



Still Life

In the landscapes of photographer Joan Myers, times past are indelibly present.

BY JACK FISCHER



25 mph

THERE ARE A FEW artists for whom wandering Antarctica might be considered the next logical step on a career path. Joan Myers is one.

For more than 25 years, Myers, '66, MA '67, has practiced landscape photography, deploying medium-format cameras to make exquisite images that explore the relationship between people and the land. What better place to capture that exchange at its most elemental than the southern tip of the planet?

An exhibit of her photographs of Antarctica will open at the Smithsonian's National Museum of Natural History in Washington, D.C., this December and then tour the country. They represent the photographer's sixth major body of work since she took up the medium in the 1970s. The photographs—richly detailed, warmly toned and unsentimental—rank among the best made of that ferocious continent and the people who cling to it.

They're also a bit of a departure for Myers in that they are not, at least yet, paired with text in book form. The Tesuque, N. M.-based Myers usually publishes her projects with



Consequences

extensive text by a writer of her choosing. These aren't conventional pairings where words serve to explain or introduce the photographs, or vice versa. Think, rather, of the form's exemplar, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, the lyrical exploration of tenant farmers in the American South by photographer Walker Evans and writer James Agee. Text and photographs do not so much explain or even refer to each other as create a complement.

Over the years, Myers has used the method to explore the legendary Santa Fe Trail, which carried a generation westward early in the 19th century; the medieval Christian pilgrimage route to Santiago de Compostela in Spain; the remains of all 10 of the Japanese-American internment camps created in the 1940s; and the polluted and abused Salton Sea in Southern California. She also has revisited the work of Depression-era photographer Russell Lee: his photo-essay of the life of a homesteader and her family in Pie Town, N.M.



Salton Sea Birds

Although Myers is not a household name, her photographs are well regarded by cognoscenti and have a place in the collections of the Museum of Modern Art, the National Gallery of Art, the George Eastman House and regional museums throughout the country.

Martha A. Sandweiss, a professor of American studies and history at Amherst College, writes extensively about women artists of the American West. She considers Myers an heir to Laura Gilpin, an early-20th-century photographer of the Southwest. Landscape photography is, of course, a venerable tradition, exemplified by such great practitioners as Carlton Watkins in the 19th century

and Ansel Adams in the 20th. But men still dominate the field, typically focusing more on the grandeur of the land than on humans' relation to it. Gilpin sought the human element there. In pursuing Gilpin's legacy, Sandweiss writes, Myers has "developed a new tradition for the genre."

She was born in 1944 in Des Moines, Iowa, the daughter of a geneticist father and lawyer mother, and, although she is loath to admit it, the paternal granddaughter of Henry Wallace, the legendary progressive and Franklin D. Roosevelt's second vice president. Myers's reticence is not for lack of pride in her famous forebear, but from reluctance to draw unwarranted attention. Most photographers prefer anonymity to do their work and she is no exception.

The world may have known Wallace for his politics, but his granddaughter knew him primarily as a scientist. Henry Wallace, too, was a geneticist, inventing one of the first hybridized corns and starting the Pioneer Seed Company to sell it.

Myers had a vague desire to follow in her family's scientific footsteps, a notion she pursued in her first two years at Stanford. But, like her grandfather, Myers was interested in many things. Her inclination to study science gave way to an interest in performing and studying Renaissance and baroque music. She had finished two degrees in musicology and was in the middle of her doctorate when, she says, "I looked up and said, 'What am I doing? I don't want to be an academic!'"



S Bay Yacht Club Pool (Salton Sea)

In a faltering marriage and with two young sons in tow, Myers moved to Los Angeles and wondered 'what next?' She soon found it in photography courses at the University of Southern California, where she studied with curator and photographer Leland Rice and with the avant-garde photographer Robert Heinecken.

The medium clicked for Myers. "Science deals with the real world," she explains over lunch in a country store near her Tesuque home and studio, where she lives with her second husband, the recently retired head of the state's arts council. "And music offered self-expression. But photography brought them both together. That's what I love: you're dealing with the real world, but from your own place."



Manzanar, Calif. (Entry Station)

Myers wandered Los Angeles, often with her kids along, making pictures without a larger

plan. she photographed blades of grass pushing through seemingly endless slabs of cement. She posed models in apartments and in the desert to make self-consciously arty nudes.

But much of what would characterize her later work was there from the first. She favored a medium-format camera for the detail its negatives offer, and handmade platinum prints, whose warmth and subtle tonal range was then unmatched. A student of photographic history, she dabbled in alternative processes that involved painting on the surface of an image to alter it. To this day, careful scrutiny of one of her lushly made prints will reveal subtle emendations with watercolors to define a horizon or give dimensionality to a rock. She loves the work of Paul Caponigro and Paul Strand, both of whom, while not strictly speaking landscape photographers, relished fine, subtly printed images at the nexus of humanity and the natural world.



Paintbrush



Toy Car

By the late 1970s Myers decided that a world of cement was no place to raise young boys and moved to Tesuque. New Mexico proved a serendipitous choice. Few places offer as palpable a sense of the primeval interaction between humans and the land.

Myers's mature work began abruptly with an NEA grant to work on a Museum of New Mexico project surveying the state. Myers selected the Santa Fe Trail as her subject. Unsatisfied with stopping at the border, she spent the next few years following the meandering twin ruts in the dirt to their source in Missouri, making pictures all the while.

Her "Boone's Lick, Missouri, 1983" is typical of the best of them. A massive, dark oval rock, rubbed smooth (by the passengers of wagon trains?), lies mysteriously in the foreground of woodlands, a cosmic egg of a rock. In the surface of that rock, with its intimations of untold hands that touched it before pushing west, is the essence of Myers's relationship to her photographic subjects. Capturing a visual record of the lingering, ghostly presence of long-gone individuals fascinates her. In the worn rocks and rutted trails—even the folly of the Salton Sea, where human intervention proved environmentally ruinous—the implied tenacity and striving of the human animal gives her images their special charge.



Doll

"Photography is great at giving a tactile sense of someone's presence," she says. "You say 'internment camp' and show a worn flyswatter, and people make up a story in their heads. There's nothing like it."

When the time came to decide what to do with all the Santa Fe Trail pictures, Myers turned to New Mexico's leading expert on the trail, Marc Simmons, and asked if he'd be interested in collaborating on a book. Simmons offered a personal essay rich in historical information that feels neither formal nor pop. And a working method was born.

Along with the texts of another writer and of Myers herself, Simmons also weighed in on the next project, a recapitulation of the Christian pilgrimage route to Santiago



San Miguel, NM

in Spain. Her other projects also employed some variation of this visual-literary pas de deux.

Antarctica is a departure for Myers in many ways: her first use of a digital camera, her first published color work, her first ink-jet prints. It may also become the first in which Myers primarily tells her own tale. She kept extensive diaries of the journeys, available in preliminary form at her website, www.joanmyers.com.

Some photographers love to shoot, but hate to print. For others, the darkroom is heaven. Myers seems to be that

rare practitioner who loves almost all facets of the process. "I really enjoy the research part of it—learning about the place, the history," she says. "And I enjoy editing photographs. Picking what's important." But all the research and slogging of equipment is a preamble to what really seems to transfix her—the moment of creation. "All that Stanford education is gone when I go out and shoot photographs," she says. "It's all gone. Time dissolves. It's still magic."

The subtle format of the books—neither fish nor fowl and likely a book retailer's despair—may have cost Myers in recognition as, probably, has her refusal to define herself as either a documentary photographer or a fine-art photographer. Typical is her comment about the work on the Salton Sea: "A lot of people liked that work. Maybe I made it too pretty." Nor has she published that Holy Grail for most photographers, a monograph surveying her best work. She seems resolutely on the cusp, surviving on grants and spending years on a single project, more intent on satisfying her dispassionate curiosity than pleasing an audience.



Hornillos, Spain



Antarctica

What's next for Myers? The Antarctica work will preoccupy her for a time. There's the traveling show to prepare for, and probably a book in the offing. She also continues to mull what to do with an earlier, very different body of work that she did between other projects: a series of nudes of women over 50. The work caused an immediate stir when she showed it in the Santa Fe gallery that represents her—so much so that, unnerved by all the attention and attendant cultural politics, she put it aside. It remains unpublished, but not forgotten.

Whatever she does, Myers's photographs will offer what the photographer herself does when

you meet her, a curious, unaffected intelligence. That quality has given her work its distinctive place. The viewer cannot entirely escape from the reality she depicts into the art, nor from the art into the reality.

She would have it no other way.

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