

PHOTOGRAPHY REVIEW; Everyman Tries to Save the Earth, One Image at a Time

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Although human beings depend on the land for life itself, European painters did not put landscape at the center of the program for many centuries. The land as artists saw it was mainly background or the site of seasonal chores and pleasures. Not until the 16th century, when Northern European painters inserted small holy figures into enormous wildernesses, did landscape even begin to become the real subject of painting.

After that the land played various roles in art: as a setting for morally edifying episodes, a symbol of order or of the awe and terror inherent in nature, a sign of the immanence of the deity, evidence of human ability to triumph over nature, even a relatively simple document of the world's beauty.

Thus the land was an almost infinitely malleable theme. But only in the last third of the 20th century did the entire Earth become a major subject: the way that human beings were treating it and its current condition. Photographers were the chief exponents of the new theme of the state of Earth itself, which they could only represent piecemeal, with images of specific sites. They tended to lament, sometimes adding accusations when humans treated the planet particularly badly.

Robert ParkeHarrison, 12 of whose large photographs are on view at Bonni Benrubi Gallery in a show called "Robert ParkeHarrison: Earth Elegies," takes a different tack. He comes down on the side of lamentation but expresses it with an unusual combination of poetic license, laboriously constructed props and a wry and melancholy, vaguely allusive sense of myth.

He appears in every picture, in a black suit and white shirt with no tie, a kind of Everyman or a minor employee of the universe, patiently, dutifully doing a job that's too big for him. That job is essentially to take care of a devastated Earth with inadequate equipment.

He works or performs obscure rituals in large and empty landscapes beneath gray skies. There appears to be no one home on Earth but the black-suited fellow, making his rounds on a schedule devised by Samuel Beckett. Perhaps nuclear meltdown has occurred, though you might expect rage and desperation then, if your mind has been honed on films like "Mad Max" and "Blade Runner." More likely clear-cutting, strip mining and global warming have done in this land. The man in the photographs is tender and sad and protective.

He has also been pushed back into some vaguely 19th-century time zone. The photographs are printed from paper negatives, a technique that echoes photography's beginnings. Varnished and mounted on large wooden blocks, they have been made in several stages, frequently with more than one negative and with some elements discreetly painted in and any visible seams painted out.

The skies (usually canvas backdrops) are dappled, and they darken just a bit around the upper edges in a rough arc as in many early 19th-century photographs. The overall tone is the pale, warm and lovely, brownish gray of early paper prints, with the extra gloss of varnish.

Everyman has even slipped into an actual 19th-century photograph of the land as a caretaker. In "Mending the Earth," he kneels in a rephotograph of a picture Timothy O'Sullivan took back in 1867: a fissure vent in Steamboat Springs, Nev., one long, irregular gash in the ground where steam leaks out from the bowels of the Earth. O'Sullivan recorded startling aspects of the Western landscape and its stupendous, even frightening natural wonders for a geological expedition. Today the caretaker considers this particular awesome rift evidence of damage to the Earth's crust. With a needle nearly as large as himself, he is sewing the cleft together.

Elsewhere he attends to similarly vast and improbable tasks with equally low-tech equipment. Carrying a ladder and a backpack with a bedraggled mop and a rough branch converted to a scouring implement, he considers how to clean a dirty cloud. In "Oppenheimer's Garden" he kneels on a ladder holding what looks like a huge sieve made of bent twigs to catch strange pods floating down from the sky on parachutes. Or he stands on a dead tree in a swamp of stumps, serenading the leaden heavens with a stringed instrument patched together from a rough box and a violin neck.

For some years photographers have been issuing warnings about the toll being exacted on Earth. After all, photographs from space were crucial to the establishment of Earth as a possible subject, so it seems only fitting for photographers to follow up. In 1968, when communications were becoming increasingly international, the pictures of Earth taken from Apollo 8 were broadcast live around the world, a striking visual index of globalization.

Earthbound photographers generally look at some piece of the globe directly as best they can while standing on it, though some take to the air in planes in distant imitation of space flight. They have photographed deforestation and land abuse, pollution, overdevelopment, oil spills, dying coral, military damage, nuclear threats: all the ills that beset the planet except perhaps the hole in the ozone layer. What the ultimate results will be, what will remain after the end of it all, is pretty hard to photograph.

For obvious reasons the world's epilogue has been mainly the province of literature and film, though occasionally photographers try their hands

at such fictions, too, as Patrick Nagatani did in maniacally cartoonish fantasies about nuclear destruction. Photography just isn't very good at registering what has not happened yet; and besides, as the saying goes, prediction is difficult, especially about the future.

The whole notion of a secular apocalypse is an idea of the future that necessarily includes a return to the past. With so much destroyed, humans would be forced out of the era of high technology, since precisely that technology would have unraveled the skein of competence until only the lowest technology was left. Mr. ParkeHarrison has a penchant for implausible low tech; in his earlier work he invented all manner of odd and primitive machines for breathing, flying and making rain.

A few other photographers have taken the trouble to build handmade mechanisms that do not, cannot work, though generally that has been the territory of sculptors like Jean Tinguely, whose most famous machine was programmed to destroy itself. The photographer Robert Cumming staged gimcrack scientific experiments with devices expressly designed not to work but to make jokes and raise questions about perception and photography. Laurent Millet made wind traps and coastal machines of no apparent use, modeled on 18th-century illustrations.

Mr. ParkeHarrison not only builds his extravagant out-of-date machines and props by hand -- a handmade model of an I.B.M. Selectric's typeface ball is approximately one and a half times his height -- but he also painstakingly puts scenes together from various negatives and paint when a computer would surely do it faster. Either he does not have a computer, or he is a kind of heroic Luddite, employing labor-intensive low technology before the world's collapse has made it essential. Perhaps this is one man's private way of saying that neither pollution, global warming nor digitalization can entirely extinguish the hands-on experience and the human desire to create.

"Robert ParkeHarrison: Earth Elegies" is at the Bonni Benrubi Gallery, 52 East 76th Street, Manhattan, (212) 517-3766, through March 4.

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