

Deborah Ford:

Cartography and the Cultural Terrain



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Organized and Presented By:



Paris Gibson Square
MUSEUM OF ART

July 22 - October 23, 2010

Reception 5:30 - 7:30pm July 22nd
ArtShare Presentation by Deborah Ford at 6:00pm

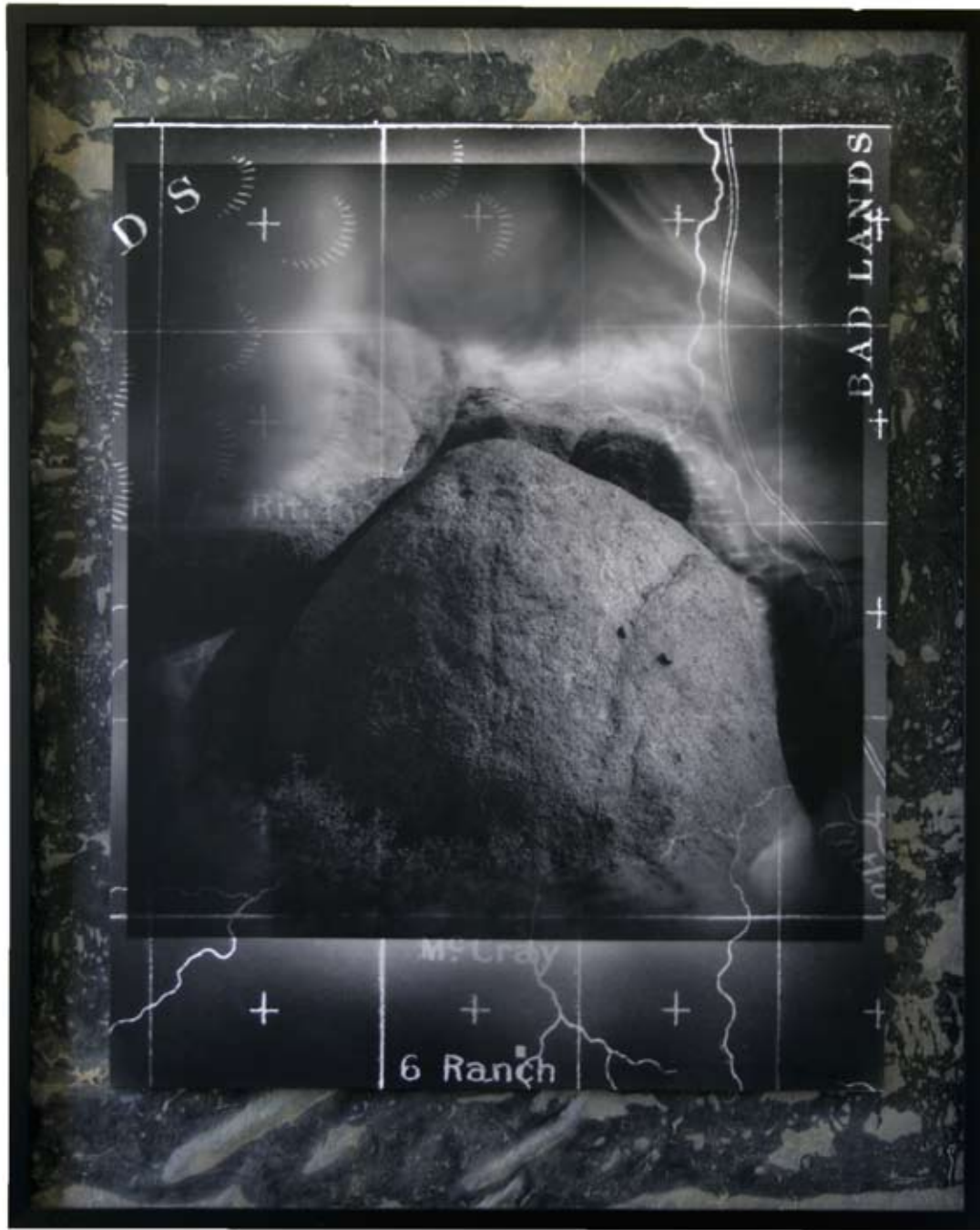
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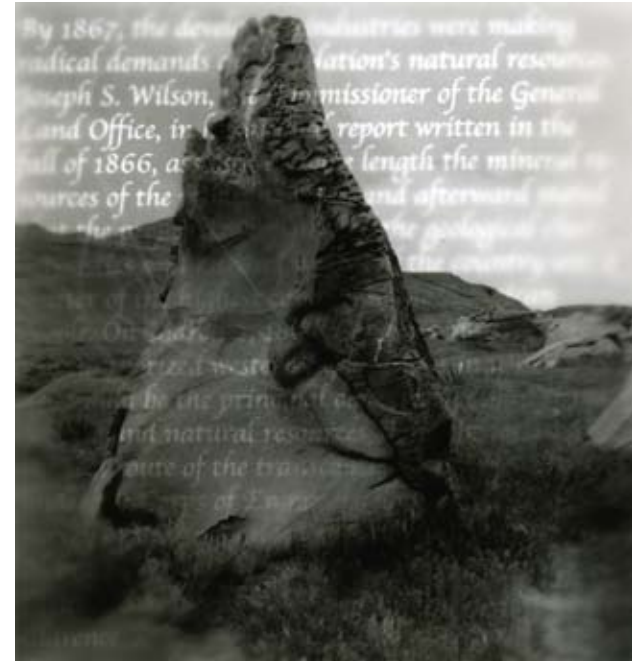
DS Badlands, 2010, archival pigment print from silver gelatin 20 x 16"

Artist's Statement

“Being the recipient of an Arizona Project Grant was incredibly vital for enhancing my opportunities for personal and aesthetic growth as an individual visual artist and as an educator. It provided me opportunities to travel and to purchase materials that would otherwise have been cost prohibitive in these economic times. I was able to travel extensively photographing and researching throughout the American West, including trips throughout Arizona, Utah, Colorado, Montana and Wyoming. I concentrated my efforts making photographic (film-based) images of landscapes and geological forms symbolic to me as representing the impetus for westward expansion, colonialism and the search for natural resources.

This body of work began with the gathering of a great deal of visual and historical data including maps, letters and other artifacts from public and private archives. I was able to comb archives as diverse as that in Sharlot Hall Museum (Prescott, AZ) and the Museum of the Beartooths (Columbus, MT) in search of documents and personal artifacts that told the stories of those individuals that migrated west in the early to late 1800s. I focused this research on various ideas surrounding westward expansion, particularly the roles of women in culture and the economy as well as an examination of environmental factors related to mining and land use practices. I became more and more interested in the motivations, sacrifices and belief systems behind colonialism that later became the foundations of the “American Dream” and now plague us in our consumer-addicted society.

I read voraciously, including diaries of pioneer women, historical and anecdotal data on the genesis of place names as well as contemporary theoretical writings exploring the complex roles of women in western culture and politics of a developing nation. I became particularly interested in the cartography, its history and the personalized artifacts that result, maps. Historic maps give us pictures of history as Eurocentric, but oftentimes map makers were influenced by the local terrain, indigenous peoples and other quirky motivations of the time. I wanted to create



Radical Demands (100-g)

2010, archival pigment print from silver gelatin, 10.25 x 10.25”

visual narratives that gained their ambiguity from the photographic techniques employed as well as the juxtaposition of the visual data of maps and other text.

I digitized many of the found maps and letters, printed them on transparency materials and then I combination printed these transparencies in the darkroom with the film negatives that I made during my travels, using traditional black and white photographic paper. For me, these darkroom constructions (montage/assemblages) had to be visually appealing as well as geographically and culturally informative. Each darkroom construction was a one of a kind piece, therefore I either scanned or re-photographed the finished prints in order to enlarge and rework the images with surface embellishment of the print using additional encaustic techniques.

At the beginning of the project, the maps were smaller inclusions overlaid within the silver gelatin photographs. As the series of images grew from the original darkroom prints to larger images, the maps continued

outside of the photographic frame. Through the use of these maps, I was hoping to challenge some of the ideas surrounding geography as a cultural construct and issues of colonialism through juxtaposition of place names. While I focused on images of landscape as symbolic of westward expansion, I began to pay more attention to how this expansion affected land use practices, species habitat and other conflicting cultural values found within the American West.

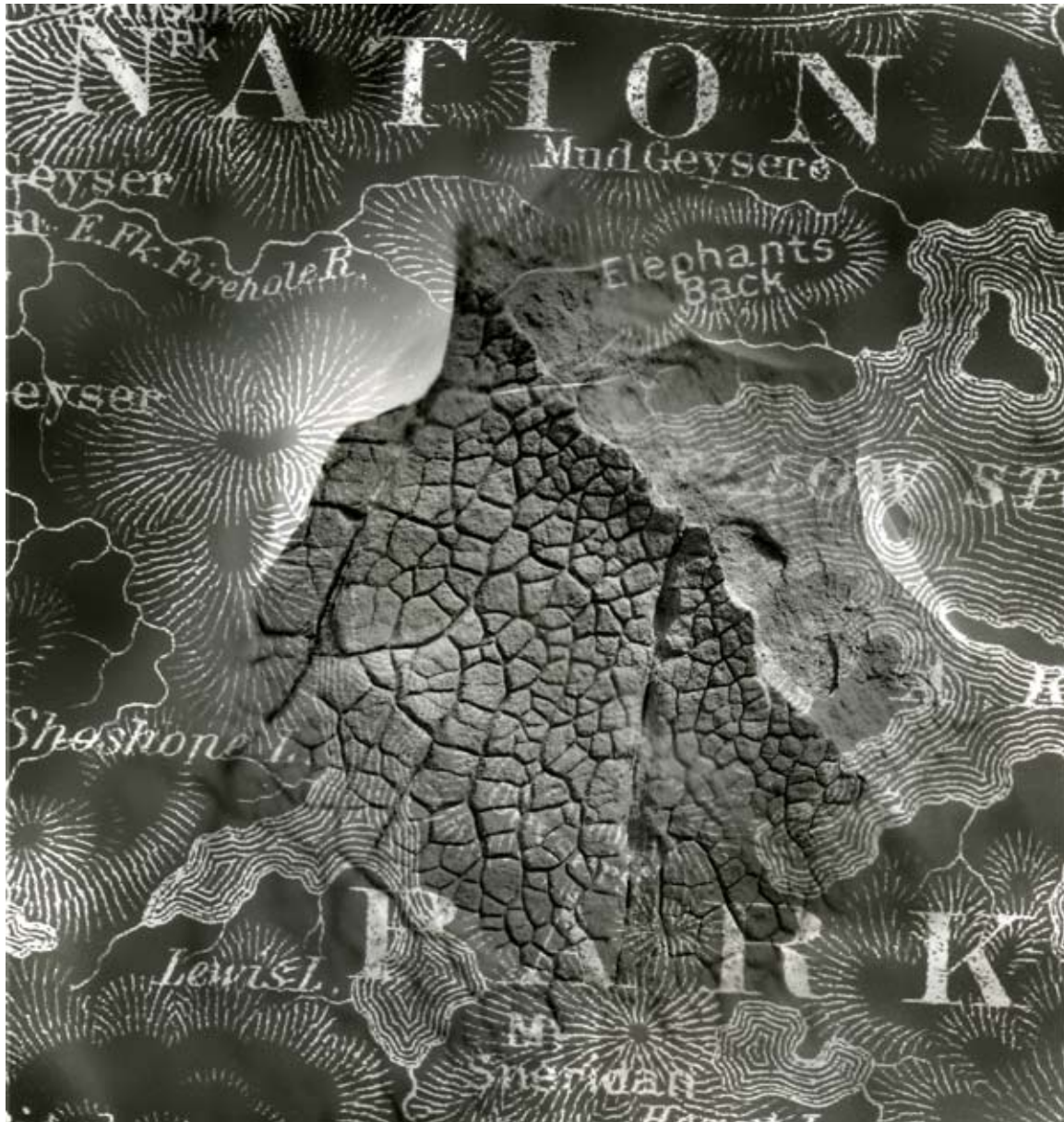
While hiking and driving these areas and photographing in Colorado, Montana, Wyoming, Utah and Arizona, I was overwhelmed by the growing prevalence of oil and gas production and copper extraction. The scars on the landscape are substantial. The quest for natural resources was one of the initial reasons that set the stage for westward expansion. As early as the Lewis and Clark expedition and during the years after the civil war, when the country was hoping to relieve some of its major debt, this intentional search for natural resources became a primary catalyst. I drew the parallels to our current quest for minerals.

Currently this resource exploitation in the West (and the world) is now focused on Coal Bed Methane (CBM). Its production is contested on many levels as these processes damage habitat for a number of species, particularly sage grouse, pronghorn and others as well as create environmental scars that are unsightly and disturbing. These production methods also contaminate and waste valuable ground water resources. Unfortunately, a large percentage of society only recognizes negative environmental impact to be significant when it directly affects the human species. This impact on the human population is indeed evident.

The toll on human life in CBM production is growing exponentially and is profound. The number of injuries and fatalities as a result of coal bed methane practices has skyrocketed in recent years. From 2002-2007 alone, the death rate of these workers grew by 70%. Some of the causes of these casualties include unsafe working conditions, minimally trained employees, lengthy work days and long travel distances in secluded areas as well as drug and alcohol use. Meanwhile, there is growing evidence that the large oil and gas companies prefer to pay the penalties instead of solving the problems (see Kennedy, 2008).” —Deborah Ford, 2010



Stillwater 3, 2010, archival pigment print from silver gelatin 10.25 x 10.25”



Nationa (3), 2010, archival pigment print from silver gelatin, 10.25 x 10.25"

Curator's Statement

Bob Durden

Advances in science and technology have transformed 21st century photography, but many contemporary artists continue to choose analog capturing methods and darkroom processing over digital cameras, software aided processing and ink-jet printing to explore their visual ideas. Deborah Ford is a photographer who utilizes the traditional photography methodology for primary image capturing and newer technology as an assist in some of the final image production. Her highly accomplished darkroom work rivals computer aided processing, resulting in images that are composed in layers mirroring the complexity of her intellectually/culturally loaded content that reveals her interest in the impact of land usage and the meanings calculated in static images.

In an era where photography has become more widely accessible than ever before, the subjective response to evaluating images has become increasingly difficult for the viewer. The affordability and capabilities of modestly priced digital cameras and a wide variety of affordable “darkroom” software packages have removed (to some degree) the necessity of learning the basics of photography, especially in regard to image processing which can now be accomplished on low grade to more sophisticated printers. What then distinguishes the work of highly accomplished trained artists from that of knowledgeable hobbyists? These questions are not new to the area of photography and new debates about what truly is photographic have now entered into the conversation pitting some film based photographers against their digital counterparts.

As an artist trained and skilled in both realms of photography, Deborah Ford's work adds to the vernacular of photography, but she does not flinch at utilizing new technologies in the production of her art work. For her, the darkroom process is an important ingredient in the production of her work, but she also finds new technological advances can provide advantages in the final production of an image. The tools of her art making are simply that, tools that allow her the ability to visually communicate her artistic and intellectual concerns and observations. The wider debate about which tools and applications of process are appropriate do not burden her artist production.



AKOTA, 2010, archival pigment print from silver gelatin, 20 x 16"

Of course, technical knowledge of Ford's art production is keenly interesting and photographers will find insights to the work that are not available to other observers—the manner in which she dodges and burns images, guessing her exposures and chemical mixtures, knowledge of the photography format and limitations/advantages of each, evaluating lens choice, etc. These process related issues need not be fully understood to appreciate what most modernists deem chiefly important in art production, the content of the artist's work.



OF (NAZ11), 2010, archival pigment print from silver gelatin, 10.25 x 10.25"



PRESHO, 2010, archival pigment print from silver gelatin, 20 x 16"

The selections in this exhibition are from a larger group of works in which the artist examines a multitude of aesthetic and cultural/socio-political issues. Without a knowledge of the artist's statement the deeper-seeded meanings might not be readily apparent to the viewer; but if he/she is captivated long enough by the beautifully composed and produced images, questions should form leading to clues about the artist's intent. The most obvious question that arises is related to the exhibition title and the maps that appear in most of these works. It will be obvious that the photographic elements of the landscape are related to the mapping, but this will not totally answer the question of why this visual marriage? If one understands that the maps are historic in nature and intermingled with contemporary images of place, a viable perspective on meaning can be entertained.

The relationship between the graphic images (maps) and the landscape images is ironic and the irony is heightened by the fact that visual references of the landscape imagery are not necessarily placed in a scaled or

positional relationship to the portions of the map that are shown—the landscapes may be merely symbolic of the features that are found in the mapped area. This fact leads to a better understanding of the artist's intent. Maps are human constructions that impose boundaries upon vast land and water masses where no "real" boundaries exist other than the intersections of land and water or dramatic changes in the landscape such as the northern Rocky Mountains transitioning into the northern plains. Another intriguing facet of this body of work is that the landscape was captured at a contemporary moment and then connected to a portion of our past through the relationship with the historic maps. When viewers see these same photographs in the future, another layer of time will be imposed on the interpretation of the photographs. In this case, the work will become more historic and anachronistic. In this scenario, the artist's intentions may even become more relevant as the artificial boundaries described on the maps may have shifted in relationship to what is still observable in nature. Deborah also seems to question whether or not land usage and environmental practices will change in the regional culture over the coming years.

Compositionally, Ford's choice to obfuscate letters on the maps is also related to the notion of artificial boundaries. The letters convey enough information about place but also create a playfulness that is akin to concrete or surrealist poetry. This artistic intention is reinforced in her titles which refer to the composition of the letters found in the images rather than a more literal spelling out of the specific place that is shown. The coupling of serious content with beautifully composed images and an aspect of play allows multiple entry points for the viewer to interpret the artist's deeper intent and to find their own position relative to cultural values and the significance of place represented in Ford's work.



DLANDS, 2010, archival pigment print from silver gelatin, 20 x 16"

Exhibition Checklist

All objects are archival pigment prints from silver gelatin unless otherwise noted:

1. **Camp Baker (New 100-ynew)**, 2010, 10x10"
2. **Shoshone India (4)**, 2010, 10 x 10"
3. **OF (NAZ11)**, 2010, 10.25 x 10.25"
4. **HINGTO (100-v)**, 2010, 10.25 x 10.25"
5. **Radical Demands**, 2009-2010, 10.25 x 10.25"
6. **WEET (100-r)**, 2010, 10.25 x 10.25"
7. **Nationa (3)**, 2010, 10.25 x 10.25"
8. **Stillwater 3**, 2010, 10.25 x 10.25"
9. **Missouri River 1**, 2010, 10.25 x 10.25"
10. **Muscle Shell R.** (diptych), 2009, 17x25"
11. **Stinking R.** (diptych), 2009, 17 x 25"
12. **DLANDS**, 2010, 16 x 20"
13. **NG Ft. Laramie**, 2010, 16 x 20"
14. **AKOTA**, 2010, 16 x 20"
15. **PRESHO**, 2010, 16 x 20"
16. **DS BADLANDS**, 2010, 16 x 20"
17. **WYOMIN (TN1)**, 2010, 16 x 20"
18. **MONT (5)**, 2010, 16 x 20"
19. **Morganriver2**, 2010, 16 x 20"
20. **Fremon-4**, 2010, 16 x 20"
21. **TEXAN**, 2010, 16 x 20"
22. **AKOT**, 2010, 16 x 20"
23. **Ft. Phil Kearney**, 2010, photographic print on wood, 16 x 16"
24. **WM**, 2010, photographic print on wood, 16 x 16"
25. **Plains Fauna 1** (heading right), 2010
mixed media, encaustic archival pigment on rice paper, 16 x 17"
26. **Plains Fauna 2** (heading left), 2010
mixed media, encaustic archival pigment on rice paper, 16 x 17"
27. **Bird of Prey: Two Views**, 2010
mixed media, encaustic archival pigment on rice paper, 16 x 17"
28. **Bird of Prey: Talons**, 2010
mixed media, encaustic archival pigment on rice paper, 16 x 17"



Paris Gibson Square
MUSEUM OF ART

Paris Gibson Square Museum of Art is dedicated to fulfilling the artistic needs of the general public. This is accomplished through:

- * Fostering accessibility and understanding of modern, contemporary and self-taught art;
- * Collecting, preserving, exhibiting and interpreting art that actively engages a diverse and growing audience;
- * Providing educational programming that inspires artistic expression and understanding;
- * Expanding public knowledge of, interest in and support for the arts and artists of the region; and
- * Serving as a cultural center, and continuing the preservation of the historically significant Paris Gibson Square building.

- Approved April 29, 2008 by the Board of Trustees

Admission to the museum is free to the public courtesy of



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Hours of operation:
Monday – Friday 10am to 5pm
Tuesday Evenings 7 – 9pm
Saturdays 12 – 5pm
Closed Sundays



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