Imaging a Shattering Earth, Contemporary Photography and the Environmental Debate, National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa, June 27-October 13, 2008

John K. Grande
Imaging a Shattering Earth
Contemporary Photography and the Environmental Debate
National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa
June 27–October 13, 2008

A more timely exhibition of photography there never was. And with a shock-prime
title such as Imaging a Shattering Earth: Contemporary Photography and the Environmental
Debate, one is put on edge from the begin­ning. Although the bias in the photographs
is toward documentary and old-style landscape, the record of humanity’s disruption,
manipulation, and despoiling of these landscapes is disturbing for its ongoing, ever-
evolving and almost surreal persis­tence. While documenting nature and the land
has been part of the photographer’s role since its inception, many of these works
focus on landscapes in transition, and, more interestingly on landscapes that are
forever beautiful with or without pollution. Indeed, a push-and-pull between aesthetics and information characterizes many of these works.

Certain photographers’ works are brought into a more public viewing through this show. John Ganis’s images of landfill sites in Michigan and Oklahoma are seemingly
innocent in their traditional presentation, yet they presage the further expansion on
this subject by Toronto’s Ed Burtynsky and California’s David Maisel. Similarly, Emmet
Gowin’s Aeration Pond, Toxic Water Treatment Facility, Pine Bluff, Arkansas (1989) is toxic
culture at its most unsettling. We see a bath full of forms floating like some hydra
in waiting.

Among noteworthy surprises in this exhibi­tion are the posed photos by Robert and
Shana Parke Harrison, which have a wit and humour that gets the message across
without grinding you down. Their images are performance enactments that recall
German Dieter Appelt’s set-up structures, but without the solemn gravity and narrow
aesthetic confinement. The Guardian has
Robert dressed in a formal suit, wearing
wings made of branches, and perched on
two precarious tree legs; in another photo­graph he is in mid-air, held to Earth by a
giant fish hook while trying to harness the clouds. There’s hope in those clouds, and
the tonality of these photos carries a documen­tary historical cadence.

Emmet Gowin’s photographs are also fas­cinating. The aerial view Off Road Traffic Pat­tern along the Northwest Shore of Great Salt Lake, Utah (1998) is, to all intents and pur­poses, a collaborative land-art work enacted
by many vehicles. The image effectively
communicates our impact on the land yet is
an interesting land-scaled photograph.
Gowin’s aerial view Weapon Disposal Trenches, Tooele Army Depot, Utah (1991) is almost like an art brut artwork. The engineered inci­sions in the landscape operate as markings
and look as primitive as the Lascaux cave
paintings! David Maisel’s The Lake Project (2001–02) photographs are like those
microcosmic images we see in biology
books, and equally interesting. (See Ciel variable 76, pp. 14–17 for an interview with
David Maisel.)

Other photographs in Imaging a Shattering Earth document the resource industries’
incursions on a more pristine nature. In
John Ganis’s Alaska Pipeline, North of Valdez, Alaska (2001), we see a pipe disappear,
snake-like, under the muskeg. Jonathan

Robert Parke Harrison and Shana Parke Harrison
Reclamation 2003, from the series Reclamation, 2003, photograph

Long documents the ageing of landscapes as the lasting effects of pollution eventually
come to form the look of the land. A series of trees – broken stumps – standing in
a seemingly endless and mercurial
swamp of unnamed and polluted orange
liquid says it all. Ed Burtynsky, who has
more recently been investigating northern
Alberta’s oil sands, as economies of scale
work on what was once nature to turn it
into toxic sludge and scraped landscapes
empty of topsoil, has a strong image from
China’s Three Gorges Dam project on the
Yangtze River. Winnipeg-based David
MacMillan’s photographs of abandoned
classrooms in the Ukraine near Chernobyl
offer some idea of what is still there long
after the exodus. The way weather has
worked on peeling wall paint and a portrait
of Lenin at Pripyat School, and the way an
entire classroom has remained untouched
– curtains, toys, and shelving still in place
– are reminiscent of scenes in Nevil Shute’s
post-atomic novel On the Beach (1957).

David T. Hanson’s Wasteland series brings
together maps, aerial views, and govern­ment reports presenting toxic landscapes
in the United States

Given the immensity of this subject and
the range of approaches taken by the photo­
graphers contributing to this exhibition,
it is surprising how small the selection of
works actually is. It would have broadened
our understanding to include Canadian
photographers’ works, such as Thaddeus
Holownia’s Pipeline series, Bob del Tredici’s
Nuclear Map of Canada series, and Roy
Arden’s more urban works, to name a few.
Nevertheless, this show, orchestrated by
Martha Hanna (director of the Canadian
Museum of Contemporary Photography)
and curated by Claude Baillargeon (of Oak­
land University, California), proves that
photography can play an active role in
heightening our awareness of social and
ecological issues.

John Grande’s recent books include Dialogues in Diversity: Art from Marginal to Mainstream (www.paripublishing.com) and Art Al­
sorts: Writings on Art & Artists (www.lulu.com). In the summer of 2008, he curated two international ephemeral-art exhibitions at the Royal

David McMillan, Roof Sign in Basketball Court, Pripyat, Ukraine 1998, from the series The Chernobyl Exclusion Zone, 1994, chromogenic print, collection of the artist

John Ganis, Alaska Pipeline, North of Valdez, Alaska, 2001, from the series Consuming the American Landscape, 1984–2003, chromogenic print