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The city is a prism: Mark Ruwedel's images of Los Angeles

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Review



Mark Ruwedel, *Downstream, 2017-19 (Los Angeles River)*, 12 – gelatin silver prints dry mounted to archival watercolor paper with digitally printed text, each 8 x 10 in. prints dry mounted to paper 16 x 20 in. © Mark Ruwedel, Courtesy of Gallery Luisotti, Los Angeles.

“Devising a guide is a good way to explain a city,” Reyner Banham once offered, lending some voiceover to the 1972 BBC documentary *Reyner Banham Loves Los Angeles*. At the start of the film, the British architecture and design critic has just touched down at LAX, found his cream-colored rental car, and successfully sailed on over to Century Boulevard. “And Los Angeles needs some explaining,” he adds, over some overblown footage of the passing pavement and palm trees. His tone lowers, swerving into distinctly British disdain. “It’s normally regarded as an *unspeakable*, sprawling *mess*,” he pooh-poohs. Then, a rhetorical U-turn: “though not—certainly not—by *me*.”¹

A year earlier, Banham penned *Los Angeles: The Architecture of Four Ecologies*, a book that was quickly canonized as one of the city’s most groundbreaking guides. Approaching LA as an outsider, he divided its developed areas into four types of terrain—each as hospitable to Americans’ home-owning dreams as the last. Weary of dense, gridded urban centers, Banham celebrated southern California’s sprawl, signage, and interstate highways with his characteristic élan. (An environmentalist he was not.) A year later, *Learning from Las Vegas* echoed these sentiments, and the two books ushered in new enthusiasm for “Pop” styles and postmodernist architecture. In *City of Quartz*, Mike Davis recalls how *Four Ecologies* was “adopted universally as *the* textbook on Los Angeles,” and prompted a “turning point in the valuation of the city by the international intelligentsia.”²

Four Ecologies exalted Los Angeles as the world's portent for a "post-urban," suburban future. The world got on board.



Mark Ruwedel, *San Timoteo Canyon #1* (2017). Gelatin silver print dry mounted to archival mat board. 11 x 14 in. print mounted to board 20 x 24 in. © Mark Ruwedel, Courtesy of Gallery Luisotti, Los Angeles.

Banham's book might seem a curious reference, then, for the photographer Mark Ruwedel's latest body of work, *Los Angeles: Landscapes of Four Ecologies*. Though it emulates the treatise in name, structure, and subject material, it submits an altogether different vision of the same city. Across dozens of stately, black-and-white photographs—a selection of which have recently been staged at Gallery Luisotti from September 20, 2024 through January 4th, 2025, as part of 2024's Getty-coordinated Pacific Standard Time ART event "Art & Science Collide"—there isn't a housing development or highway to be seen. Reading the city through its natural phenomena, Ruwedel's co-optation of the term "ecologies" becomes much more literal. His project fixates on places that haven't been paved to put up a parking lot—yet—but that still show traces of urban encroachment. Pipelines, powerlines, and overpasses make occasional appearances, but their presence causes more perturbation than promise. Banham had high hopes for

human development, but Ruwedel seems hell-bent on reminding us that nature was there first.

Like Banham, Ruwedel became acquainted with Los Angeles in adulthood, moving to Long Beach from the East Coast at the age of forty-eight. But he wasn't a stranger to the mythos of the region: "I grew up with this idea that California was the golden land," he recalled in a 2018 interview for *Aperture*.³ Having now lived in LA for over two decades, Ruwedel has embarked on—to use Banham's words—some explaining of his own. The photographer devised a new quartet of categories by which to sort the sprawl, and clearly savors the mapmaking sociology of it all. Conceptual constraints can be liberating for camera-based artists; apparatuses typically thrive under apparatuses. Ruwedel is no exception, and his new ecologies shadow those of Banham quite closely, with civilization subtracted.



Mark Ruwedel, *Malibu #19* (2022). Gelatin silver print dry mounted to archival mat board, 16 x 20 in. print mounted to board 24 x 30 in. © Mark Ruwedel, Courtesy of Gallery Luisotti, Los Angeles.

The former's first category was "surfurberia," which referred to the burgeoning residential neighborhoods along the coastline, frothy with frontier-y potential. Ruwedel's analogue is "The Western Edge." Banham subsequently outlined the "foothills"—clusters of mansions nestled into leveled mountains from the Palisades to Pasadena, where the "fat life" of "Hollywood's classic years" lives on.⁴ Ruwedel's riposte: "Mountains and Canyons." Banham coined the "plains of Id" to describe the vast expanses of "central flatlands," which, though dense with Dingbat apartments, still allowed "the Angeleno, his car and his house" to "sprawl with ease."⁵ Ruwedel, taking vast expanses to the next level, chose "Haunted By the Desert," a phrase taken from Dame Joan Didion. Banham's last ecology was "Autopia," LA's churning network of freeways, which he considered a fundamentally "democratic" yet "mystical" habitat, where residents spend the bulk of their lives. Ruwedel reveals a rarer aspect of Los Angeles—its watershed—with "A River Runs Through It."

Gallery Luisotti and co-curator Sally Stein arrange Ruwedel's works dutifully, in clear keeping with the photographer's system and vision. However, it would be incorrect to imply that *Landscapes of Four Ecologies* amounts only to a rigid polemic. Generally, Ruwedel's pictures sit squarely in the tradition of "straight" photography, aiming to show but not steer. The works on view from "A River Runs Through It," for example, unveil a realm of creeks, tributaries, wetlands, and estuaries, pocketed within our otherwise parched and paved metropolis. The LA River is often shot from eye level, mid-channel; the body of water appears as vast, powerful, and dynamic as Banham's beloved freeways. Ruwedel seems to rejoice in his camera's ability to capture the cacophony of detail at the Arroyo Seco, Haskell Creek, and the Ballona Wetlands, which are deliriously crowded with untamed vegetation. This "sprawling mess" is beautiful, impossible to parse, entirely resistant to human reasoning. Its chaos contrasts beautifully with Ruwedel's otherwise orderly, stoic approach.



Mark Ruwedel, *LA River View #4A* (2017). Gelatin silver prints dry mounted to archival watercolor paper with digitally printed text. 8 x 10 in. prints dry mounted to paper 16 x 20 in. © Mark Ruwedel, Courtesy of Gallery Luisotti, Los Angeles.

That tension reaches its apogee in *Downstream*, a grid of smaller prints from the same series. All of Ruwedel's other images are more medium-sized, at 11×14 or 16×20 inches. Printed on 8×10 paper, these river views are compact, repetitive, but full of fine detail. Presented this way, the work veers away from mainstream fine-art stratagems and into the delta of documentary tradition. Ruwedel's practice is often likened to that of Bernd and Hilla Becher, but only here is that comparison of any real use. In the margins of matboard above and below each print, Ruwedel has printed each site's identifying details in small, serif type. It's the photographer's first experiment with image and text, and, for a foray so *factual*, the annotation is a nice touch. Another new experiment is a series of hand-drawn maps on watercolor paper—one for each of his four ecologies—which greet visitors to the gallery. Ruwedel labels identifying details in colored pencil, and adorns empty areas with cursive quotes from Mike Davis, Mark Reiser, and a few other usual suspects. They lend the show a cloistered, studious charm.

Ruwedel's images of southern California's coastlines, canyons, and deserts adhere to a more classical approach. With stoic precision, the photographer succeeds in demonstrating what he refers to as the "conflict between Arcadian and Utopian impulses." He captures a barren hilltop in the Verdugo mountains after the 2017 La Tuna fire, erosion in the Palos Verdes Hills, and—for his only foray into color—the last remaining orange orchards in the Inland Empire. They run dangerously close to reiterating "Los Angeles Spring," the mid-eighties "elegy for an ideal botanic world" by his forebear Robert Adams, another series of black-and-white landscapes. That project was chiefly pictorial—a quest for new beauty using old means. This is, in part, why tethering this new project to Banham's original *Ecologies* was wise. Guides, or maps, or methodologies do not merely show us what to look at, but how to look in a new way. They make no promises of completeness, and they point back to the limits of their own perspectives. Ruwedel knows this, as Banham did too, each using the same prism to see the same city in altogether different ways. If any one of us peered through it, we'd see our own rendition, too, partial and prejudiced but nonetheless real.



Mark Ruwedel, *Signal Hill #3* (2007). Gelatin silver print dry mounted to archival mat board. 11 x 14 in. print mounted to board 20 x 24 in. © Mark Ruwedel, Courtesy of Gallery Luisotti, Los Angeles.

Mark Ruwedel, Los Angeles: Landscapes of Four Ecologies

Gallery Luisotti

September 20, 2024 to January 4, 2025

This review was made possible thanks to the **generous support of Pier 24 Photography.**

1. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WIZ0NbC-YDo> 1972, BBC. ↩
2. City of Quartz, p 74. ↩
3. <https://archive.aperture.org/article/2018/3/3/john-divola-mark-ruwedel> ↩
4. Four Ecologies, p83 ↩
5. Four Ecologies, p159 ↩

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