

## Mark Ruwedel's Desert History, as Fugitive Present

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By Sky Goodden •

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*"I'll show you fear in a handful of dust."*

– T.S. Eliot, *The Wasteland*

It's like peering through dusk, looking at Mark Ruwedel's desert photos. You think you're letting your eyes adjust, but they won't. At the center of this eventide is a door's mouth that goes repeated, adobe after adobe suggesting a focus within a wild and fallow space. The mouths are black, and though they lay entry to small and shallow houses – postwar prefab jobs in the act of desolation – you'd think that nothing, not a thing, could come behind those teeth. That if the Mojave wind blew through them, this is where it stopped.

Georgia O'Keeffe chased a door like these. She painted it almost twenty times in her effort to "get it," saving to buy the house that framed it, making its difficulty her abode. "It's a curse the way I feel – I must continually go on with that door," she said.



Ruwedel's subject, here, and his repetitions (with slight variations between them) pulls from a lineage of typologies, desert recordings, and the American frontier, the American South. He cites the dustbowl photographers, and updates the Depression in a thick wind that feels both historic and upsettingly present. Among his freighted forebears are the "New Topographics" of the 1970s and '80s, scanning the ruins of a post-industrial, postwar America with (what its landmark exhibition curator, William Jenkins, termed) "stylistic anonymity." Extending from this historic group are German photographers Bernd and Hilla Becher, of course, and their codification of industrial landscapes as they grew before them, obsolete. And then, for Ruwedel, Ed Ruscha proves all-essential, especially his early bookworks from the 1960s and '70s, in which "deadpan images of gas stations, palm trees, and apartment buildings function as an index of the spatial practices that shape everyday life in Los Angeles," writes Grant Arnold, in a recent monograph.

However Ruwedel's timing with this exhibition – his first with Toronto's Olga Korper Gallery – feels contemporary in a way you can't plan for. At the center of his focus are insignificant structures, improvised and deteriorating. They signal, actually, a remote history of cheap bunkers being erected after the Second World War – each one, seemingly, the only home for miles. Abandoned and hollowed out, they raise a profile against the night. Home, in this sense – temporary, impersonal – suggests quick entry and fleeting exit.



Mark Ruwedel, "Dusk #101," 2015. Image courtesy of the artist and Olga Korper Gallery.



Mark Ruwedel, "Dusk #90," 2013. Image courtesy of the artist and Olga Korper Gallery.



Mark Ruwedel, "Slab City #18," 2005. Image courtesy of the artist and Olga Korper Gallery.

When Ruwedel brings the light up, and the sun burns off the fog, the adobes appear more provisional, still. They are, at once, more narratively specific, and more fugitive. Water-filled soda bottles weight a folding plastic table on which a solitary pair of sneakers points towards the sun. This is minimal but pointed detritus; a makeshift scene, maybe whimsical or maybe urgent. In either case, abandoned. Forts made out of mattresses. Trees whose nettled branches nearly obscure their sheeted shelters. Arnold, a curator and art historian, aptly notes in his essay on Ruwedel how color photography, when placed alongside its black-and-white counterpart, can inherently make its subjects appear contemporary. This is true, of course, perhaps here especially, where black-and-white means postwar bunker, and color means the body's imprint on a still-warm mattress. However the contemporary aspect of Ruwedel's makeshift subjects, under high noon or in the hot stream of his setting suns, feels especially contemporary given the flight of the world, right now. We are no longer walking away over the course of a generation from dust-browed bungalows; we are fleeing wars like desert storms. Even the subprime mortgage crisis in the States moved people across its landscape in such a way as to revive the image of Walker Evans. The wind is rarely behind us, now, but in our teeth.



The tribal protests that recently embanked the Missouri and Cannonball rivers in North Dakota remind us that Ruwedel's survey of the American frontier, and its many escarpments, erosions, and unnatural inlays over the centuries that followed, is not one whose subject is history. The questions of "where is home," and "what is ours" run through this art like a stream into which you cannot step twice. So too does the question of when, in a sandy stronghold on land that is, in so many ways, constantly shifting, is one's grasp simply too firm? When does one let go, and when, by contrast, is it important to hold on?

There are two doll-like houses photographed in cinematic, unreal light that foot this exhibition. They are ideals, appearing like dusk-time maquettes glowing outward, benevolent. They usher in a reminder of structural integrity and the way it can impose, at its most refined, moral virtue. In this exhibition they are one thing too many, for me, a gesture that's so on-the-nose, or pique, as to stop-up the complexity they might be capable of, apart.



Mark Ruwedel, "Hope," 2010. Image courtesy of the artist and Olga Korper Gallery.



Mark Ruwedel, "LP Quartet," 2009. Image courtesy of the artist and Olga Korper Gallery.

I double-back to the last images that retain the feeling of the show, and burrow down into their hard shapes, their sun-bleached ossein. Ruwedel shot warped vinyl records he found in the sand, modeled by heat and time. They are a common item of refuse, apparently. The way they look, like that, from above, they look like the round discs of our bodies, like the hips of an animal that's dead. They look like the moving center of zero. Again, I think of O'Keeffe, those bones she painted repeatedly, along with that door. Each of these the same thing, in essence: a form she can't get through. A thing she was trying to grasp, but failed to call her own.

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