

Carte de California: Contested Terrain

Two years after the discovery of gold at Sutter's Mill, California entered the Union as a free state amidst great dispute, and only after concessions were made to appease pro-slavery Senators. The world turned its eyes to the western frontier, enticing a culturally diverse wave of immigrants, both American and international, to seek their own fortunes in this plentiful terrain. When the Civil War began a decade later, California was considered too remote to recruit soldiers or to ship supplies, but its fist-sized nuggets of gold would nonetheless prove decisive in funding the Union Army's eventual victory.

Photographic technology quickly advanced concurrent with California's Gold Rush, extending the domain of the image profoundly. Popular carte-de-visite images (the term references formal cards used to announce the arrival of an aristocrat, and was appropriated to describe large format albumen photographs mounted on heavy card stock for durability and transport) and related stereo cards (two slightly offset images, also mounted on heavy stock, seen through hand-held devices that produced a spectacular illusion of three dimensionality through binocular vision), were traded, collected, and prized for the novelty of their subjects, as well as the encyclopedic knowledge they offered through didactic texts printed on the reverse side. Bolstered by Manifest Destiny doctrines that held westward expansion to be both inevitable as well as righteous, railroad barons beckoned "civilized" would-be settlers with carte-de-visite and stereo card landscapes teeming with splendor to develop a terrain that was understood to be "virgin," and "untouched."

At the end of the Civil War, with its golden sunshine and fertile promise, California as imagined through photographs seemed the perfect place for the nation to begin anew. Interested themselves in new subjects through which to gain profit and notoriety, photographers set out on harrowing journeys to photograph California's seemingly indistinguishable resources. Photographs of this era tell us that beyond its beauty and arid climate, California was a place full of wealth in the form of gold, silver, lumber, oil, fertile land, and native peoples that were ready for the taking. More than Three Hundred Years after the exploits of the Spanish Conquistadors, then the Catholic missionaries, the history of this place was disregarded and reinvented through photographs.

Relics of the Spanish Conquest and Manifest Destiny politics can be seen in our landscapes to this day. Your travels to and from the Cal Poly campus will likely ring familiar in Jeff Cain's work, where the artist follows the trail of invasive mustard seed planted by the Spanish as they traveled north. A painful metaphor for the plight of the indigenous peoples who once thrived on this land but were forced into indentured servitude at the missions, killed by European diseases, or slaughtered in officially sanctioned genocides, the opportunistic and poisonous mustard weed has overtaken California's native, beneficial plant species like a scourge. The deceitfully cheerful yellow flowers that now blanket California's hillsides during the spring, will dry up in the summer, and make the perfect incendiary.

Likewise, Julie Shafer's pinhole negatives investigate the scars inflicted on the landscape through bellicose mining techniques used to strip every ounce of mineral of any worth from Californian soil. Shafer traveled with her room-sized camera obscura to extraordinary sites like Malakoff Diggins (where mountainsides were intentionally washed away, leaving in their wake toxic plains

and unruly sludge) and Owens Valley (the dry lake created when Los Angeles diverted water from the Owens River). Her titles make wry remark on California's state slogan, "Eureka," which means, "I have found it!" Shafer's photographs question who is the "I" who claims, and at what cost to those who do not own, and are left unrecorded? The ghosts of the Other haunt Shafer's human-scale images.

Enid Baxter Blader further examines the footprint of short-sighted gains and unbridled subterfuge evident in cookie-cutter suburbs and abandoned commercial enterprise. Baxter Blader is drawn to forgotten sites where she reckons with landscapes transformed by cleverly named housing developments and quaint mega malls designed to look historic, then follows the avarice that drove the most contested urban planning project of all time, the Los Angeles Aqueduct. The artist mixes the cold objectivity of scientific survey with the emotional history of California's urbanity to critique the misuse of public trust and foretell the current economic collapse. Her work points us back to the strategies of carte-de-visite photographers, but cautions that monsters loom in the plastic backdrops now dotting the landscape.

As well, Dee Williams travels the concrete jungles that feed California's sunny fictions. Billboards call out to crumbling sidewalks to buy, to want, to consume while monolithic headquarters simultaneously obscure and mirror, but never reveal. In the spirit of Robert Frank, the signs of American patriotism and economic vigor are dismantled by Williams' astute lens. The Conquistador's dreams of cities of gold and fountains of youth are ever present in the abundant reflective surfaces of the city - those fortunes always yet to be found by their inhabitants. In Williams' photographs, the viewer sees the American Dream ragged and torn.

Collectively, these works explore the contemporary implications of California's political machinations and strife, revealing the scars of plunder in their wake. As much a call to action as revelations of the conquests, these works ask us to recognize our role in the loot, and assume more sustainable and responsible consumption of the terrain. To extend Glen Creason's point in Los Angeles in Maps (2010) to include the photographed terrain, **Carte de California: Contested Terrain** asks us to understand that all photographs are fictions that have "led us into the future with the conviction that mere lines on paper can make a [state]... Having finally run up against its limits, both geographical and psychological, that [state] of the imagination waits to be remapped as the geography of the home."