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Review Mark Ruwedel's photographs are hell on the eyes

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If cathedrals have traditionally been visualized as houses of God, what might the Devil's dwelling look like?

Not an enclosure, it seems, but more likely exposed terrain. Craggy, rugged, dry, but perhaps also verdant, with softly rolling hills. Relentlessly horizontal, or notched to inhibit easy passage. Sandy, rocky, scrubby or possibly coursing wet. The Devil, it seems, lives everywhere and nowhere.

Mark Ruwedel has been making "Pictures of Hell" for 20 years, creating a visual archive organized according to the typology of nomenclature. In his fine show at Luisotti, he assembles a grid of 21 prints, for instance, all representing places named Hell's Gate or Devil's Gate. Another grouping joins images of sites called Devil's Garden and Devil's Punchbowl.

The locations do not appear particularly inhospitable, treacherous or beguiling, in spite of their names. Nothing, in fact, typifies the places except for their names, but those names and their narrative of damnation inevitably influence how we view the places. The subtle, perceptual mechanics of this process undergird Ruwedel's project.

In his pictures, Ruwedel spikes the cool clarity and uniformity, the frontality and sense of middle-distance detachment common to so-called New Topographics with a reverential awe more characteristic of his 19th century forebears, Carleton Watkins and the like.

There is much descriptive detail and pristine beauty in these photographs. In their contradictions and the questionable moralistic cartography they document, perhaps too there is a bit of devilish mischief.