

## The human wilderness

Francis Hodgson MARCH 26, 2006

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Robert Adams won the Deutsche Börse photography prize last week. There is nothing in the least wrong with that. It is good when these prizes recognise proper talent, and Adams has been a brilliant photographer for many years. He has also been one of the finest writers on photography, and a splendid teacher and inspiration to a generation. Contemporary photography covers some of the ground it covers because of Robert Adams.

Adams, who was born in 1937, came to prominence in *The New Topographics*, a hugely influential 1975 exhibition at George Eastman House in Rochester, New York. William Jenkins, who curated it, gave that exhibition the subtitle *Photographs of a Man-altered Landscape*, which pretty much spells it out. Adams was included along with a crowd of photo-graphers whose reputation has never really dipped since: Bernd and Hilla Becher, Stephen Shore, Nicholas Nixon and Lewis Baltz. Joe Deal was included, too, a wonderful photographer whose star faded a little since, but is rising fast again now. This is pretty heady company.

The notion of a man-altered landscape was not new: in a small cramped country such as England, for example, the landscape was known to be a palimpsest of alterations. W.G. Hoskins' great *Making of the English Landscape*, the book that first popularised the notion that the landscape could be interpreted to reveal the successive acts of interference that had made it, was published in 1955. But in the US it was possible for a different tradition to take the upper hand. Typified by the great romantic Ansel Adams, and drawing on a tradition of 19th-century landscape photographers in search of the American Sublime – such as Carleton Watkins and Eadweard Muybridge – this was a photography that consciously sought to remind man of his puniness in the face of the magnificence of nature.

The New Topographers turned their backs on all that, and it was Robert Adams who most coherently put the case in writing: “Our discouragement in the presence of beauty results, surely, from the way we have damaged the country, from what appears to be our inability now to stop, and from the fact that few of us can any longer hope to own a piece of undisturbed land. Which is to say that what bothers us about primordial beauty is that it is no longer characteristic. Unspoiled places sadden us because they are, in an important sense, no longer true.”

Adams took as his 19th-century mentors a different set of pioneer photographers, the profoundly practical and unromantic professional surveyors who accompanied the military expeditions to define borders and routes. These men photographed in straight lines across country, and they cut down what was in their way. Robert Adams learnt from them to photograph “damaged country”, and many eminent photographers, such as Richard Misrach in the US or Nigel Shafran in the UK (whose magnificent set of urban trees is too little known), have followed him there. The staple of landscape photography now is to photograph that interference with the land. It is right to remember how original that once was.

So the prize jury has made a welcome acknowledgment of a distinguished and influential career. The only fly in the ointment is that the prize is supposed to be awarded for a specific piece of work shown or published in the past year, not for a whole “oeuvre”, and that unfortunately the set of pictures in question are some way short of Adams’ best. *Turning Back: A Photographic Journal of Re-exploration* was shown at Haus der Kunst in Munich in 2005. It is a quiet set examining the deforestation of part of the north-western US. Adams’ trademark understatement is much in evidence. The scenes are un-shrill, the tonal range in the prints very moderate. And the pictures are, by today’s ridiculous standards, refreshingly small. Yet the cumulative effect is powerful.

A pair of pictures, with the lens slightly shifted from one to the next, show how very deliberate these seemingly natural compositions are. In a picture (simply entitled “Harvey, Oregon”) a pair of poplars press close together for mutual support. That’s all. The captions are gently eco-minded, and the truth to Adams’ own manifesto, of looking at the landscape with saddened shame, is very plain. It is a nice series, and a fairly representative one, but not quite a great prize-winning set.

Adams, who was for many years a professor of English, makes one literary allusion. A caption asks us to bear in mind the journals of Lewis and Clark, the pioneer explorers of the route to the American west. One of the other short-listed photographers, Alec Soth, another American photographer much younger than Robert Adams, and to some extent his follower, has made a series (first shown at the Open Eye in Liverpool) called *Sleeping by the Mississippi*. This, which touches on similar subject matter in the creeping dereliction of a landscape that means less to people than it once did, is done in a much more self-consciously literary way.

The pictures are bigger, and in colour, and stylistically fully positioned in the great line called New Colour Documentary. Soth likes to deal in allusion of a very formal kind. He shows us Charles Lindbergh's boyhood bed, as knackered as all the other abandoned beds in Soth's show, but jammed in a sky-blue corner so that the young Lindbergh is shown to have had no choice but to dream of the skies. Johnny Cash's boyhood home was always a shack, but now it's a shack with a satellite dish.

Soth deals in absences, but with masterly presence of his own. A picture called "Cape Girardeau, Mississippi" shows a grimy wall, split by a dado. Above the line, the faded colour shows where a little collection of stars (as in stars and stripes or as in Christmas?) has gone, extinguished. Below the line is fake pine cladding in vinyl. A postcard remains, a sepia version of a standard American-wilderness view of a steep wooded canyon, with the single bruisingly ironic word "folklore" from a newspaper headline. This is good stuff, and very close to Robert Adams in spirit.

Another picture, "Sugar's, Davenport, Iowa", plays the same melody in a different register. A hideous chair padded in fake Aubusson is in the corner of a room, above a clashing carpet of equally ornate sub-Gobelins pretension. The window is hermetically sealed, with

the last layer a pathetically fringed shade patched with duct tape. The walls are a rich, bright, sickly green.

On the floor lies an abandoned copy of Hustler, its utility seemingly over. Its headline? "Aids and priests". Lots of these pictures of Soth's bear close examination of this kind. He wants us to unravel allusions, and he wants the whole effect to be very literary.

Soth is hardly a new discovery: he is in his way as much a validated artist as the already much-garlanded Robert Adams. His gallery is Gagosian, which tells you all you need to know about how established he is. Robert Adams is very far from lucky to have won the Deutsche Börse Prize. He has earned it. But all the same, Alec Soth is a fraction unlucky not to have won it

*The Deutsche Börse Prize is at the Photographers' Gallery, London, until April 22.*

Tel 20 7831 1772