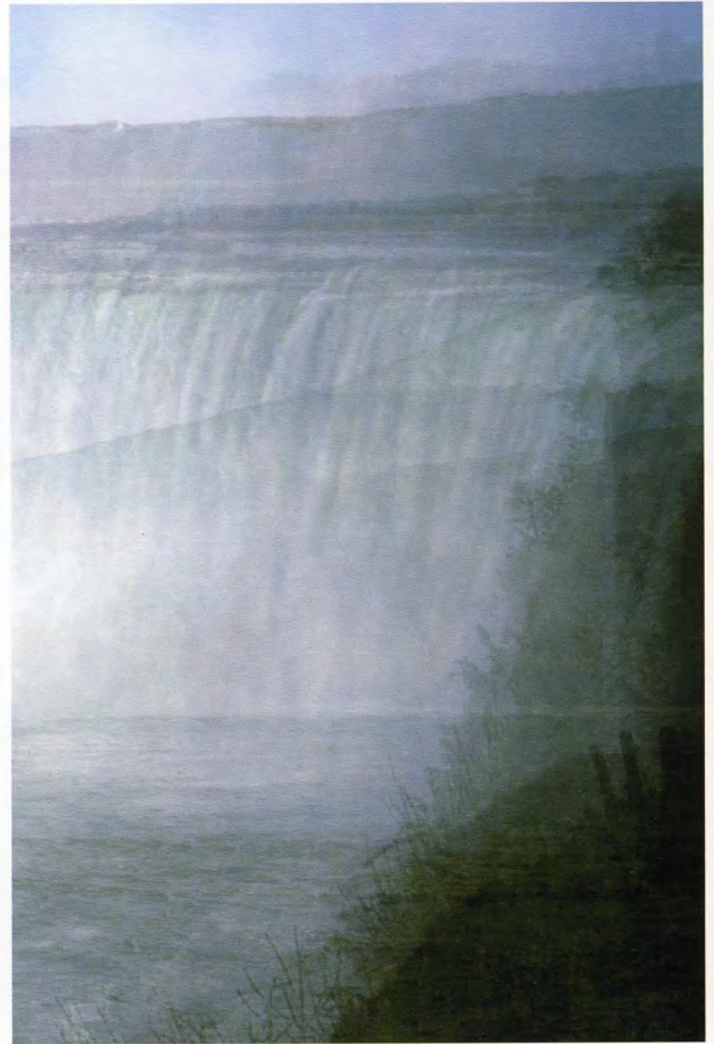


Collection Connections

Elliot Anderson **Average Landscapes**



January 13–May 20, 2007

Collection*Connections generously funded by the Annenberg Foundation

Collection Connections de Young

January 13–May 20, 2007

Artist's Statement

Average Landscapes began with an experience I had at Bryce Canyon National Park. I happened to be wandering by a lookout point and noted that tourists came up to the edge, snapped a picture, and left. Thus, the photograph became the observation of place. How did these particular photo-op points become established? What cultural and historical influences frame our observations of nature? To address these questions I researched the work of American artists and photographers of the 19th century—specifically, the Hudson River School painters. What intrigued me were the similarities between 19th-century landscape painting of the Hudson River School and the contemporary tourist snapshot.

The painter Paul Cézanne worried throughout his life whether his artwork represented trouble with his eyes or a reflection of his desire to “learn from nature.” Do the artifacts of 19th-century vision designate the points of our photographic interest or are we drawn to what nature reveals to us? The work in this exhibition attempts to portray the ambiguities that nature presents to our collective vision.

—Elliot Anderson

Elliot Anderson *Average Landscapes*

Nearly everyone has stood near a spot marked by a “Kodak moment” sign and taken a photograph. We know that the resulting picture will have a certain look and a recognizable point of view. However, few people stop to wonder where this imagery originated. In other words, how does the tourist bureau know where to place these photo opportunities in order to create the exact image that people expect? In *Average Landscapes*, Elliot Anderson uses the tools of new media to investigate how we see nature, exploring the way individuals interact with the world without an awareness of the cultural assumptions they impose on it.

Layered Views

The Romantic Movement in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries projected human feeling onto natural phenomena, believing that it could be a source of inspiration to counter the perceived bloodless rationalism of scientific and industrial progress. In their depictions of the landscape, artists sought to capture the ways that nature supposedly encouraged emotional awareness and self-expression. Although Romanticism is often seen as naively optimistic, popular expectations about landscape in America continue to be defined by its philosophical ideals.

In 1757 the English philosopher Edmund Burke published his treatise *Philosophical Enquiry into the Origins of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*, espousing a theory of human perception based on an aesthetic approach to emotional experience. In Burke's formulation, the natural world exists on a continuum that extends from a chaotic wilderness to an ordered pastoral countryside, often described using language recalling the Garden of Eden. At the center of these two extremes—the dangerous excitement of the sublime and the tame pleasures of the beautiful—exists the poetic and contemplative synthesis he calls the picturesque. Burke provides a rationale to explain the range of subjective responses to natural topography, and by manipulating the point of view a scene can be made to embody any of these abstract concepts. The intersection of observation and emotion defines landscape as a cultural construct.

Fig. 1.



Fig. 2.
(cover image)

Anderson has created a computer software program that searches Internet sites where individuals upload their snapshots for others to view. He is particularly interested in how the landscapes of America's Hudson River School painters, which were based in Burke's theories, still shape contemporary understandings of place. His search program uses the titles of nineteenth-century landscape paintings in the de Young collection to find digital images that have been uploaded using similar descriptions.

The program collects up to 500 pictures for each title and combines these images by averaging them together, creating a single image. The resulting depiction contains traces of all the images collected into its ghostly composite, like layered scrims. Mounting the composites in lightboxes allows viewers to look into the image and see the accumulation of layers.

Wilderness Views

The de Young's large-scale *Niagara Falls* diptych (ca. 1832) (Fig. 1) by Gustav Grunewald exemplifies the romantic conventions of the sublime. A popular tourist destination even before the Erie Canal made it easily accessible in 1825, the falls served as an archetype, a natural analogue for national grandeur. In the pair of paintings, nature and nation are inextricably linked, implying the country's destiny lies in its divine mandate to tame the power of a wild landscape that is nevertheless the source of its strength. This contradiction is supported visually by the awesomeness of the scene, in which sublime nature overpowers the viewer's rational experience.

Anderson's composite diptych (Fig. 2) shows how indelibly this concept continues to inform the experience of tourists visiting Niagara Falls. The two halves of the diptych, which depict the American and the Canadian banks, situate the falls as thundering

cascades, emphasizing the immense canyon created by the volume of water. As is typical in sublime depictions, the work seems to suspend the spectator over an abyss of empty space, rendering literally the gulf between humans and the natural world. The rising clouds of vapor further obscure the scene and help to dissolve its materiality. Just as in Grunewald's paintings, tourist snapshots typically elide the human presence represented in the buildings along the shoreline. The monumentality of this natural wonder appears to remove it from the realm of human accessibility.

As the nineteenth century progressed and the population of the country expanded westward, the vast territories of the continent and the natural wonders they possessed became the focus of tourist travel. Artists trained in the Hudson River School aesthetic such as Albert Bierstadt and Thomas Moran created canvases of western sites that enticed people to journey to them. Many of these sites would become national parks in an attempt to protect them from development, and landscape paintings helped to shape the perception of what needed to be saved.

Moran's *Grand Canyon of the Yellowstone* (1893) (Fig. 3) illustrates why he is often considered the artist most responsible for making the wonders of the American West known to the world. The small scale of this painting condenses the visual conventions of the sublime much like a photograph does. Moran maintains the monumentality of the scene by framing the canyon with imposing rock precipices on the right. This placement brings the foreground close to the viewer, creating a visual jump to the falls in the middle ground that heightens the sense of dramatic distance. The darker trees and rocks framing the view on the left and bottom contrast with the saturated hues that provide so much of Yellowstone's seductive appeal for tourists.

Fig. 3.



Fig. 4.



Domestic objects meant for decorative display such as plates, cups, and spoons were often the carriers of these souvenir scenes. Anderson has taken a series of porcelain souvenir plates from the 1820s in the museum's collection and created new versions using the layered imagery of his lightboxes (see Fig. 12). In his version of *Natural Bridge, Virginia* (Fig. 7), the wilderness character of the site appears to be intact. However, on closer inspection, a human barricade is evident, which effectively tames the spectator's emotional experience of the bridge, eliminating the sense of sublime danger that Thomas Jefferson famously recorded in his naturalist studies.

In his images of *Genesee Falls* (Fig. 8) and *Lake George* (Fig. 9), Anderson serves up even more direct evidence of the destructive transformations that the landscape has undergone. The falls, once a tourist site, lay nearly buried within the industrial city that has grown up around them. They are little more than a poignant reminder of the natural world that was exploited to provide the resources for Rochester's urban development. Even more unsettling is the view of Lake George, which staved off unsightly building through the more ecologically destructive construction of a golf course. Although the pastoral quality of the scene is retained, the chemicals required for this natural playground have severely compromised the environmental health of the region.

Mythic Views

In his most radical intervention into the works in the museum's collection, Anderson has created a visual quartet out of Thomas Cole's monumental painting *Prometheus Bound* (1847) (Fig. 10), which itself addresses the issue of the mythic role played by landscape images. Cole's painting appropriates the Prometheus story to present a view of the American landscape that is encoded with heroism, progress, divinity, and destiny. However, because mythic language attaches itself to all aspects of the culture, Anderson's Internet search brought up some startling results.

The myth tells the story of how Prometheus, a Titan from a race of immortal giants, stole fire from heaven in order to bring it to humans. This action earned him the wrath of Jupiter, who condemned the Titan to be chained to a rock on Mount Caucasus in Scythia, where a raptor would devour his liver in the morning only to have it grow back in the night so the torture could repeat the following morning in an endless cycle. Prometheus serves as an emblematic figure: his defiance of Jupiter to aid civilization offers a moral lesson in the virtues of independence, courage, endurance, and sacrifice.

Fig. 7.



Fig. 8.

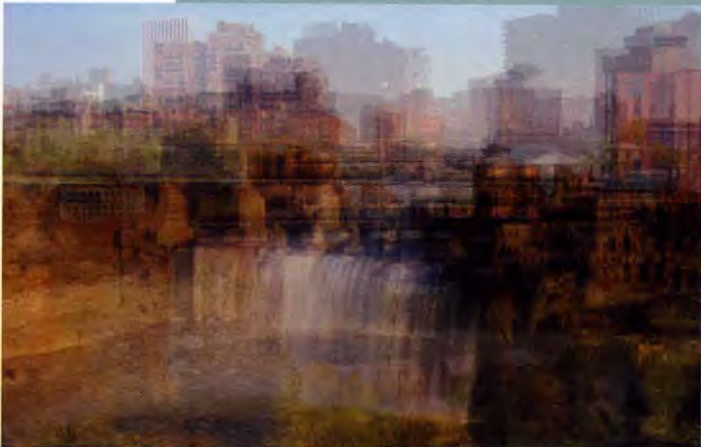


Fig. 9.



Anderson's layered composite of this scene (Fig. 4) retains the characteristics of Moran's painting in a remarkably consistent way, demonstrating how thoroughly the tourist experience of nature remains wedded to established visual conventions. The falls consistently occupy the middle distance. Their location near the top of the image positions the viewer below the scene, accentuating their grandeur. Darker rocks and trees frame the bright colors of the canyon. Anderson supplies a video of this composite, illustrating the process of layering in which each photograph contributes its visual information to the final combination. The consistency of the individual images in this collective national ritual of photographing nature belies the radically subjective responses they are meant to convey.

Countryside Views

On the opposite end of the scale from the sublime tourist experience, James Francis Cropsey's *View of Greenwood Lake, New Jersey* (1845) (Fig. 5) presents a natural scene that combines the conventions of the beautiful and the picturesque. The painting depicts the human and natural realms existing in mutually beneficial harmony. Its panoramic vista takes in the broad, fertile valley around Greenwood Lake, another popular nineteenth-century tourist destination, which is just twenty-three miles outside of New York City.

In Cropsey's painting, orderly, carefully tended fields, barns, and houses occupy the middle of the valley and testify to the benign presence of civilization and the creation of pastoral plenty, which is underscored by the brilliant fall colors indicating the time of the harvest. Unlike the roaring falls of Niagara, Greenwood Lake nestles serenely into the scene, its angled surface linking the tamed farmland of the middle ground to the promise of the future suggested by the golden horizon. In contrast to this bucolic vision, Cropsey situates the viewer near the rugged rocks and tangled trees in the foreground. However, a man and his dog are walking

confidently through this rough countryside, suggesting that the benevolent wilderness is waiting to be tamed by civilization.

Yet, as most nature tourists know, their very presence signals the precariousness of the sites they are visiting, a realization that Anderson exploits in his layered investigation of *Greenwood Lake* (Fig. 6). Although trees frame the image, and the sky glows behind the distant mountains, the site's rural character is gone. Greenwood Lake is now a suburban bedroom community, characterized by automobiles and strip malls. No longer a sylvan symbol of the harmonious blend of wilderness and human cultivation, it stands for the destruction of nature through the relentless march of civilization.

Whether engendering sublime sensations at Niagara Falls or offering beautiful and poetic contemplation at Greenwood Lake, topography could be pressed into the service of an ideological agenda. On the one hand the conventions of landscape demonstrated the inevitability of grandiose, even divine, national ambitions, and on the other they could be used to reassure society that interventions into the natural world were triumphs of civilization and evidence of human progress.

Remembered Views

As the nineteenth century progressed, tourists traveling to sites of natural wonder began to seek their own landscape images as a way to capture their extraordinary experiences for future enjoyment. New printing technologies made possible a thriving business in postcards and mementos stamped with depictions of scenic sites that replicated the conventions established by Hudson River School artists, who embedded romantic attitudes toward nature in their paintings. The natural world was not only transformed into the ideological image of a landscape but also divorced from its source even further, becoming a commodity that could be purchased and carried home.

Fig. 5.



Fig. 6.



Fig. 10.

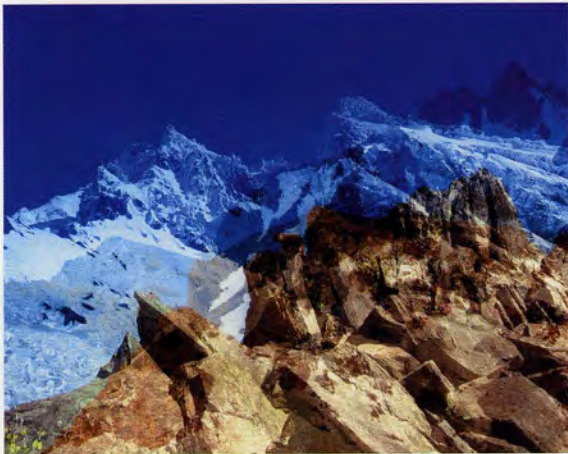


Not surprisingly, the U.S. military has appropriated the mythic associations of this name. Perhaps more surprising is the number of people who have posted photographs of fighter planes and bombers with this name on their Internet sites. Anderson creates a layered montage of these images over the raptor in Cole's painting, relating the contemporary interest in awe-inspiring military displays to the nineteenth-century ideology of divine destiny and power (Fig. 11, lower left box).

Anderson completes the work with a composite image based on the nude figure of Prometheus (Fig. 11, right box). In a final ironic twist, typing *Prometheus* into an Internet search for images brings up Prometheus Books, a gay male publishing company, one branch of which features erotic male photography. These images traffic in a set of conventional poses derived from nineteenth-century neoclassical images of the male nude. The addition of the word *bound* creates a further discovery, shifting this search to include sadomasochistic imagery and other sexual images from personal chat sites.

Anderson's sly nod to the homoerotic valance of these works is a reminder that representations of the body may also be constructed to carry ideological values. That these photographs now circulate

Fig. 11.



so widely on the Internet suggests how much we have come to rely on Web-based reality, which replaces actual experiences with virtual ones. In this way, Anderson's project asks us to consider how our relationship to imagery positions us as spectators of mediated conventions that displace physical interactions.

In nineteenth-century America, artists expressed the nation's ideals, ambitions, and sustaining myths through representations of the landscape, creating cultural touchstones out of geography. They often used the camera to record a visual reminder for painting their canvases, and snapshots by present-day tourists return contemporary representations to the rhetorical structures of the earlier photographs and paintings that inspired them. Inevitably, these structures are freighted with ideological imperatives that the photographs convey even when those who take them are unaware of anything but a Kodak moment.

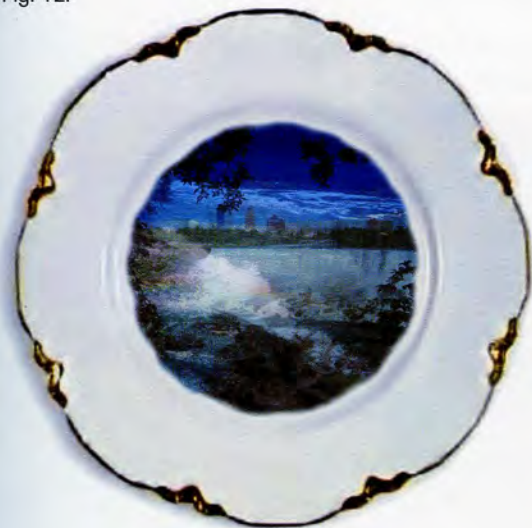
—Daniell Cornell
Director of Contemporary Art Projects

About the Artist

Elliot Anderson is a professor in the departments of Art and Digital Arts/New Media at the University of California, Santa Cruz. He has been involved professionally in the field of computer technology since the early 1980s. Anderson's work incorporates a wide range of media and includes interactive computer sculptures and installation, public art, digital photography, and interactive video productions for performance. His most recent production, *Rituel III*—a collaboration with composer Hi Kyung Kim and Ae Ju Lee, Korean National Treasure for Buddhist Dance—was performed at the Walt Disney Concert Hall in Los Angeles (2005), at the San Francisco International Arts Festival (2005), and in Sydney, Australia (2004). Other productions include the opera *Cezanne's Doubt*, in collaboration with composer Daniel Rothman. He has had solo exhibitions at Gallery 16, San Francisco (1996, 2004, and 2006); Kenderdine Gallery, University of Saskatchewan, Saskatoon, Canada (2000); and the Sesnon Gallery, University of California, Santa Cruz (2000). His group exhibitions include *Lifelike*, New Langton Arts, San Francisco (2001); and *Bay Area Art + Tech*, Duke University Museum of Art (1998).

The artist would like to thank his software assistant, Phoenix Toews.

Fig. 12.



List of Illustrations

Fig. 1.

Gustav Grunewald
Niagara River at the Cataract, ca. 1832
Oil on canvas, 84 x 60 in.
Gift of John Davis Hatch V, in memory of John Davis Hatch IV, A.I.A., architect of San Francisco, 1996.52.1

Gustav Grunewald

Horseshoe Falls from below the High Bank, ca. 1832
Oil on canvas, 84 x 60 in.
Gift of John Davis Hatch V, in memory of John Davis Hatch IV, A.I.A., architect of San Francisco, 1996.52.2

Fig. 2.

Elliot Anderson
Niagara (diptych), from the *Average Landscapes* series, 2006
Digital photographic transparency and lightbox, overall approx. 72 x 106 in.
Collection of the artist

Fig. 3.

Thomas Moran
Grand Canyon of the Yellowstone, 1893
Oil on canvas, 19 7/8 x 15 7/8 in.
Gift of Mr. and Mrs. John D. Rockefeller 3rd, 1979.7.73

Fig. 4.

Elliot Anderson
Grand Canyon of the Yellowstone, from the *Average Landscapes* series, 2006
Digital photographic transparency and lightbox, 36 x 24 in.
Collection of the artist

Fig. 5.

Jasper Francis Cropsey
View of Greenwood Lake, New Jersey, 1845
Oil on canvas, 30 3/4 x 40 3/4 in.
Gift of Gustav Epstein, 45.24

Fig. 6.

Elliot Anderson
View of Greenwood Lake, New Jersey, from the *Average Landscapes* series, 2006
Digital photographic transparency and lightbox, 30 x 40 in.
Collection of the artist

Fig. 7.

Elliot Anderson
Natural Bridge, Virginia, from the *Average Landscapes* series, 2006
Digital photographic transparency and lightbox, 24 x 30 in.
Collection of the artist

Fig. 8.

Elliot Anderson
Genesee Falls, New York, from the *Average Landscapes* series, 2006
Digital photographic transparency and lightbox, 24 x 36 in.
Collection of the artist

Fig. 9.

Elliot Anderson
Lake George, New York, from the *Average Landscapes* series, 2006
Digital photographic transparency and lightbox, 30 x 40 in.
Collection of the artist

Fig. 10.

Thomas Cole
Prometheus Bound, 1847
Oil on canvas, 64 x 96 in.
Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Steven MacGregor Read and the Estate of Joyce I. Swader, 1997.28

Fig. 11.

Elliot Anderson
Prometheus Bound (four parts), from the *Average Landscapes* series, 2006
Digital photographic transparency and lightbox, overall approx. 48 x 124 in.
Collection of the artist

Fig. 12.

Elliot Anderson
American Falls, Niagara, 2006
Digital photograph on porcelain, 10 1/2 in. diam.
Collection of the artist

The **Collection Connections** program presents new works that aim to reinterpret traditional objects from the de Young's collections. The contemporary artists working in this space create installations that transform the conventional experience of museum viewers. For each project, artist and curator draw inspiration from the permanent collection, offering non-

traditional connections that provide visual and educational opportunities to explain, interpret, and recontextualize the art objects on display throughout the museum. Through these projects, visitors are given a window into the ways that artists and cultural institutions construct and disseminate knowledge about historical understanding and current attitudes.

Checklist of the Exhibition

Works from the *Average Landscapes* series by Elliot Anderson (all are in the collection of the artist):

Prometheus Bound (four parts), 2006
Digital photographic transparency and lightbox; overall approx. 48 x 124 in.; *Star*, 11 x 14 in.; *Vulture*, 20 x 24 in.; *Landscape*, 48 x 60 in.; *Male Nude*, 36 x 30 in.

Niagara (diptych), 2006
Digital photographic transparency and lightbox; overall approx. 72 x 106 in.; *Horseshoe Falls*, 72 x 48 in.; *American Falls*, 72 x 48 in.

View of Greenwood Lake, New Jersey, 2006
Digital photographic transparency and lightbox, 30 x 40 in.

Twilight, 2006
Digital photographic transparency and lightbox, 36 x 60 in.

Grand Canyon with Rainbow, 2006
Digital photographic transparency and lightbox, 24 x 36 in.

Lake George, New York, 2006
Digital photographic transparency and lightbox, 30 x 40 in.

Genesee Falls, Rochester, New York, 2006
Digital photographic transparency and lightbox, 24 x 36 in.

Grand Canyon of the Yellowstone, 2006
Digital photographic transparency and lightbox, 36 x 24 in.

Natural Bridge, Virginia, 2006
Digital photographic transparency and lightbox, 24 x 30 in.

Natural Bridge, Virginia, 2006
Digital photograph on porcelain, 10 1/2 in. diam.

Horseshoe Falls, Niagara, 2006
Digital photograph on porcelain, 10 1/2 in. diam.

American Falls, Niagara, 2006
Digital photograph on porcelain, 10 1/2 in. diam.

Hudson River Highlands, 2006
Digital photograph on porcelain, 10 1/2 in. diam.

Lake George, New York, 2006
Digital photograph on porcelain, 10 1/2 in. diam.

Genesee Falls, New York, 2006
Digital photograph on porcelain, 10 1/2 in. diam.

Grand Canyon, Arizona, 2006
Digital photograph on porcelain, 10 1/2 in. diam.

Yellowstone Falls, Wyoming, 2006
Digital photograph on porcelain, 10 1/2 in. diam.

Works in the collection of the Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco:

Thomas Moran
Grand Canyon of the Yellowstone, 1893
Oil on canvas, 19 7/8 x 15 7/8 in.
Gift of Mr. and Mrs. John D. Rockefeller 3rd, 1979.773

Unidentified artist
Made by Coalport Porcelain Factory, Shopshire, England
Plate (Niagara Falls from near Clifton House, America), ca. 1820–1830
Porcelain
Gift of Martha and William Steen in memory of his mother, 1990.37.2

Unidentified artist
Made by Coalport Porcelain Factory, Shopshire, England
Plate (Natural Bridge, Virginia, America), ca. 1820–1830
Porcelain
Gift of Martha and William Steen in memory of his mother, 1990.37.8

Unidentified artist
Made by Coalport Porcelain Factory, Shopshire, England
Plate (The Narrows, Lake George, America), ca. 1820–1830
Porcelain
Gift of Martha and William Steen in memory of his mother, 1990.37.7

Unidentified artist
Made by Coalport Porcelain Factory, Shopshire, England
Plate (Sabbath Day Point, Lake George, America), ca. 1820–1830
Porcelain
Gift of Martha and William Steen in memory of his mother, 1990.37.1

Collection
Connections

de Young

Fine Arts
Museums of
San Francisco



Elliot Anderson

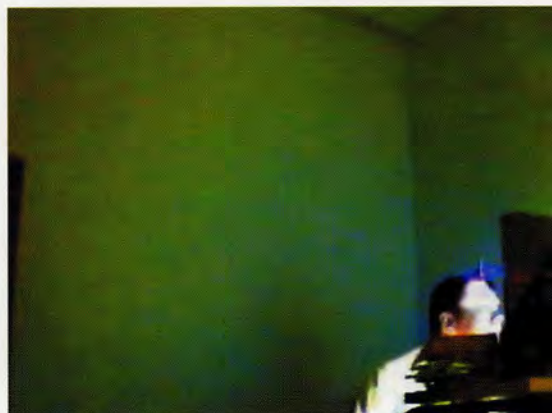
Cams

Cams is an ongoing project that uses personal web cameras as the source for images. Web cameras are small video cameras that attach to a personal computer and broadcast live video images in real-time on the Internet.

I watch a number of these cameras regularly. When I see an image that appeals to me aesthetically and that has compelling content, I capture a frame from the video stream. For me this is a form of street photography with the Internet being the street. Elliot Anderson



Chandelier, 2004
Pigment on Somerset 310gsm
34x46 inches
Edition of 10



Untitled, 2004
Pigment on Somerset 310gsm
34x46 inches
Edition of 10

Natural History

Natural History is a project that involves documenting the painted backdrops on display in the dioramas at New York's American Museum of Natural History. Each of the photographs are wonderfully diffused images of what appear to be landscape photographs, but are in fact, pictures of paintings. They are documents that defy convention. These painted landscapes suggest an 'untamed world replete with bucolic vistas and idealized and romanticized landscapes.' All prints are available individually.



Matterhorn, 2005
Pigment on Hahnemuhle 310gsm
34x46 inches
Edition of 25



Clouds, 2005
Pigment on Hahnemuhle 310gsm
34x46 inches
Edition of 25



Poplars, 2005
Pigment on Hahnemuhle 310gsm
34x46 inches
Edition of 25



Birds, 2005
Pigment on Hahnemuhle 310gsm
34x46 inches
Edition of 25

Icelandic Houses

In the summer of 2003 I traveled to Iceland with my 1970s vintage Polaroid SX-70 camera in tow. This was my first visit to Iceland. I was struck by the sparse geometry of the buildings.

I proceeded to shoot Polaroids of these buildings in a way that would emphasize their abstract geometric qualities. All the images are out of focus to draw attention to the lines of the structures rather than the details. I draw inspiration for this series from the work of German photographers Bernd and Hilla Becher and Uta Barth. Elliot Anderson



Black House, 2005



Four Windows, 2005



Mobile Home, 2005



Red Roof, 2005



Six Windows, 2005



Blue House, 2005

Each print 46x34 inch paper size, 30x30 inch image size, pigment on Somerset 310gsm. Available individually in editions of 10.