

PHOTOGRAPHS DAVID McMILLAN











Near Rothsay, Minnesota 1986



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GALLERY 1.1.1, SCHOOL OF ART, UNIVERSITY OF MANITOBA

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## Photography and Landscape: Some Thoughts

Affection for the land runs deep in us. Its manifestations encompass a vast range of human actions and choices, from the garden plot to the National Parks. At what point in the history of our species, I wonder, did the watchful, anxious regard of our surroundings on which survival depended begin to modulate toward love of a particular place? There must be an Other before there can be love; Eden becomes the object of our desire only after we are cast out. The best landscape images, whatever their medium and whatever other emotions they may evoke, are predicated on that loss. They propose the possibility of an intimate connection with a world to which we have access only through our eyes. Such a promise contains its own denial. In the case of landscape photography the paradox is sharpened, because the world represented must have existed for the picture to be made, and yet the existence of the photograph attests undeniably to that world's disappearance. Culture itself creates a gulf between ourselves and the world through which we move; for some societies the effort to repair the rupture, even if only momentarily, is an abiding preoccupation. Photographs play a central role in our culture's attempts to establish a connection with that larger reality which includes nature. It is an odd choice of tools: the making of a photograph presupposes distance, which accounts, I think, for the elegiac tone, the note of longing that suffuses so many of the finest landscape photographs. I love such images in part because they implicitly acknowledge the predicament without succumbing to the temptation to suggest an easy solution. It is a fact that our relationship with the natural world is a troubled one and can never be otherwise under the present cultural dispensation, and photographs, ambiguous as they are, are nevertheless witnesses to the facts, be they visible or existential.

How can one be at home in a world from which we are all in some way estranged? Obviously not a question with a single or simple answer, but one to which David McMillan's photographs are always addressed, and to which each photograph is a provisional answer. He looks for his answers by walking or driving around out-of-doors, camera in tow, and stopping when the conditions warrant. What makes him stop? And what does he hope to do by stopping and framing a picture that seems to him to encompass what attracted him to that spot? The critical climate is a bit chilly these days for artists like David and myself, who use the camera to

draw attention to those parts of the world where we have found the potential for meaning. We will undoubtedly put on heavier clothes and keep working, but I want to know why. What do we get out of it? What does the community gain by it? If there were no such thing as landscape photography, what would people like David and me be doing with our impulses? Would we be foresters or farmers, environmental planners, or property tax assessors? Is there some purpose beyond the satisfaction of our own whims that continues to make this activity viable? As the doubts swirl around me, I return to the photographs.

If Modernism refers to the self-conscious use of a medium to examine its own essential properties and procedures, then David only partly qualifies. To be sure he is conscious of the opportunities and limitations of his medium in ways that the casual amateur or the salon photographer usually are not, and that is a sign of his modernity, but he also takes the appearances of the world seriously as an independent source of meaning. His photographs are about more than the way that photography turns the world into pictures; they are about, among other things, "the manifestations of a culture and the inevitable imprint of that culture on the landscape", as David put it in a letter to me, and this distinguishes him from those Post-Modern Modernists for whom the only imprint to be discerned in a photograph is that which it makes on the passive mind of the hapless and manipulated viewer.

Their absence of rhetoric makes these photographs appear calm and unruffled, but the excitement in them is more penetrating for being understated. The gaze is patient, attentive; in these places you think you've seen a hundred times before you are eager to scrutinize everything. The spaces are generous; they accommodate your explorations. There is plenty of time to look around while a moving patch of sun turns a road sign into a mysterious semaphore, while a cloud swells with its own internal brightness over a ragged construction site, while a rainbow graces a pasture and its guywires, or evening gilds the strips of tar on a highway. David McMillan's photographs remind us that the factual, the contemplative, and the visionary are not incompatible modes of apprehension. They memorialize moments when his experience and intelligence and the events of the world have been catalyzed by sight to create the look of something understood for the first time. Like all the best art, they enlarge our idea of what is worthy of our attention.

Frank Gohlke  
October, 1987









Near Faribault, Minnesota 1986





Butte, Montana 1986





Winnipeg, Manitoba 1986





Waukesha County, Wisconsin 1985





Duluth, Minnesota 1985





Near Monmouth, Illinois 1985





Sedro Woolley, Washington 1986





Winnipeg, Manitoba 1987





Dragocvet, Yugoslavia 1986



David McMillan was born in Dundee, Scotland in 1945 and in 1951 he immigrated with his family to the United States. Since 1973 he has lived in Winnipeg where he teaches at the School of Art.

Frank Gohlke is a widely exhibited photographer whose work has taken him from the prairies of the American mid-west to Mount St. Helens and more recently to rural France. Originally from Texas, he now lives near Boston, Massachusetts.

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