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Art Review | Accommodating Nature: The Photographs of Frank Gohlke

The Plain Truth: Frank Gohlke's photographs take in the width and wonder of American landscapes

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It's not wrong to call Frank Gohlke a landscape photographer. It's just too limiting. Yes, he shoots landscapes, but as part of a larger, more complex enterprise. Call it interface photography: a recording of right-angled encounters between sky and land, man and nature, space and time.



"Accommodating Nature: The Photographs of Frank Gohlke," the deeply satisfying career retrospective that runs at the Addison Gallery of American Art through July 13, shows Gohlke, 66, working in a variety of settings: the Larry McMurtry country of his native north Texas; the Upper Midwest; Mount St. Helens; northern Ohio; the South; a number of locations in Massachusetts, most notably along the Sudbury River. Gohlke taught at the Massachusetts College of Art and Design from 1988 to 2006.

Starting in mid-July, a major expansion will close the Addison for 18 months. "Accommodating Nature" ensures it goes out with a bang. This is a big show - it includes 85 pictures - but that's as it should be. Even when his subject is just houses in Wichita Falls, where he grew up, Gohlke communicates a sense of size. It's a birthright. A son of the Great Plains, Gohlke is an oracle of the horizontal. "I feel safest in places where the earth under my feet can be followed in sight until it disappears over the horizon," he writes in the exhibition catalog.

The sense of space in his pictures can imprison rather than liberate. "I take SPACE to be the central fact to man born in America," the poet Charles Olson once wrote. "I spell it large because it comes large here. Large and without mercy." Spacious does not begin to describe the Great Plains (there's a reason they're called "great"). What the Sahara is to dry, what the Pacific is to wet, the Great Plains are to openness. Of course, a picture like "House on the outskirts of Moorhead, Minnesota" reminds how close openness can be to oppressiveness.

While not in awe of nature, Gohlke most certainly respects it. The idea of survival, rather than exaltation, underlies so many of his landscapes. The houses he shoots in Wichita Falls, the grain elevators in Minnesota, are akin to frontier outposts. The Plains are about spread (and defenselessness), the structures are about indrawing (and shelter). In fact, the gun-turret splendor of "Art deco house, corner of Lebanon and Kessler, Wichita Falls, Texas" is more fortress than shelter.

Notice, by the way, how detailed that title is. Geography matters to Gohlke. Sense of place is as much about specificity as evocation.

Visually, the Plains are plain as well as plane, and (relative) plainness characterizes the places Gohlke photographs. Even when he shoots Mount St. Helens, it's well after the eruption. Ansel Adams-style transcendence does not interest him. John Rohrbach, who organized the show for the Amon Carter Museum, in Fort Worth, describes Gohlke's images as "laconic." That's exactly right. Grandeur is all well and good, but actuality (a much mightier concept) subsumes it. "Maybe by photographing places and things whose claim on the general attention involved little more than the fact they were incontrovertibly there," Gohlke writes, "I was reminding myself that existence itself is life's deepest mystery."