

Robert Adams: The Place We Live

A Retrospective Selection of Photographs

16 January – 20 May 2013



Robert Adams,
Frame for a Tract House, Colorado Springs, Colorado, 1969. Gelatin silver print, 15.2 x 15.2 cm.
Yale University Art Gallery, Purchased with a gift from Sandra B. Lane, a grant from the Trellis Fund, and the Janet and Simeon Braguin Fund.

Are there affirmable days or places in our deteriorating world? Are there scenes in life, right now, for which we might conceivably be thankful? Is there a basis for joy or serenity, even if felt only occasionally? Are there grounds now and then for an unironic smile?

Robert Adams

For more than four decades Robert Adams (born 1937) has photographed the changing landscape of the American West. His pictures are distinguished not only by their economy and lucidity, but also by their mixture of grief and hope. On the one hand, they record an impoverishing loss of space and silence, and the inhumanity of what has been built. On the other hand, they celebrate the startling eloquence of trees, evidence of caring, and the redemptive power that sunlight has, even as it falls across suburbs.

Robert Adams: The Place We Live traces the photographer's evolving pursuit of beauty and balance amidst mankind's increasingly tragic relationship with the natural world. In their portrayal of subjects both ordinary and grand, Adams's austere black-and-white pictures resist simplification, rendering with delicate precision the complexities and contradictions of contemporary American life.

Surveying each of the photographer's major projects—most of which were originally conceived and seen as books—the exhibition begins with Adams's early explorations of rural space, buildings, and monuments (*The Plains; Late Hispanic Settlement; Ludlow*) in Colorado, the state where he lived and worked from 1962 to 1997. A visit to his wife's native Sweden in 1968 spurred Adams to recognize the significance of the insidious new urban and suburban developments being built along the Colorado Front Range. In his photographs of expanding commercial and residential structures set against a stark and glorious landscape, sunlight acts as a powerful, disinfecting force. *Eden* (1968), the first body of work to record this, was soon followed by *The New West* (1968-71) and *What We Bought* (1973-74)—two series that brought Adams's work to wide acclaim.

"To discover a tension so exact that it is peace," Adams's objective as an artist, is felt throughout his body of work, whether it be his views of suburbs after dusk (*Summer Nights*); grand landscapes marked by human intervention (*From the Missouri West*); people going about their daily lives in the shadow of a nuclear processing plant (*Our Parents, Our Children*); or a once-verdant paradise choked with smog (*Los Angeles Spring*). Also represented is a more lyric approach to the landscape, seen in his photographs of cottonwood trees and unheralded places in Colorado (*The Pawnee National Grassland; Along Some Rivers*), as well as in much of his later work in Oregon and Washington State (*The Pacific; Pine Valley; Alder Leaves; Sea Stories, This Day*). The deforestation of the Pacific Northwest, however, stirred Adams to embark on the epic series *Turning Back* (1999-2003), an undisguised protest unique in his life's work.

Taken as a whole, the exhibition elucidates the photographer's civic goals: to consider the privilege of the place we were given and the obligations of citizenship—not only in the western United States but also, by extension, in the wider world.

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Exhibition and publications organized by Joshua Chuang, Associate Curator of Photography and Digital Media, and Jock Reynolds, the Henry J. Heinz II Director, both of the Yale University Art Gallery. Made possible by Yale alumni and friends: Helen D. Buchanan; Allan K. Chasanoff; Nathaniel W. Gibbons; Betsy and Frank Karel; Saundra B. Lane; Melanie and Rick Mayer and the MFUND; Mark McCain and Caro MacDonald/Eye and I; Mr. and Mrs. Alexander K. McLanahan; Ms. Eliot Nolen and Mr. Timothy P. Bradley; Risher Randall, Sr.; The Reed Foundation; the Shamos Family Foundation; Mary Jo and Ted P. Shen; Jane P. Watkins; the Janet and Simeon Braguin Fund; and an endowment created with a challenge grant from the National Endowment for the Arts. The acquisition of Robert Adams's master prints was made possible through a gift from Saundra B. Lane, a grant from the Trellis Fund, and the Janet and Simeon Braguin Fund.

**Museo Nacional
Centro de Arte
Reina Sofía**

Sabatini Building

Santa Isabel, 52

Nouvel Building

Ronda de Atocha

(with Emperador

Carlos V Square)

28012 Madrid

Tel. (34) 91 774 10 00

Fax (34) 91 774 10 56

Museum hours

Monday to Saturday

and holidays

from 10:00 a. m.

to 9:00 p. m.

Sundays from

10:00 a. m.

to 7:00 p. m.*

(*From 2:30 p. m.

onwards only the

Collection galleries

can be visited)

Closed Tuesdays

Galleries close

15 minutes

prior to Museum

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Image

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