

Work in Progress

Mark Adams

York St John University, UK
adams_2001uk@yahoo.co.uk

Copyright©2023 Mark Adams. This text may be archived and redistributed both in electronic form and in hard copy, provided that the author and journal are properly cited and no fee is charged, in accordance with our Creative Commons Licence.

'It is traditional in urban societies to see nature as a lost paradise. Yet, nature is indifferent to any kind of ethics or esthetics. Nature thrives to survive and develop wherever it can. In contrast, artifacts wither and decay, they can only survive when maintained and repaired.' (Danchin, 2000)

Questions addressed in this project are concerned with issues of photographic representation and the ways in which, through extended walks with a camera, the medium might reflect upon the problematic coexistence of nature and a cultural progressive drive towards limitless manufacturing within the context of the broader geo-political issues that affect the planet. Specifically, the images respond to problems such as the human exploitation of natural resources, urban expansion and our reliance on fossil fuels in an era in which climate change is threatening our existence.

This short series of photographs explore a small area of the gulf coastline in the USA by looking at transitional sites where natural topographies are transformed into luxury housing developments. The site represented in these images is built largely for access by automobile. Quasi-colonial architectural developments on the shore of Galveston Island refer to the architectural history of this specific region and serve as an expanded commentary on the landscape's past and present, within the context of an aspirational western culture.

According to recent assessments on the impact of human activity on natural eco systems, areas such as the Gulf of Mexico are listed as being vulnerable geographical areas in the United States of America as a result of climate change. Therefore, while this area is under threat, it is also being developed as a utopian lifestyle sustained by industrial activity, potentially leading to its own demise. Many of the houses featured here are raised on stilts as a way of avoiding rising sea levels and potential flooding, yet they give rise to fantasies and illusions of a better life. Here, pragmatic solutions offered by architectural design infer symbolic readings of utopian aspirations through photographic representation.

The industry surrounding the site is a petroleum-refining and petrochemical-manufacturing centre, with high levels of pollution. The cause and effect of industrial activity, land use and environmental damage converge in these images. Here, photography acts as a palimpsest, merging and rewriting past, present and anticipated futures. The transitional nature of the topography (the emphasis on ground and soil) is juxtaposed with an idyllic blue sky as a further symbol of aspiration.

The project's methodology looks slowly and closely at the land through the detailed vision of photography. The camera as a prosthesis for human perception was famously discussed by Walter Benjamin (2025) in relation to his theories of the optical unconscious. Benjamin's theory discusses the act of photography as an activity which reveals experience beyond the capabilities of the naked eye. For example, an image in this series depicts an unfinished road, alluding to one of the many by-products of manufacturing processes, chemical pollution and excessive car use through the discoloured horizon across the landscape.

Certain images in this series focus on soil, a form of ground that, in a pictorial sense, provides compositional stability. However, the descriptive narrative aims are quite different. The precarious nature of the architecture suggests the opposite of stability and suggests a metaphors for imbalanced relationships between exploitation of natural resources and our disregard for a balanced ecosystem.

Theorist Marc Auge discusses the importance of soil frequently, referring to 'an indigenous fantasy of a society anchored since time immemorial in the permanence of intact soil outside which nothing is really understandable' (1995, p. 44). The soil in these photographic images is polluted, disturbed and in transition; the result of commercial developers drive towards a utopian ideal. The result is a form of temporary wilderness, a hostile topography.

In his book 'Non Places', Marc Auge states 'place is defined as relational, historical and concerned with identity,' (1995, p. 77) whereas space, or non-place, is the opposite of this: undefined, ambiguous and transitory and yet to be formed. The terrain pictured here might be regarded as closer to the latter, an unresolved space. Yet this landscape contains traces of the past through which its natural topography and plant life progress, yet it promises a future that will largely be determined by growth, expansion and reliance on the surrounding industries to sustain it. My intention is that the flora pictured here may be read as seeds of hope, juxtaposed with a rather bleak expectation for the future of the planet.

By making extended photographic walks on foot, my aim is largely to authenticate contemporary concerns about the environment through an embodied multi-sensory, lived experience. Threats to the environment from over development and pollution are contemplated through slow analytical observation of details through camera optics (consciously and unconsciously) reading the environment as a palimpsest.



Land Development Site #01, Galveston, Texas, USA. Photographic Chromogenic Print of newly planted palmtrees on construction site on the island of Galveston, Texas (Edition of 50). 16x20 inches



Land Development Site #03, Galveston, Texas, USA. Photographic Chromogenic Print of housing construction site on the island of Galveston, Texas (Edition of 50). 7.5x7.5 inches



Land Development Site #05, Galveston, Texas, USA. Photographic Chromogenic Print of housing construction site on the island of Galveston, Texas looking north towards the smog from the city of Houston. (Edition of 50). 16x20 inches



Land Development Site #04, Galveston, Texas, USA
Photographic Chromogenic Print of luxury house on a construction site on the island of Galveston, Texas (Edition of 50). 7.5x7.5 inches



Land Development Site #02, Galveston, Texas, USA. Photographic Chromogenic Print of a luxury house on a housing construction site on the island of Galveston, Texas. (Edition of 50). 16x20 inches

References

Auge, M. 1995. *Non-places – Introduction to an anthropology of supermodernity*. London: Verso.

Benjamin, W. 2015. *On Photography*. London: Reaktion Books.

Danchin, A. 2000. *Nature & Artifice. Sociology & Epistemology*, at <https://www.normalesup.org/~adanchin/causeries/Nature.html> (last accessed 18 December 2023).

Mark Adams is a photographer and academic whose practice and research is concerned with landscape representation as a means of investigating the cultural forces which impact the environment. His large format landscape photographs are made during extended walks, which focus on the disregarded, indeterminate and transitory spaces with a recurring focus on post-industrial legacies. Adams' methodology exploits photography's empirical and suggestive qualities and the inherent tensions between indexicality and allegory in modes of photographic representation. Over the past 20 years Adams has exhibited in the United States,

Europe and the UK. He published '*Peregrinus [Bede's Walk]*' walk in 2020 a publication, which is part map, part photo book that explores parallels between the flâneur and the ancient notion of the pilgrimage as allegorical journey. His work appears in various journals such as *Next Level*, *Der Greif Magazine* and recently in the American landscape publication '*Observations in the Ordinary*'. He is Course Leader of Photography at York St John University and currently lives in North Tyneside.