Sustainable vision,

or the art of seeing gracefully

Adrian Ivakhiv

Introduction to the exhibition

"Natural Grace; Images for a Sustainable Future"

http://www.uvm.edu/~aivakhiv/sustainable_vision.htm

Paintings, prints & collaborations by Cameron Davis, Davis TeSelle, and Janet Fredericks/Dona Seegers

Amy Tarrant Gallery at the Flynn Center for Performing Arts, Burlington, Vermont
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For images, see http://www.global-community.org/gallery/album105

At first glance, seeing would seem to be the most innocent of actions, so passive (and so ubiquitous) as to be a *non*-act. From the first blazing whorl of light and color, the 'blooming buzzing confusion' that greets the newborn's eyes, through the days- and years-long process of recognizing objects within the visual sensorium, vision appears to give us the world as it is, in its sheer *thereness* and immediacy.

But seeing is an act in which we participate, whether we admit to it or not. We look with a gaze that may be gentle, soft, caring, curious, vulnerable, compassionate, and loving, a gaze which recognizes the seen as also seeing, sharing in the act of mutual vision. Or it can be voyeuristic, penetrating, accusatory, or sadistic, an 'evil eye' or a cold, hard stare which puts its objects 'in their place' as resources, possessions, things to be used (or abused).

In an insightful meditation on the phenomenology of seeing, philosopher David Michael Levin contrasts the cold, detached vision of the Cartesian gaze, the dominant vision of the modern world, with the immersed and immersive, moist and heartfelt vision embodied in the first act of the newborn's eyes, the emotional outflow of tears. 'In the vision and crying of the infant, there is a symbiotic (con)fusion of subject and object,' the baseline of a relationality that is meaningful, heartfelt, needy and connective. Light appears here as a flickering, sometimes jarring, but always affective medium which breaks in upon the vulnerable body. Light is neither separate nor distinct from touch, motion, sound, voice, temperature, the whole fleshy, polymorphic intertwining of bodies and sensations. And as the child's vision becomes more acute and refined, the eyes develop their potential to be not

only ‘windows on the world,’ but ‘mirrors of the soul,’ both taking in and expressing outward in relationship with others.

But the vision that has dominated Western modernity has been sharply focused, clearly fixed on its object, which is almost always conceived of as directly in front of the viewer, in the middle of the visual field, open to inspection, analysis, and judgment. Emerging in the Renaissance, single-point perspective, as Erwin Panofsky put it, presumes ‘first, that we see with a single and immobile eye, and second, that the planar cross section of the visible pyramid can pass for an adequate reproduction of our optical image.’ Neither of these presumptions finds a pure basis in lived reality. The ascendancy of classical linear perspective, wrote historian Martin Jay, meant that the ‘participatory involvement of more absorptive visual modes was diminished, if not entirely suppressed, as the gap between spectator and spectacle widened.’ When this gaze fell on objects of desire, ‘it did so largely in the service of a reifying male look that turned its targets into stone.’ This visual order produced a ‘de-narrativisation or de-textualisation,’ with the rendering of the scene becoming an end in itself for the artist. Vision, over the course of the last three centuries, became the paradigm for knowledge: we know by virtue of seeing things as they are, at a distance from ourselves, even as we probe ever deeper into the texture of the world with our technologically enhanced optics and our cutting, measuring, and surveying devices.

Modern notions of the beautiful, the sublime, and the picturesque, were built on this substrate of Cartesian perspectivalism. Whether emphasizing smoothness and delicacy (the beautiful), extremes of magnitude and power (the sublime), or a middle-ground between the two (the picturesque), landscape art constructs the world as a series of pictures, each framed by a window. The European colonization of other lands, Albert Boime argued, was facilitated by the ‘magisterial gaze,’ a mastering and panoramic view from on high, which constructs land as a scenic vista and spectacle, to be gazed at and admired for its sweeping visual beauty and to thereby be possessed by its viewer. ‘To colonise,’ wrote John Dorst, ‘was to occupy a position from which the colonial object could be seen coherently as an artifact available for appropriation.’ Cartographic and photographic technologies strengthened the ocularcentrism of Western culture, making possible the birth of the ‘world picture’ and the ‘conquest of the world as picture,’ which, according to philosopher Martin Heidegger, allowed the natural world to be transformed into a ‘standing reserve’ to be surveyed, unlocked, and transformed into usable energy. Vision here is detached, dispassionate; it surveys and encompasses, calculating and categorizing with one sweep of the glance. Our eye on the world echoes the way in which God is supposed to have surveyed his creation – from a distance that enabled Him to judge according to criteria that were objective and universal, with little room for local or contextual variability. In this way of seeing, the world *can* be known and

evaluated because the knower is not in that world, not intimately entangled in the myriad relationships that make it up.

The tail ends of artistic modernism – impressionism and post-impressionism, Dada and Surrealism, cubism, abstract expressionism, and so on – and perhaps even such scientific developments as relativity and Heisenbergian uncertainty, have whittled away at this Cartesian legacy, and postmodernism has left it in tatters. But in their wake, photography and television have stepped in to supplement the ocular esthetic with an even more pervasive and specular visuality. In the postmodern era, the perspectives have been multiplied such that we find ourselves in a hall of mirrors: advertisements and billboards hail us with idealized images of ourselves, surveillance cameras eye us from above, and personal videocams swing from our shoulders as we work, play, and travel in foreign countries (or do all at once, as the visual souvenirs of the humiliated trophy victims of US soldiers in Iraq recently showed us). In the 'society of the spectacle' and the era of mass home videos, 'to be is to be perceived: seen, noticed, brought forth into the visibility of the spectacle.' The stare of the camera remains predatory even as it sediments itself into the very texture of our lives.

The ecology of images

How can *ecological* images possibly compete in this din? The clichés of what Andrew Ross has called 'images of ecology' are well known and, perhaps, all the less effective for it:

> belching smokestacks, seabirds mired in petrochemical sludge, fish floating belly-up, traffic jams in Los Angeles and Mexico City, and clearcut forests; on the other hand, the redeeming repertoire of pastoral imagery, pristine, green, and unspoiled by human habitation, crowned by the ultimate global spectacle, the fragile, vulnerable ball of spaceship earth.

Environmental dystopia set in stark contrast to the utopian impulse, both relics of a Romanticism that sees nature as a rejuvenating Eden, on the one hand, and as a 'raped' and exhausted victim of man's transgression, on the other (the ubiquity of that sexual metaphor being all the more striking for the casualness with which it is customarily uttered). In both cases, there is nature, which came first, and there are we, overcoming it in glory or in hollow and deadly hubris. Somewhere, somehow, the fleshy, flickering, mutually vulnerable relationality of the infant-body-world has been lost in the harsh glare of these battle lines.

Even the pictorial representation of nature by environmental conservationists often shows a tension between the possessive, magisterial gaze – or, as in the hands of the nineteenth century Hudson River School painters, or of Ansel Adams and his

followers, a more awestruck and monumental sublime – and a gentler, more intimate and dialogical 'being in and with nature.' When Eliot Porter was commissioned by Harold Hochschild, president of the Adirondack Museum, to photograph the Adirondack mountains for a coffee-table book that would help protect the park from development, Hochschild requested broad, magisterial views in order to establish the grandiosity of the mountain range in the minds of readers. But Porter insisted on including intimate close-ups of woodland details, showing little that could not be seen in almost any northeast woodland (of which there still were some around, despite logging rates far beyond sustainable), because such intimacy better reflected his emotional responses to the park.

Images of pastoral nature may still have the intended impact for some, but for the jaded and image-saturated majority they do not. In addition to such 'images of ecology,' however, Ross argues that there is an 'ecology of images' – an ethics and politics which concerns the technologies by which images are made, the economics by which they are produced, circulated, and consumed, the ecologics of the resources extracted and wastes left in their wake, and what we might call the 'epistemologics' by which these images affect our perception of the world and of ourselves. Susan Sontag argued several years ago that the mass reproducibility of the image reduces the world to aesthetic and commercial resources – scenic views to be gawked at from the side of a highway, potential photographs and postcards – and turns us into 'tourists of reality' and 'image junkies.' It was this sort of image addiction that filmmaker Wim Wenders set out to critique in his 1991 film *Until the End of the World*, but the lesson to be learned from Wenders' exercise was simply that image addiction can easily become just another image. The film presented an apocalyptic narrative with characters jet-setting between Venice, Berlin, Lisbon, Moscow, Beijing, Tokyo, and San Francisco, before retreating to the glitz-less Australian outback, where the image-addicted characters walked around gazing intently, almost furiously, into hand-held 'vision machines' which turn their dreams into images. As an antidote to image addiction, Wenders seemed to suggest the storytelling traditions of Australian aborigines (which paralleled another of his films, the celebrated *Wings of Desire*, in which an old Jewish storyteller wandering amid the pre-Fall of the Wall Berlin represented Wenders' own idealized, if sadly powerless, persona). But presenting an argument *against* images – an iconoclasm taking its cue as much from Reformation Protestantism as from Romantic anti-industrialism – in the most monumental form of spectacular imagery available in our time, that of a multi-million dollar movie with multiple crews spanning several countries, seems disingenuous at best. The 'ecology' of Wenders's images was paradoxically, even painfully, inconsistent with the message he seemingly wanted to convey.

Materiality, texture, practice

Just as food and consumer goods, as far as most North Americans are concerned, come respectively from the supermarket and the mall, not from laborers working on a plantation in Chile or a factory in Thailand, so images appear to come from a world from which they were innocently plucked, like apples from a tree growing in Old Macdonald's farm. Environmental, organic-agriculture and 'slow food' activists urge us to think about where things come from and where they go – to render the ecological production cycle conscious and more visible, with the aid of labels warning us of the presence of GM foods, rBGH, and so on, and with the hope that we might revive a more local, bioregional, face-to-face and responsible system of production. In the same way, one could argue that we should increase our awareness of the 'sources' and 'sinks' of the *images* that fill and structure our worlds. The ecology of image-making requires us to ask questions about the chemical and industrial underpinnings of the photographic, paint, and art-materials industries, the economics of access to image-making technology, and the epistemological impacts of seeing and representing certain things (people, places, landscapes) in certain ways. Do we even need more images of nature, of trees and lakes and pastoral landscapes? What functions do they fill for us? What of the codependence of pastoral imagery and regional tourist industries? Is there a criterion of truth whereby one might judge an image as a more or less honest representation of life in a particular place or bioregion?

Such questions are *materialist* questions; they raise the issue of the world's materiality and our connection, and the connection of our cultural practices, with that materiality. No matter what their medium, artists manipulate the Earth's matter (and energy), shaping and reshaping it, and in the process they convey and perpetuate a relationship between themselves as makers (shapers, assemblers, arrangers, crafters, selecters, interpreters), the materials from which their art is made, and the world from which that making proceeds and which it in turn affects.

The Earth Art and Land Art movements which emerged in the late 1960s brought such issues to the forefront. In contrast to their European counterparts, Robert Smithson, Michael Heizer, Walter DeMaria, and Dennis Oppenheim launched the Earthworks movement with dramatic and often monumental interventions in the landscape. But others since have retreated to a less muscular gesturalism, intervening more gracefully, as it were, into landscapes that are always both social and natural. Environmental artists have pursued a vision of the artist as collaborator with the Earth, manipulator of its materials (soil, stone, water, ice, wood, leaves, trees, along with slag and industrial waste) but locked in an embrace with its rhythms (tides, winds, the passage of days and nights and of sunlight and shadow, the force of gravity and decay).

The best of recent environmental art reminds us of the evanescence of the world, its vitality and its autonomy, but also of our own mortality in its midst. It

replaces static representations of the world with dynamic and collaborative forms of interaction with that world's materiality. The ephemeral, site-specific and nature-based works of Andy Goldsworthy, Chris Drury, David Nash, and Peter Hutchinson; the solitary landscape walks of Richard Long, Hamish Fulton, and Christian Philipp Müller; the performance rituals of Joseph Beuys, Mary Beth Edelson, Charles Simonds, and Ana Mendieta; the gardens, reed-bed installations, and 'sanctuariums' of herman de vries, Ian Hamilton Finlay, Patricia Johansen, and Meg Webster; the ecological restoration and reclamation interventions of Alan Sonfist, Mierle Laderman Ukeles, the PLATFORM collective, Helen Mayer Harrison and Newton Harrison, Avital Geva, Michael Singer, Lorna Jordan, Mel Chin, Viet Ngo, and Betsy Damon; the 'trans-species art' of Lynne Hull; and the 'postnatural' landscape photography of Richard Misrach and Peter Goin or the videos of Bill Viola – what is most striking across this spectrum is the interaction between these artists and the temporal and material realities of the environments in which they work. The photographs, books, and exhibition catalogues that result from their efforts are reports, documents, traces, not the thing itself. They may hang on walls, but they do so as records of a movement (or process) that has occurred in a place which, no matter how 'natural' it may appear, has seen previous movement, and which continues to 'move' and metamorphose through the work of these artists in other real places and real landscapes. Their art is better conceived as a form of process, an ongoing performance that bespeaks of an engaged relationship with the social and natural ecologies of the world.

The works exhibited in *Natural Grace: Images for a Sustainable Future* follow in this tradition of symbiotic collaboration with nature. Dona Seegers' and Janet Fredericks' collaborative *Being in Water/Water Chronicles* found them drawing under water and submerging and exposing drawings on watercolor paper to ice, rain, snow, fog, and dew. In one of the works in this series, Fredericks allowed the currents of the New Haven River to initiate the movement of her own arms as she added lithographic crayon markings to a submerged paper, thereby capturing the 'language of water' (the artist remarks that the crayon was perfect for drawing in water without releasing ink into the river). To this and similar pieces she and Seegers added watercolors, acrylics, inks, and fragments of text (dates, locations, ideas and insights received in the process). Paintings inspired by sunsets over Moose Pond near Seegers' Maine home were suspended in the frozen pond for several weeks, to be taken out and later stained and adorned with paint, grass clippings, and seaweed from Ogunquit Beach on the Maine coast. The two artists sent each other works-in-progress for further addition, deletion, and refinement in collaboration with the elements, making up a back-and-forth circuit into which additional aleatoric or unconscious elements might enter into the dialogue.

Seegers' more recent *Earth* involved planting squares of watercolor paper in her freshly tilled garden, pouring on thin paint and letting the papers remain in the

earth for a week, then rubbing color over the dried dirt, hanging them out in the woods, and modifying the 'pages' (ripping, curling, stacking, marking, painting, layering) to create a book/installation as sensuous, intimately layered and richly colored as the overlay of rock, bark, seeds, leaves, pods, roots and soil found in a walk through the woods. Analogously, Fredericks' *Woodland* presents a kind of anti-cartographic map of the woods behind her own home at the edge of the Green Mountains in Lincoln, Vermont, with the names of plants, a stream, and her walking path traced through those woods, making for something that is equal parts topographic map and pictograph or 'chorograph,' a space already diversified into the concrete meanings and particulars of an extended home place.

Davis TeSelle's lithographs and Cameron Davis's paintings take a more 'traditional' approach to art-making, but one that is no less sensitive to issues of the 'ecology of images.' The works of both negotiate the tensions between two ways of seeing – one more direct and 'objective,' which aims to visually capture the object under observation in a clear and deconxtextualized representation of its physical appearance; the second a softer, more field-like observation, a 'visual listening' (as the artists' collective statement puts it) to the larger ground or matrix within which nature and culture, the material and the spiritual (in Davis's case), and discrete objects and the artists themselves are perceived as a blurred or dialectically intertwined unity.

TeSelle sees himself as working with the tensions and contradictions between the natural and the cultural; yet the overwhelming impression of his lithographs and glass drawings is that of a 'pattern language' – one of textural rhythms and markings – that is the common heritage of nature and an ecologically attuned culture. Teselle's most recent work is a series of studies of indigenous plant seeds from the desert Southwest and northern Mexico. In the case of *Phaseolus vulgaris*, or the common bean, the object under observation may look 'wild,' but, according to the artist, it has actually been 'cultivated in a long, intricate and delicate reciprocity.' One work in this series presents what the artist calls a 'ceremonial field of integration' of opposites: the germinating bean seeds are laid out over washes of crayon and ink variously scratched, erased, and modified on glass plates which have been processed and overlaid as a series of overlapping fields or 'grounds.' The shape of the germinating seeds is echoed in the 'field' background in which we can discern a 'hidden calligraphy of the earth,' inspired by the artist's observation of cilia in soil. The title, *Miracle Enough*, refers to TeSelle's belief that native seeds contain more than what can be gained through the accelerated processes inherent in the 'miracle' interventions of the producers of genetically-engineering and -modified foods. The work thus functions both as the artist's collaboration with the seeds themselves and as a form of cultural critique (a combination to which I will return in a moment).

Cameron Davis's works are perhaps the most symbolist of those in this exhibition. *Limina: Painted Prayers for Threshold Times* is titled in reference to a series of thresholds (or *limens)* on which the artist perceives humanity as being perched in our environmentally destructive (and post 9-11, neo-imperialist) times. Having originated as a kind of prayer made of equal parts grief/despair and fragile hope, and which therefore 'felt' to the artist 'as if they should be light,' not heavy, the work consists of pencil sketches, acrylic, Xerox transfers, and found images on soft cloth, rice-paper, and sustainably harvested plant materials from Nepal, all giving it the quality of a series of interconnected prayer flags waving in the wind. Both here and in other works such as *Wild Iris Supine* and *Domina*, organic patterns emerge out of a field of energies punctuated by cultural (and at times occult) symbols and signs drawn from Christian and Goddess iconography, insects (dragonflies, bees, and butterflies), vegetation and bone imagery, and, in *Domina*, red X's and tear-like paint drippings which seem to serve as reminders of the blood that flows through generations of life and of history both as its most vital fluid and the mark of its violence. Like TeSelle, Davis works at the threshold of the precisely visible object and the larger field that connects the things of the world with ourselves – a distinction which she derives from the meditative practice of *Drishti* (soft gaze), which involves looking into the world while maintaining a multidimensional awareness of its connectedness. In the work of both artists, one finds a keen awareness of the thresholds and precipices on which the future of humanity itself seems to hang.

Art and the biodegradable

In what sense are these 'images for a sustainable future'? One could argue that the most 'sustainable' images are the ones that go away, decaying and decomposing back into the earth from which they emerge; anything short of that simply adds more stuff to an already saturated world. Not indefinite sustainability, but mutability, metamorphosis, transience, acceptance of change – these are the themes by which humans might best create a culture that engages creatively and respectfully with the world around it. Jacques Derrida's ruminations on literature and biodegradability seem apposite here. A piece of writing, Derrida writes,

must be '(bio)degradable' in order to nourish the 'living' culture, memory, tradition. To the extent to which it has some sense, makes sense, then its 'content' irrigates the milieu of this tradition and its 'formal' identity is dissolved. […] And yet, to enrich the 'organic' soil of the said culture, it must also resist it, contest it, question and criticize it enough […] and thus it must not be assimilable […]. Or, at least, it must be assimilated as inassimilable, kept in reserve, unforgettable because irreceivable, capable of inducing meaning without being exhausted by meaning […].

This tension between assimilability (comprehensibility, social resonance) and critique presents a high standard by which to judge the work of artists. What will enrich the soil of our culture, while withstanding the 'full assimilation' by which it would be simply co-opted into a medium perpetuating current patterns of production and 'conspicuous' art consumption?

Some of these works can be sold, hung on walls, and circulated through the machinery/economy of the art world; others cannot (except as documents of the 'real thing,' that being an art work which is itself a document of an interaction with natural process). But taken collectively, they add to the critique of a certain way of seeing and propose a different one in its place. In the sensibility represented by these artists, 'grace' appears not as some *mysterium tremendum* looming before us or possessing us with its sublime power – not as the awesome and transcendent spectacles that were the focus of the nineteenth century American landscape painters of the Hudson River and Rocky Mountain schools. Rather, this kind of seeing seeks out the everyday *gracedness* of things, the heightened texture and luminosity which opens up when we look at the world through those slightly moistened, compassionate and vulnerable eyes, eyes which are embodied and fully situated within the world on which they gaze gently, intently yet carefully and caringly. It is this insight into the 'ecology of seeing' – a seeing that is not fixed hard on its object, but which moves between the clear gaze and the indistinct 'felt sense,' as it moves also between the natural and the cultural, and the artist and the thing observed – that the present exhibition contributes to the ecology of images.

Adrian Ivakhiv, May, 2004

NOTES

David Michael Levin, *The Opening of Vision: Nihilism and the Postmodern Situation* (New York and London: Routledge, 1988), p. 188.

Erwin Panofsky, *Perspective as Symbolic Form* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1991), pp. 29-30.

Martin Jay, 'Scopic regimes of modernity,' in S. Lash and J. Friedman, *Modernity and Identity,* ed. S. Lash and J. Friedman (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992), pp. 181-2. See also M. Jay, *Downcast Eyes: The Denigration of Vision in Twentieth-Century French Thought* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994).

Albert Boime, *The Magisterial Gaze: Manifest Destiny and American Landscape Painting, c. 1830-1865* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1991).

John Dorst, *Looking West* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999), p. 195.

Heidegger, Martin, 'The Age of the World Picture,' in *The Question Concerning Technology,* trans. and ed. W. Lovitt (New York: Harper and Row, 1977).

Levin (1988), p. 15.

Andrew Ross, *The Chicago Gangster Theory of Life: Nature's Debt to Society* (London: Verso, 1994), p. 171.

Susan Sontag, *On Photography* (New York: Dell, 1977).

See Jeffrey Kastner and Brian Wallis, *Land and Environmental Art* (London: Phaidon, 1998); Sue Spaid, *Ecovention: Current Art to Transform Ecologies* (Cleveland: Ram Publications, 2002); Mel Gooding and William Furlong, *Artists Land Nature* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 2002).

On this distinction between cartography and chorography, see Edward Casey's wonderful book *Representing Place: Landscape Paintings and Maps* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002), especially pp. 154-170.

Jacques Derrida, 'Biodegradables: Seven diary fragments,' *Critical Inquiry* 15 (1989), p. 845.

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