

The Washington Post

Art Review | Accommodating Nature: The Photographs of Frank Gohlke

When Nature Shows Us Who's Boss:

By Michael O'Sullivan
Washington Post Staff Writer
Friday, Dec. 12, 2008

There's a war going on out there, and photographer Frank Gohlke, the subject of a career retrospective at the Smithsonian American Art Museum, has been documenting it for more than 30 years.

On one side is Man. On the other, Nature. Let's line the armies up.

In our arsenal: Electricity; architecture; the infrastructure of transportation (highways, railroads and airports). Agriculture and the harnessing of water; telecommunication systems; industry. The collateral damage? Pollution, for one thing.



In Nature's corner: Fire, ice, wind and other extremes of weather. Tornadoes, earthquakes, landslides, floods, lightning and volcanic eruptions. Need I go on? You get the picture.

You'll see all these things, and more, in Gohlke's art. He draws our attention to everything from the catastrophic aftermath of the Mount St. Helens eruption of 1980 to the comically unchecked growth of two topiary bushes dwarfing the entrance to a Texas bungalow. ("Exhaust from a vegetable rocket," he calls the 1979 picture in a video interview that accompanies the show.) The battle rages, he reminds us, in every green lawn and garden hose. A deceptively placid 1997 picture of a man pushing a mower in a sleepy Ohio town captures that eternal struggle in a nutshell. Lord of all he surveys? It's only the illusion of control.

Of course it isn't a fair fight. Nowhere is that better expressed than in a series of several before-and-after pictures taken in his home town of Wichita Falls, Tex., in April 1979 and then in June 1980.

At first glance, the pairs of pictures seem to have been reversed. Taken just after a major tornado, the "before" shots depict a landscape of devastation; the "after" shots show those same streets, rebuilt a little more than a year later. There is no trace of the devastating storm's destruction, except in one shot.

But we're conditioned to expect it the other way around. Picture A: Order. Picture B: Chaos. We already know that's the way that nature works. By playing with our expectations in the Wichita Falls pictures -- by showing us a fragile, man-made Eden arising out of the primordial soup -- he's reminding us, paradoxically, not of our dominion over the Earth, but of the futility of that notion.

Take a look at another pairing. In this one, taken 10 years after the Mount St. Helens eruption, Gohlke gives us what we may not want to see, but what we need to. The first shot shows tourists blithely gawking as they stand at the rim of the quiescent volcano. The second, taken 10 minutes later, shows them having retreated in terror as that rim disintegrated, the result of a tremor-induced landslide.

That's the real message of "Accommodating Nature: The Photographs of Frank Gohlke," a show whose title underscores the essence of give-and-take, of back-and-forth, in the ongoing pas de deux between mankind and Mother Nature. It's a dance in which she, not us, is leading.

Here's putting it another way. Gohlke writes that his Mount St. Helens pictures remind those foolishly cavalier tourists of one important fact about this beautiful place we call home. It's a fact that we forget at our peril: "They're living in a place that can kill them."