"In the Sunshine of Neglect" Reveals Inland Empire's Many Facets

Christopher Michno | March 7, 2019

For nearly a decade, Douglas McCulloh has been looking at how artists working in photographic media have portrayed Southern California’s inland valleys. He’s been tossing images — hundreds of them — into a folder on his laptop and thinking about the freedom that can be found making art at the edge. The result of that research, which started as a germ of an idea three laptops ago, is the ambitious double venue exhibition he curated at the UCR ARTS California Museum of Photography and the Riverside Art Museum titled “In the Sunshine of Neglect.”

The exhibition of 193 works by 54 artists, made from 1950 to the present, is a condensed portrait of a region that orients toward Los Angeles, but is on the periphery — both part and apart from its proximate metropolis. “It’s an area where [people say], ‘Oh, I drive through there on the way to Palm Springs,’” McCulloh quips. He writes in the lead essay of the exhibition catalog that it “occupies the margin between two mythical landscapes of the American West — the wide open spaces of the Basin and Range and the strange dream of Los Angeles.”
Tomas McGovern, "Untitled," 2008-2012, from the series "People in Cars" | Courtesy of the artist

In the Sunshine of Neglect

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In the exhibition title and his essay, McCulloh calls the area Inland Southern California rather than using the more familiar yet amorphous Inland Empire designation. “People have insanely wide definitions of [Inland Empire],” he observes, “and to some extent, it carries different baggage. I don’t know if it’s true or not, but it’s a very specific label.”

He defines the region geographically as the vast area of contiguous valleys nestled below the San Gabriel and San Bernardino mountains. It extends from Pomona, through San Bernardino, and out to the San Gorgonio Pass, and then pushes south, funneling between the Santa Ana and San Jacinto ranges, which cordon it from Orange County and the Salton Sea on either side, to finally end at the Temescal Mountains.

McCulloh also includes Arrowhead, Big Bear and a bit of high and low desert, just above the Cajon Pass, and out into Palm Springs. “There’s such a historic connection between Hesperia, Victorville and Apple Valley with this other inland valley area,” he clarifies. “The same is true for the San Gorgonio Pass. But once you’re down to the Salton Sea, you’re in a different zone. You’re really into desert as opposed to Palm Springs, which has a linkage.”
The photographs in the exhibition reveal an Anthropocene-scarred landscape. “They invariably point out,” says McCulloh “that this is a colonized place.” A remnant citrus grove, seen in Chelsea Mosher’s “The Orange Blossom,” refers to a recent past that, in isolated instances, has resisted the sprawl of subdivisions. Robert Adams cataloged this shift in land use in his photo “New Development on former citrus-growing estate, Highland, California.” The Los Angeles region’s commercial citrus groves, of course, point to two earlier periods of colonization, when the Spanish planted orange groves in the missions in the early 1800s, and later when citrus dominated large tracts starting in the late 19th Century.
Sant Khalsa’s “CalPortland Cement Plant, Remains of Slover Mountain, formerly known as Catalmacay and Cerrito Solo (Lone Hill), Colton” alludes to the long sweep of history, referencing one of the Native names for a regional mountain that has in the modern era been topped and carved for use as aggregate.

Adams’ “Development Road, San Timoteo Canyon, Redlands, California” also addresses relentless development, recording the trace of construction traffic along the foothills, and Herb Quick’s late 1980s photographs reveal bedroom community construction in full swing, with grading equipment and newly trenched sewer lines. Laurie Brown’s “Recent Terrains #7” and “Recent Terrains #,” taken from the vantage of a fully graded subdivision, with views of the foothills in the distance, echo these concerns.

“The photography that occurred around here after 1970, and certainly after 1973, ‘74 and ‘75, starts to follow the trend of the post-New Topographics photographers,” McCulloh explains. It’s one reason you won’t find an “iconographic” depiction of a landmark, whether one of the peaks that rim these valleys or, as McCulloh notes in his essay, some monument to culture that stands indexically for place, analogous to something like the Hollywood sign. “It’s far more incisive and interested in critique, instead of the wonders of the landscape. It explores place with a hard eye. A lot of the work concentrates on that. If there’s a place in the U.S where you want to go out and explore and find New Topographics views, it’s got to be this area,” says McCulloh.

Three of the exhibition’s artists — Robert Adams, Lewis Baltz and Joe Deal — were included in the seminal 1975 New Topographics exhibition. A fourth, Judy Fiskin, whose works run parallel to Ed Ruscha’s use of photography as a conceptual tool and the new approach to landscape photography signaled by New Topographics, was considered for New Topographics, but ultimately was not part of that earlier show. Fiskin’s small 5 x 7 inch photographs are taken from her 1974 series, “35 Views of San Bernardino,” and include shots of unadorned tract homes, apartment buildings, grocery stores, local businesses, and finally, a landscape. “Sunshine of Neglect” liberally reflects the orientation toward photographing actual uses of land, as seen in New Topographics, rather than constructing an idealized vision of landscape as a pristine Arcadian paradise. It is an unsentimental, though not to say unfeeling, record of the built environment as it affected the land, the natural environment and the way we live.

Stories of people and communities come from a generation of photographers once, and even twice removed from New Topographics, yet there is a strand of common DNA that has morphed. The documentary inflection remains and, with these more recent works, the show veers even more directly into exploring the economics, the sociology and the personal stories associated with place. Thomas McGovern acknowledged in an email admiration for “the deadpan, documentary style” of New Topographics work. His “People in Cars” series
captures a parade of restored and tricked out muscle cars and vintage rides with people leaning out windows, strutting their stuff. His work combines documentary with genuine affection: “All my projects have been about something close to me, either emotionally or by proximity.”

Two selections from McGovern’s series “Swap Meet: This is San Bernardino” are also in the exhibition. It includes, says McGovern, pictures of “vendors, shoppers, arrangement of goods and even the stains and markings on the asphalt parking lot.” McCulloh calls the series, which the artist developed over a five-year period, “a deep engagement.” The two photos that are part of “Sunshine of Neglect,” McGovern says, feature tarps that swap meet vendors have put up around their booths, either for privacy, shade or to separate their stall from the next vendor. “The tarps are often stained or torn, and I found them to be beautiful. The stains remind me of the thousands of people who have visited the place and left their marks.”
Aashanique Wilson’s works move the documentary impulse in an autobiographical direction, with group of four untitled photos. McCulloh writes in the catalog that these depict a traditionally African American neighborhood in Rubidoux that was “an oasis in the artist's otherwise tumultuous upbringing.” One of the houses was the residence of Wilson's great-grandmother Juanita Powell, who was well-known as a civil rights pioneer in the area. Wilson’s slightly askew photos, with the ground tilting forward or to side, throw the scene off balance. A fallen mailbox, a rusted shipping container, an abandoned car with the mountains in the distance — these scenes inflect documentary with wistful reflection.

McCulloh’s own “Dream Street” series exposes the economics of the housing boom and its reliance on and exploitation of low-wage labor, in the city of Bloomington before the housing market went belly up. In a charity event, he won the right to name a street in a housing development. Despite the dystopian aspects of the project, “the name Dream Street was chosen,” McCulloh says,
“not because it's ironic but because it's wide open.” It took 8 or 9 months just to come up with Dream Street. “I had lists of the dumbest names ever. Dream Street was finally picked out of the tradition of surrealism, where dreams are beyond your control. They can be wondrous, or they can be nightmares. They can go in all directions.” After the bust, he reports, “there were repos up and down Dream Street. It doesn't get much more dystopian than that—people reaching for the dream, in some fashion, and through no fault of their own, losing it.”

Laurie Brown, "Recent Terrains" | Courtesy of the artist In the Sunshine of Neglect

Other photographers like Noah Berger, Sant Khalsa, Stuart Palley, Joel Sternfeld and Andrew K. Thompson take on the disasters of fire, flood and earthquake in a region that is prone to all three. Some of the most compelling landscapes in the exhibition come from geologist turned photographer John S. Shelton, who photographed from the air with a large format aerial reconnaissance camera to produce remarkably detailed landscapes. His works were eventually published in a 1966 book titled “Geology Illustrated.” These capture large scale topographical features and contextualize human intervention within geologic time.

For McCulloh, “In the Sunshine of Neglect” turns on the notion that abundant freedom can be found in benign neglect. The works in the exhibition reveal relentless exploration of the region and its stories. As McCulloh notes, “a huge number of people have found it really interesting and open and a great place to operate for art.” Paradoxically, “Sunshine” also offers a kind of index of failed dreams alongside the yearning for freedom; dreams of an idyllic suburban life and tidy notions of success are countered by the one-two punch of the early run-up of subdivisions, as reflected in the photographs of Herb Quick and Laurie Brown, and the economic collapse, referenced in McCulloh’s “Dream Street.” Yet the exhibition wears its optimism alongside its clear-sightedness, presenting moments of sublimity beside bitter sweet ruminations.
Top Image: Robbert Flick, "EV_Willow131217a" | Courtesy of the artist

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