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Photographer Mark Ruwedel: ticket to nowhere

With the next in her photography book series, Liz Jobey looks at the work of US photographer Mark Ruwedel, who spent 15 years recording the faded hope of America's abandoned railway lines

By Liz Jobey
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Photography and railways have been closely involved with one another since the 1840s, when photographers were first employed to survey the territories across which ambitious railway companies planned to lay their tracks. In America, as early as 1840 daguerreotypes - images recorded on light-sensitive metal plates - were used to solve a boundary dispute with Canada, and by the 1850s, photographic surveys were being used to record geographical, geological and historical evidence. In France, in 1851, the commission for historical monuments appointed five photographers to travel the country recording the state of ancient sites and monuments. A decade later, one of those five, Édouard-Denis Baldus, was appointed by the Southern Region railway company to photograph along the line from Lyons to Marseilles and Toulon.

In America, as private railway companies expanded west, they employed photographers to record the terrain along their intended routes. After the American civil war, by which time photography had advanced sufficiently to make travelling and developing negatives more manageable, photographers were dispatched like military scouts to survey the land.

One hundred and thirty years later, Mark Ruwedel, an American who studied as a painter and came to photography through the influence of the Land Art movement in the 1970s, has

recorded what little remains of these 19th-century projects. He is fascinated by what drove companies to lay tracks across thousands of miles of inhospitable landscape to carry minerals, people, goods and supplies westwards, and back again, in the name of progress, national pride and in pursuit of private wealth.
This is the subject of his exemplary new book of photographs, Westward the Course of Empire. It is the result of 15 years' work, which began in Utah, in 1994, with a trip to Promontory Summit, where the trans-continental railroad was completed in 1869. Of the pictures he took then, he writes, "the ones that interested me the most … reminded me of earlier images, both 19th-century landscape photographs of the American west and those I had already made of Michael Heizer's earthwork, Double Negative. I was hooked."

Over the next decade and a half, using old maps and driving thousands of miles, he walked and photographed along more than 130 abandoned railway lines that had once crossed hundreds of miles of desert and tunnelled through mountain ranges. As a focus for photographs of the wider, contemporary landscape, they provide an opportunity for the viewer to examine a country that, even now, is largely devoid of settlement.

In Ruwedel's pictures, it seems often as it must have done in the 1860s, when photographers such as Carleton Watkins first recorded it: astonishingly beautiful and full of natural drama. At the same time, the line of these abandoned tracks is enough to suggest over a century of exploitation, not just by rail, but by generations of prospectors and developers who have mined, forested, overbuilt and exhausted the country's natural resources.

Now that most people cross the United States or Canada by plane, bus, or car, it is difficult to imagine just how many railway companies there once were. Their names conjure up a time when new towns and settlements were being laid out along the railways, with little regard for adequate water supplies or means of cultivating the soil, and competing railroad companies joined up the dots: Picacho and Colorado River; Chicago Milwaukee St Paul and Pacific; Columbia and Western, to name a few.

Each of Ruwedel's prints (recently exhibited in Paris), has the name of the railroad company handwritten in pencil beneath it. This careful calligraphy, with its spacing marked by a pencil line top and bottom, is reproduced in the book, part of the attention to detail that makes the whole enterprise so calmly impressive.

It opens in the flatlands, with a series of photographs in which the line of the tracks is barely visible across the landscape. Only a telltale alteration in the colour and texture of the earth, or a slightly raised mound that marks the line of track ballast across which sleepers would have been laid, provides evidence of what was once a working line. Stretching into a distance, across hundreds, maybe thousands of miles, these faint traces lead almost invariably to a mountain range on the horizon. You can imagine exhausted railroad workers (many of them were Chinese immigrants from the west coast) gazing towards those same ranges nearly 150 years ago, wondering whether the land, and the work, would ever end.

From the prairie and the desert, the photographs move up through forests, to a series of dramatic railroad cuts through rock faces and mountain ranges, and then to the tunnels that were blasted through their core. Most of these black tunnel mouths are now serviced only by dirt tracks or have been abandoned. The last third of the book is dedicated to the relics of railroad trestles - the wooden honeycomb structures that straddled rivers and canyons and let the track down gently from the hills. These are the railroad bridges familiar from cowboy movies: vulnerable to ambush, usually involving an explosion that pitches the engine and its carriages into the gulley below. Despite the passage of time, they still represent spectacular feats of engineering, recorded here in various states of disrepair.

As Jock Reynolds, the director of the Yale University Art Gallery, writes in his essay, "Americans do not often think highly of the ruins in their midst." What was built by progress was soon destroyed by it. Reynolds describes the parlous state of the American railroad system, subject to massive delays and heavily subsidised by the government. His essay provides a good deal of historical background to the photographs and answers questions that arise when looking at them (such as, where have all the sleepers gone?). But it is the precision and clarity of Ruwedel's photographs that reveal his respect for the landscape, and for the pioneers whose paths he has followed.

In the same way that Robert Adams, the great photographer of the contemporary American west, and one of Ruwedel's influences, incorporates into his photographs the sense of

discovery and promise that historically was invested in the landscape, at the same time as revealing how that promise was betrayed, so Ruwedel's photographs combine the ambition and the folly of these engineering projects, abandoned so relatively quickly after their foundation. The success of his book is not only that it makes us consider what was achieved and what was lost, but that it shifts our thoughts forward, to think about ways in which, this time around, we might not plunder with so much enthusiasm and abandon at such cost.