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Places

Title

Portfolio -- Showing Us the Way It Was

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/69b4v8n8>

Journal

Places, 21(1)

ISSN

0731-0455

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Publication Date

2009-05-19

Peer reviewed

Showing Us the Way It Was

Photographs by Curtis Hamilton

American landscape photographs taken in the middle of the last century might show us pristine subjects without, say, parking lots and visitor centers (think Ansel Adams): pure nature or something like that. Some decades later we might be shown nature marred by tire tracks. Criticism of those who were responsible for taking care of the land did not seem to be the purpose of the later pictures. Scale and images of the way things really looked seemed to be the goal.

The photographs reproduced here, taken last fall in northern Alberta, Canada, by the New York photographer Curtis Hamilton, clearly offer reality: this is the way the places he saw looked. His subjects are fields of “oil sands,” and two interesting remarks can be made about them. One is that the U.S. can get more oil from this place in Canada than it does from any other place in the world—more oil than comes from the Persian Gulf for instance. So the news is good? On the other hand, Susan Casey-Lefkowitz, a senior attorney with the National Resources Defense Council in Washington, D.C., says of this source of oil, “It’s one of the most destructive projects on earth.”¹

So what do the photographs reproduced here say? One of them may be worth a thousand words, but a picture’s message is always somewhat different from that of the words. We can give more careful attention to good photographs whose meanings are not explained by texts and read good texts with much more care when they are not decorated with photographs. (And yet here you are being told about the photographs you’re going to see; perhaps an introduction is acceptable but explanatory captions are to be avoided.) The bad news about these fields gave Curtis his motivation to travel to Alberta and gives his remarkable work the energy it clearly has. The photographs are “telling” but what precisely are they, or other photographs of place unpropped up by texts, actually saying besides “this is the way it really was”?

— *Cervin Robinson*

Note

1. Ian Austen, “The Costly Compromises of Oil From Sand,” *NYTimes.com*, January 6, 2009.















