredible force that devastated 230 square miles of commercial timberland, recreational forest, and wilderness. Trees representing one billion board feet of timber were killed where they stood, flattened, or pulverized and blown away. Valleys were filled with debris, rivers were rerouted, old lakes were reshaped and new lakes created. Where before there had been a gleaming symmetrical cone 9700 feet high, there was now a gaping horseshoe-shaped crater whose rim was 1300 feet and whose floor was 3000 feet lower than the old summit. Perhaps two million animals of all species were killed, including sixty-five human beings. During

Article in *Aperture*, no. 98 (1985).

the seven hours of the May 18 eruption the release of energy was estimated to equal one Hiroshima-sized bomb per second.

I have often been attracted to places where very little happened: plowed fields, front yards, quiet intersections; the things that took place in my photographs were non-dramatic, hardly events at all in the common understanding of the word. A tornado or a volcanic eruption is at the other end of the spectrum; these are “real” events, they spawn stories, some of which make the evening news. I have been a latecomer to these events, more of an archeologist than a reporter. My task is to recover the shape of the past event from what I observe in the present. It is often perplexing work. When I photographed the aftermath of a tornado in my hometown in Texas, everything I saw had a single cause, and so I followed the path of inference backward with confidence. At Mount St. Helens, however, individual phenomena often point in many directions at once. The landscape there is a densely layered web of causes and effects, some of natural and some of human origin. When I ask, “What happened here?” I receive many answers, depending on where I am and where I am looking.

Knowing the facts is important, but facts are only part of the story. I have worked at Mount St. Helens in four successive summers, and I think I have a clear grasp of the multitude of physical causes that has created what I see there. My curiosity, however, has not diminished; it has intensified, and encompasses more facets than when I began. I wonder about the human response to natural calamities and what that says about our attitudes toward nature in general; I wonder about my attraction to Mount St. Helens, about what it means to want to photograph there.

Great natural forces regularly rearrange the surface of the earth and the lives of the human beings on it. Our obsession

with those forces is nothing new; our efforts to understand or pacify or render them more predictable motivate both religion and science. Upheavals of the earth, I think, unsettle us more than disturbances of the air and water. We need the earth to be solid and immutable because its substance reminds us of our own. A sudden and enormous alteration of the earth's surface, like the Mount St. Helens eruption, creates an urgent need to know what happened. Facts can help to calm our terrors, but even more important is a story, a framework in which events have logic and time a shape.

American artists and writers of the nineteenth century repeatedly turned to the landscape for subject matter and inspiration because it was the only fact big enough for the stories they had to tell. One could not understand the nation or the century without confronting the immensity of America; it seemed as though no matter how far you went there was always more. It seemed inexhaustible, like time itself. In other ways, too, the landscape and time were bound together: what were the thousands of feet of strata revealed everywhere in the west but frozen time, a stony chronicle of countless millennia. Regardless of one's theories about their origins, the continent's marvels seemed to promise much. Great forces had been at work here over vast spans of time; the greatness of the nation was simply a continuation of those processes in other terms. In such places as the Grand Canyon or Yosemite the present was overwhelmed by the past; and the past, seen as a story of titanic struggles and prodigious births, provided a satisfyingly heroic pattern for the future. Geology was destiny.

Photographers seem to share this propensity to confound the past, present and future. Walker Evans spoke of photographing the present as if it were history, a sort of ocular divination. When a photographer chooses a subject, he or she is

making a claim on the interest and attention of future viewers, a prediction about what will be thought to have been important. (Since photographs now constitute so much of the evidence, such prophecies tend to be self-fulfilling.) Projecting oneself into the future so that one can view the present with more apparent dispassion, and projecting an image of the past onto the future in order to take the measure of the present are of course different strategies. But both are attempts to make the present transparent to a more inclusive and fluid sense of time and consequence.

The last fifteen years have been a period of great vitality in American landscape photography. In the same fifteen years our relationship to the land and to the natural order as a whole has been scrutinized more intensely than at any time since the beginning of this century. The landscape, both the one we have built and what remains of the one that was here before us, has seemed to many artists to be especially rich in hints about where we are as a culture and where we are going. As a photographer, I am committed first of all to the clear description of the view from where I stand. But the choice of where to photograph has implications that go beyond how the picture looks; it is a statement about what it is important to notice.

I photograph at Mount St. Helens because it is the most interesting place I have ever been. So much has happened in a relatively small space and in a brief period of time that everything feels compressed and energized, as if still reverberating from the blast, as if geological and biological processes moved faster under the mountain's influence. My sense of scale is constantly challenged. I look from a tiny fir seedling at my feet, the only green thing within fifty yards, across an endless waste of pumice littered with fragments of basalt blown from the crater four miles away. It takes two hours to pick my way through

two hundred yards of blown-down trees, some as big around as I am tall, and half a day to walk a desolate canyon I have flown through in minutes. Minute rivulets in the volcanic sand braid in exactly the same pattern as that traced by the Toutle River across a bed a quarter-mile wide. At the edge of an enormous mudflow on the south side of the mountain a wall of layered deposits thirty feet high has been exposed; those thirty feet equal 13,000 years of volcanic activity.

But I would be less than candid if I did not admit that one of the many things that has drawn me to Mount St. Helens is the fear (and the fascination engendered by it) that it is an image of our future. Mount St. Helens is the only place on the continent where one can *see* so clearly the effects of forces comparable in scale to those produced by nuclear weapons. My experience there over several years has allowed me to feel, with a visceral immediacy unobtainable from words or images, the magnitude of the danger we face. This is sobering, but it has not led to terror or despair, because nature's powers of generation and regeneration are everywhere in evidence and every bit as awesome as its powers of destruction. In ways I cannot entirely account for, it has strengthened my own capacity for hope. We may yet find the wisdom to discard our suicidal arsenals and the atavisms they serve. Time, and our own actions, will tell.

Thoughts on Landscape

[1995]

AFFECTION FOR THE LAND RUNS deep in us, and its manifestations—from the garden plot to the national parks—encompass a vast range of human actions and choices. At what point in the history of our species, I wonder, did the watchful, anxious regard for our surroundings, on which survival depended, begin to modulate toward love of a particular place? There must be an Other before there can be love; Eden becomes the object of our desire only after we are cast out. The best landscape images, whatever their medium and whatever other emotions they may evoke, are predicated on that loss. They propose the possibility of an intimate connection with a world to which we have access only through our eyes, a promise containing its own denial. In the case of landscape photographs, the paradox is sharpened because the world represented must have existed

Article in *Landscape Journal* 14, no. 1 (spring 1995). A earlier version of this essay was published in *Landscapes from the Middle of the World: Photographs 1972–1987* by Frank Gohlke (Friends of Photography and Museum of Contemporary Photography, 1988).

for the picture to be made, and yet the existence of the photograph attests undeniably to that world's disappearance.

Culture creates a gulf between people and the world they inhabit. Some human groups experience this rupture as a problem and expend enormous amounts of energy in their attempts to heal it. Americans have been noticeably divided on the necessity, even the desirability, of a harmonious relationship with the natural world; but when we do attempt to establish a connection with larger realities, photographs of unspoiled Nature frequently play a central, almost devotional role. It is an odd choice of tools: the making of a photograph presupposes distance, which accounts, I think, for the elegiac tone, the note of longing that suffuses so many of the finest landscape photographs. I admire those pictures most that acknowledge our predicament without causing us to lose heart, just as I am most touched by those places where damage and grace are inextricably entangled. Photographs bear witness to the facts, be they visible or existential, and it is a fact that our relationship with the natural world is a troubled one that can never be otherwise under the present cultural dispensation.

The photographs in this selection witness to many different sorts of facts, but first of all to the fact that I was moved in very particular ways by what I was seeing at the time. As different as these places are from one another, they have at least one thing in common: being there made my pulse speed up, and the making of a picture seemed the only appropriate response. I don't always love the places I photograph, in the sense that I love places that we associate with outdoor pleasures. But the particularities of things never fail to draw me in. For a moment all my vagrant impulses are gathered together, and whatever sense I can make of the experience is crystallized in the photograph.

Approached attentively, any place may persuade us to linger in an attempt to locate the source of its attraction. What we discover often comes to us in the form of a story. Landscapes are collections of stories, only fragments of which are visible at any one time. In linking the fragments, unearthing the connections among them, we create the landscape anew. A landscape whose story is known is harder to dismiss, harder to treat like a neutral matrix of interchangeable parts. For all the obvious, vast differences between ourselves and the aboriginal walker, singing the world into existence at every moment, there is still some sense of kinship. At its best, telling the landscape's story can still feel like a sacred task.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Frank Gohlke has been awarded two Guggenheim Fellowships and two fellowships from the National Endowment for the Arts. His work has been shown internationally and is included in the permanent collections of the Museum of Modern Art, the Art Institute of Chicago, the Victoria and Albert Museum, and the Bibliothèque Nationale. Born in Texas, Gohlke received his BA in English Literature from the University of Texas at Austin. At Yale University, where he received his MA in English in 1966, Gohlke met Walker Evans and then studied privately with photographer Paul Caponigro. Gohlke has taught at Massachusetts College of Art, and the universities of Harvard, Princeton and Yale. He is now Laureate Professor of Photography at the University of Arizona and Senior Research Fellow at the Center for Creative Photography, in Tucson, Arizona.

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