

BEYOND NOLA

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Ansel Adams

ANSEL ADAMS AND THE RHAPSODIZED LAND

Ansel Adams was the quintessential naturalist. He was obsessed with the study, embrace and conservation of the natural environment—most notably the vast wilderness of the American West. At every stage of his long life—he lived to 82—nature motivated him and, in turn, he did all he could to insure its safe constancy.

What is remarkable, and somewhat troubling to certain observers, is that he did this not only through his position in the Sierra Club, or as an eloquent wilderness spokesman, but also through his art. As a photographer, Adams—47 of whose works were recently on display at the New Orleans Museum of Art—was one of the few artists in history whose work proved capable of effecting significant change in public opinion. The political artist's dream was his reality. Perhaps unwittingly, perhaps not, he used his pictures as benign propaganda. And to amazing success. There is little dispute today that those gorgeous, symphonic landscapes, so expertly printed, played a real part in the advance of 20th-century environmentalism. We can only thank him for the acres and acres of unharmed land whose worth he compelled us to see.

But what of Adams' art itself? Does it have the intellectual depth, the emotional subtlety, the richness of great art? Or is it merely a virtuosic display, a series of picture postcards embarrassingly glamorized for our easy pleasure—in a word, eye-candy for the motives of conservation? The issue is hotly

debated. Those lined up against Adams are usually the art professionals—artists and critics. To the wider public, his works are revered almost as icons, magical evocations of the spiritual sway of open spaces.

In a single provocative quote, Adams himself both clarifies and intensifies the argument. He spoke of “art as something almost religious in quality.” That has the ring of 19th-century nature-as-deity philosophy. But he continues with a familiar sentiment from early in our own era: “I exist only for the quality of art in relation to itself... without any other motivation.” What initially sounds contradictory here is only partly so. Adams’ religion, arguably, is the “religion of modernism,” the belief in the irreducible purity of art—art conceived, produced and celebrated for its own sake. What he failed to mention is his extending that doctrine to include his consuming ardor of the wilds.

He made the connection later. In an address to a college audience, he expounded on “the true power of art to counteract the destruction of natural and cultural beauty.” Clearly, he saw no problem in this marriage of pure art and activism, and indeed there should not be. But there is a problem when that marriage provides us with little more than those two. And that is what we see in prints that made him famous. For Adams, the idea of pure art is the idea of virtuosity, of stunning technical feat. He is unsurpassed in this. He learned well from photography masters like Paul Strand and Edward Weston, but where their work is contained and poetic, his is typically full of gesture and bombast, the grand sweep.

This ties neatly with his conversation efforts. The prints are excruciatingly accessible. In most instances, he gave us exquisite wilderness that was not there, a wilderness of his and our reverie. By way of his own technical prowess, his famous zone system of manipulating value, Adams was not only able to de-

sign space and light masterfully; he also underscored the lovely and undermined the unlovely, the reality.

It's an old story, with roots in America's brand of romantic painting. In the last century, artists such as Frederick Church and Thomas Cole also contrived to rhapsodize the landscape. They, too, presented us with a freshly polished America, something appropriate for our patriotic needs, but woefully lacking in aesthetic challenge. In photography, in this century, such rhapsodizing seemed to be natural with the advent of color photography. Eliot Porter, who haunted much the same territory as Adams, is a prime example. Before him, the Grand Canyon never looked so splendid. But Adams worked with venerable black and white, and it took special effort—the zone system—to achieve his results.

But this is a corollary of excess. His techniques have served others remarkably well. And there are moments in his own expansive oeuvre where the sumptuousness is kept under wraps. It is fortunate that the NOMA show includes some. These are mostly lesser-known prints, often requiring more concentration than familiar pieces like *Moonrise*, not included here. In certain prints, the landscape is in clear layers, “zones” of dark and light, but they are so subtle that we are drawn into them not in search of idyllic beauty, but rather of some compelling enigma of the land.

Equally compelling is Adams' *Saguaro Cactus*, which rises like a monument in the center of its format. If we must confer “iconic” on his work, then this is where it is most fitting—where he is direct, forceful, but without inordinate control.

—Terrington Calas, 1992