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Western Exposure

Mark Ruwedel's photographs capture time in a timeless landscape
Peabody Essex Museum, Salem, Mass

SALEM — The West haunts American photography as the South haunts American literature — if for opposite reasons. Lush and complicatedly peopled, the South is burdened with history. “The past is never dead,” William Faulkner wrote in words that are as much boast as warning. “It’s not even past.”

The West, in contrast, could have been created with the camera in mind: stark and empty and bracingly new (terrifyingly new, too). The South may feel foreign to us, but the West looks alien. In documenting it, photographers from Timothy O’Sullivan and William Henry Jackson in the 19th century to Ansel and Robert Adams in the 20th to Richard Misrach today have made it seem at least a little less alien.

Mark Ruwedel belongs in their company. His West is riotously austere and beautifully desolate: a Beckett landscape so empty of human life that even Beckett’s lost souls would feel out of place there. Yet one crucial aspect distinguishes Ruwedel’s work from that of his predecessors. As much archeology as art, his images explicitly remind us that the West has a past, one immensely longer in duration than the past of cowboys and Indians we see in westerns. “California is west of the West,” Theodore Roosevelt once said. The parts of Texas, Colorado, Utah, and California that Ruwedel photographs aren’t west of the West. They’re so desolate they almost seem underneath the West.

The 41 images in “Imprints: Photographs by Mark Ruwedel,” which runs at the Peabody Essex Museum through Jan. 1, can appear almost bare in their seeming emptiness. Ruwedel photographs traces of vanished life: fossilized dinosaur tracks, tribal migration paths, and the like. The camera, which arrests time in two dimensions, here records its having been arrested in three. The result is a folding together of three chronologies: geological, animal, and human. Most often, Ruwedel presents the tracks in the center of the image, perpendicular to the bottom. Seen that way, they seem to recede into both pictorial space and unrecorded time.

Time is an abstraction, of course, and these pictures have a stripped-down, abstract quality. Looking at them, one thinks not so much of other Western photographers as of Minimalist sculpture, Robert Smithson and earth art, or even Zen mysticism. Look closely, though, and notice how concrete the abstractions are.

Ruwedel, who took these photographs between 1994 and 2009, uses a large-format camera. Such cameras are cumbersome and require long exposure times. What they offer,

though, and the reason Ruwedel lugs one over such challenging terrain, is their capacity to make prints of the utmost precision. So these landscapes, bare but not empty, are alive with detail. Each stone sticks out. Even the smallest declivity has a weightiness and almost-palpable volume.

It's one thing to see a fossilized footprint or the barely visible depression that indicates the presence of a once-used path. But to see more clear-cut evidence of a human presence is almost unsettling, as if time is speeding up before us: the incised steps in Ruwedel's photograph "Chaco Canyon/The Jackson Stairway"; a line of cows staring at the camera from the other side of a creek in "Purgatoire River/Theropod Tracks"; or, most shocking of all, in "Vermillion Cliffs/Theropod Track," a highway and rest stop in the distance.

Rather than wall labels, the photographs have titles faintly printed on their mattes. The faintness makes the words look eroded, like the tracks they designate. Eight of the photographs are in color. They're New Testament pictures, to the black-and-whites' Old Testament. The colors are drained, delicate: sighs rather than shouts, more memories of color than the thing itself. Memory, after all, is time internalized.

Part of the power of these images is how inhuman they seem — until they don't. One gets so accustomed to the almost-biblical dryness of these mountains and deserts that the occasional glimpses of water — even just muddy puddles — seem miraculous. They look that healing, that nurturing, in this context. They appear otherworldly — except that the otherness they recall belongs to the world we live in.

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