Invisible Green

Amanda Sauer
Virginia Commonwealth University

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INVISIBLE GREEN

A Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Masters of Fine Arts at Virginia Commonwealth University.

by

AMANDA SAUER
Master of Fine Arts, Virginia Commonwealth University, 2007
Bachelor of Arts, Cornell University, 2000

Director: PAUL THULIN
COMMITTEE CHAIR, PHOTOGRAPHY AND FILM

Virginia Commonwealth University
Richmond, Virginia
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Abstract

INVISIBLE GREEN

By Amanda Sauer, MFA

A Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Masters of Fine Arts at Virginia Commonwealth University.

Virginia Commonwealth University, 2007.

Major Director: Paul Thulin.
Committee Chair, Department of Photography/Film.

How is nature conceived today, a generation into the environmental movement? Many contemporary artists grapple with how to reconcile our inheritance of both a precarious natural world and the culture that created it. My work investigates the subtle intricacies of our relationship with nature. I use photography to develop a way of seeing that points to the often-unnoticed nature in front of us. In particular, my work recognizes and re-imagines nature’s deep connections in the context of our ecologically changed world.
THE LENS AND MIRROR OF NATURE

Interviewer: “Why are you drawn to trees again and again in your photographs?”

Robert Adams: “Trees smell good, feel good, sound good, and look good. And as if that weren’t enough, they point beyond themselves.”

Nature is the long-lost origin of all human culture. Its first glimmers can be traced back to the crude tools our Paleolithic ancestors created from the natural resources at their disposal. By bettering their ability to survive in nature, these tools improved nutritional resources that in turn supported larger brains, longer lifespans, and larger communities.

At some controversial moment, primitive man started to think abstractly and began to create a language system based on concepts, rituals, myths, and community ethics that form the basis of human culture. Building upon the ideas and discoveries of each successive generation, culture has continually distanced itself from its roots in nature. Today the drive to survive in the wild has been supplanted by infinite layers of human culture that remove direct interaction with the natural world from much of daily life. Contemporary culture permeates everything so pervasively that it is impossible to define, locate, or avoid – even in the most remote ecosystems on the planet.

Yet we still turn to nature in search of a primary experience, for a perceived escape from culture and the ills of society, for inspiration and meditation, and for physical solitude. The contemporary desire to “reconnect” to nature is a strong cultural response to
many of the anxieties of our time, including the imperiled state of the natural environment, the overwhelming complexity of the information age, and the perceived powerlessness of the individual in a globalized world. Despite this impulse, the “healing wilderness is as much the product of culture’s craving and culture’s framing as any other imagined garden,” existing only in our collective imagination.¹

Culture prescribes the way we use and live in nature; hence the natural world reflects our personal desires and imaginations, as well as those of society as a whole. The landscape functions as both a mirror and a lens, revealing our inhabited space as well as ourselves as its shaper and occupier.² This is particularly true when photographed, as the landscape is dislocated from place and becomes a universal image that can be read metaphorically. As such, each landscape photograph contains clues and reveals ideas about the complex systems that shape not only the land but also our culture and ourselves. The nexus of my work is the exploration of the invisible continuum between humans and the natural world.

NATURE’S CULTURE

Landscapes are culture before they are nature; constructions of the imagination projected onto wood and water and rock. – Simon Schama

According to Terry Eagleton, the idea of “nature” is perhaps the most difficult concept to define (second only to “culture”). Beliefs about the “nature of nature” and Man’s place within it have continually evolved over history and vary greatly by cultural regions. Conceptions of nature are deeply rooted in history of art and reflect the prevailing ideas of their time.

Classical Asian landscapes grew out of philosophical and religious beliefs about the journey of life and the interconnectedness of all beings. Gods and spirits live within all entities in the natural world, including inanimate objects. Because a human cannot exist outside of the web of nature, figures in oriental landscapes are integrated and harmonious with the overall compositions, no more the subject than a rock or bush.

Historical Western landscapes, though influenced by oriental art, espouse a fundamentally different perspective. In Christianity, man holds a privileged position over the earth and its creatures, as inscribed in the bible. Nature is primarily seen as the creation and evidence of a God who exists outside of its realm. These ideas are reflected in landscapes that emphasize the power of natural forces as allegories for God’s omnipotence.

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over man, or alternatively, in the peaceful pastoral scenes emphasizing man’s stewardship of God’s gifts.

In the 19th century United States, ideas of the landscape became imbued with nationalist concerns. Coinciding perfectly with the tide of manifest destiny sweeping the American West, the magnificence of the American landscape offered a new cultural temple to counter European art and architecture. As the West was conquered and the U.S. gained confidence in its cultural importance, ideas of landscape in art shifted towards the healing powers of nature and its role as a sanctuary from industrialized society’s ills. The founding fathers of environmentalism, Henry David Thoreau and John Muir, declared, “In wildness is the preservation of the world,” inspiring generations of transcendental artists.5

However, the same cultural forces that challenged modernism hit at the very foundations of this lineage of landscape art: namely, the belief in a “truth” to be discovered, uncovered, or revealed through art – especially through an image of nature. Instead new art movements (pop, minimalism, and Fluxus) questioned the overall role of art in society, with particular skepticism directed towards art’s supposed transcendental powers.

At the same time, a growing environmental movement changed the way society saw its relationship to nature. Historically, society viewed nature as awesome and dangerous, a force humans needed to be protected from; yet this perception changed to nature as fragile and precious, something that humans need to protect. The polluted air and

water became further proof that the progress towards utopia, as promised by modernism, had failed.

In the 1970’s, photographers began pushing the boundaries of landscape art by including suburban housing developments, strip malls, ecological disasters, nuclear power plants, tourists, as well as nature, in their photographs. The “New Topographics” show in 1975 asserted a new vision of human/nature relations that was dramatically different from Ansel Adams’ romantic vistas that came before.

How is nature conceived now, a generation into the environmental movement?

The towering forests, pristine mountains, teeming rivers, and endless prairies of our cultural lore no longer exist. Today’s wilderness is a network of suburban parks, vacant lots, remote areas protected by law, zoos, hiking trails, farmlands, and roof gardens. Yet there is much wildness in this contemporary wilderness, with nature’s pervasiveness enmeshed in all the footprints of human activity. Notice the chickadees living in the bird food aisle at Home Depot, the oak saplings planted in the flowerpot by a squirrel, or the unruly weeds infesting a neighbor’s lawn. Nature has not vanished but rather relocated, continually adapting and changing in response to human interventions. The important question then becomes, what is the future of this nature and is it a future that we want?

Today’s view of nature is saturated with an overwhelming sense of loss and a looming fear about an uncertain future. Many contemporary artists grapple with how to reconcile our inheritance of both a precarious natural world and the culture that created it. The enormity and complexity of global ecological issues have driven artists to various responses, ranging from engaging in activism, education, and awareness campaigns, to
creating artworks about these ideas, to re-inventing cultural norms and our interactions with the natural world.

My work investigates the subtle intricacies of our relationship with nature. I use photography to develop a way of seeing that points to the often-unnoticed nature in front of us. In particular, my work recognizes and re-imagines nature’s deep connections in the context of our ecologically changed world.

*Historic Tree, 2007.*
TRASHBAG MYTHOLOGIES

What we need are new “creation myths” to repair the damage done by our recklessly mechanical abuse of nature and to restore the balance between man and the rest of the organisms with which he shares the planet. – Max Oelschlaeger

Man has long looked to nature to explain our origins, the universe, and death. From these ideas he has developed the belief systems that support human culture. Henry David Thoreau readily acknowledged that myth could supply a library of nature’s memory commensurate with nature’s raw power and beauty. The Flora and Fauna is a screen onto which we project our thoughts and imagination, often to escape into fantasy. This serves an important function, as the imagination makes reality bearable. Indeed there is a “native capacity and desire for illusion that lurks in us all.” Yet our deepest cultural traditions are rooted to a nature that no longer survives.

How are myths created from our new “nature” – one that includes pollution, altered landscapes, and inescapable human influence?

Much of my work explores this question, and through photography I seamlessly blend the living with the inanimate, the real with the image, and the natural with the artificial. I am most interested in images that suggest imagined interpretations, confusing reality with fantasy and asserting the impossibility of separating the human from nature. In

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such photographs, a willing viewer is given just enough “evidence” to read invisible ideas into the work.

In the book *fishtales*, I use sequenced photographs that often contain illusions to create an imagined reality. In the images below, floating trash becomes a swan, a fish flies, and a discarded plastic bag mimics a cloud. Yet in this suburban fairytale birds cannot fly, little girls are frozen in time, and a hidden tension underlies the undefined narrative.

*fishtales* begins and ends with two images that reflect the desire for, but impossibility of, escape into a fantasy realm. The first image in the book (below left) shows a woman waving from a window, which upon close inspection is revealed as a photograph inside of a photograph. As she addresses us, electric blue light pours in from an unidentified source, suggesting perhaps an alien abduction or portal into another dimension. The book concludes with an image of intense beauty that evokes enchantment and magic (below right). However this image is also an illusion, a reflection acting as a mirage that overlays visual seduction with the impossibility of fantasy.
My more recent work explores myths in the context of today’s natural environment. Ancient concepts of paradise depict utopian gardens as an escape from the ruthless realities of nature and for the transcendence of death. *Paradise Bird* and *Trashghost*, below, recreate these myths of paradise and death using artificial flowers, trash, and kitschy objects set amidst the flora of an urban park. However unlike the original myths about the death of humans, these photographs suggest the death of nature. Manmade and staged elements are blended with the natural and found to point to the cultural construction of such myths and the ever-present human influence in today’s experience of nature.
Paradise Bird, 2007

Trashghost, 2007
The photograph below embodies the image of idealized nature that is reproduced on countless postcards, calendars, and Thomas Kinkade-style oil paintings. *Paradise in Rain* is used in sequence with *Paradise Bird* and *Trashghost* (above) to point to this cultural construct as another myth of nature while simultaneously seducing the viewer with a nostalgic image of beauty.
ANOTHER SILENT SPRING

Making a home for ourselves in nature is the forever unfinished work of our species...the only thing we have to preserve nature with is culture; the only thing we have to preserve wildness is domesticity. – Wendell Berry

The current state of the natural environment is an intriguing (albeit depressing) study in human nature. My most recent work focuses on human interventions that attempt to restore the local environment or improve a particular problem. Often these actions, which are intended to help, merely mask, displace, or even compound the problem they attempt to address. In some cases, small successes are overshadowed by larger issues with no readily available solutions. For example, a reforestation project in a local park offers occasion for optimism, but also marks the presence of deforestation (see Reforestation Project below). Each green tube is both a protector of future trees and a gravestone for trees cut down in the past. By showing reforestation, this photograph reminds us that the enduring systems of deforestation are alive and well outside of the photograph’s frame.

Visually, my photographs often blur the boundaries between the ailment and the remedy, the “natural” and the human, and the real and the photographic. Such inseparable elements are symbolic of the macro environmental issues facing the planet, where it is difficult or impossible to untangle the roots of the problem. In spite of these issues, the
images are still beautiful and speak to a lineage of landscape art that is aesthetically pleasing and accessible to many audiences.\[^8\]

\[^8\] In particular, this work references the classic landscape compositions of Japanese woodcuts, American survey photographers and the Hudson School of painters.
Birdhouse, 2007

Half-blind, 2006
The sedge is wither'd from the lake, And no birds sing. – John Keats

Rachel Carson’s book *Silent Spring* is widely credited with starting the current environmental movement in western countries. The 1962 novel describes the detrimental effects of pesticides on wildlife and humans, particularly the chemical DDT on birds. The title *Silent Spring* refers to an imagined future without birdsong because the birds have all died from pesticides. A generation after *Silent Spring* this frightening prospect has been avoided through a ban on DDT, but instead we face the uncertainties of climate change and numerous other local and global environmental problems.

My thesis show brings together my explorations of the intricate connections between nature and culture. The exhibition includes nine large format photographs and the book *fishtales* on a backless park bench. Together, the photographs surround the viewer and create an environment that intentionally complicates and confuses the sometimes subtle, sometimes overt layers of human interference in the landscape. The park bench invites the viewer to sit in this silent, photographic garden and to open the book, a suburban park fairytale. In contrast to looking out at the landscape images referencing external ideas, the book draws the viewer inward by using nature as the playground of the imagination.

I do not have any grand conclusions, explanations, or solutions to propose through my work. Instead, I strive to create a nuanced visual experience that reveals the complexities, fears, and desires of our relationship with nature. From my observations and creations, I hope to show a new glimpse of the vast nature around us that might otherwise go unnoticed.
Literature Cited


VITA

Amanda Sauer was born in Salt Lake City in 1977. The oldest of three sisters, she grew up in the diverse landscapes of Utah, New Hampshire, Maine and Maryland. She has won several grants, awards, residencies, and commissions, including a Young Artist Grant from the D.C. Commission on the Arts and Humanities, and has exhibited in numerous group shows, including the 2005 WPA\Corcoran Options Biennial.

In 2000, Amanda received a Bachelors of Art in Economics from Cornell University and began her career as a researcher and writer for the World Resources Institute, an environmental non-profit organization in Washington D.C. The author or co-authored of six research reports and five articles in peer-reviewed journals, Amanda has been interviewed on NPR’s Marketplace, quoted in the NY Times and Wall Street Journal, and her research has been cited in The Economist, the International Herald Tribune, the Financial Times and Al Gore’s climate change presentation and movie, *An Inconvenient Truth*.

Amanda will receive her Masters in Fine Arts in Photography and Film from Virginia Commonwealth University in May 2007. She looks forward to many adventures and challenges as she embarks on a new life with her boyfriend after graduation.