

Scenes from a Western Movie
Notes on the Photographs
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The first pictures date from the late 1990s and were made by photographing from the centerline of desert highways so that the berms defining the edges of the road converged in the distance like an arrow pointing to oblivion. From these first incursions into the western landscape many more followed, interrupted by months, often years, while my attentions were focused elsewhere. As I reflect on this project now, it surprises me to realize how much of my time has actually been spent foraging through the American west. Surprises me because I have never thought of the landscape, western or otherwise, as the subject matter of my work. To the contrary, when asked for a thumbnail explanation of what I do, I might respond that the work, which is primarily focused on the urban



phantasmagoria, addresses a psychogeography of space – how we construct meaning and a sense of ourselves in relation to the spaces we inhabit. There is an interaction between our psyches and our environs that takes place wherever we are, providing in some instances a sense of wellbeing and, more interestingly and perhaps more frequently, inflicting unease or anxiety through a condition we might characterize as a spatial uncanny, a concept I borrow from Freud by way of Anthony Vidler, who applies it to the contemporary city. I have come to realize that the estrangement Vidler and others associate with our global metropolises accompanies us beyond their borders into the surrounding regions; and nowhere is this truer than in the American west where the density of the coastal cities is matched by the emptiness of the inland terrain. Both, city and distant hinterland voraciously devour the space around them, leaving us strangers in their midsts.

Simultaneously, the American west is profoundly familiar to us all (Americans and foreigners alike) because of its central role in defining the American imaginary. We know it through literature from Walt Whitman to Jack Kerouac, Zane Grey to Cormac McCarthy; through movies from John Ford's *The Searchers* to Wim Wenders' *Paris, Texas*; through photography from Ansel Adams to Richard Misrach, Robert Frank to Joel Sternfeld; and of course through



advertising, particularly the selling of beer, cigarettes, and automobiles, all of which are given manly auras by their associations with the rugged terrain of the West. As a result, it is a region we feel we know long before we ever visit it. Built up in our imaginations from countless images experienced directly and indirectly, it is as if we carry within us a priori pictures of what this western landscape should be. It is, I believe, in search of these internal images that we travel to places like Yosemite, The Grand Canyon, Mount Rushmore, and Monument Valley where we experience them as affirmations of our preconceptions and, inevitably, with some degree of disappointment since reality can seldom match fantasy. It is this awareness that initially drew me to The Alabama Hills and Monument Valley, primary locations for representations of the western landscape in film and advertising; and later to national parks where throngs of people gather at designated areas to view vistas that are framed like sprawling stage sets. For me, it is here – a kind of Disney World of the Natural – that strangeness returns and overwhelms the familiar.

In my most recent (and final) forays, spring 2008 and 2009, I have approached this landscape somewhat differently. Whereas in the past my views had been scenic, even panoramic, my intention was to move closer with the camera, to collapse this scenic distance. It was with this in mind that I photographed individual buildings from gas stations and fast food restaurants to grain silos and hotels;



and obstructions on the landscape like the fence along the Mexican border with Arizona and California that, in the midst of a seemingly endless horizon, suddenly emerges to define where one national identity ends and another begins. But most importantly, it was what motivated me to reconsider the people who occupied the landscape. I wanted to bring them out of the background, which concealed their individuality, so that they could look back at us even as we scrutinized them. The result is a series of portraits – something I had not done before – depicting individuals

in the places where I encountered them. This human presence provided the kind of proximity that, in my mind at any rate, helped fracture the resoluteness of scenic distance.

