

MATTHEW MARKS GALLERY

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The New York Times

Picturing the West: Scarred, Flawed, Beautiful

Robert Adams: Turning Back

Matthew Marks Gallery



Matthew Marks Gallery, New York, and Fraenkel Gallery, San Francisco

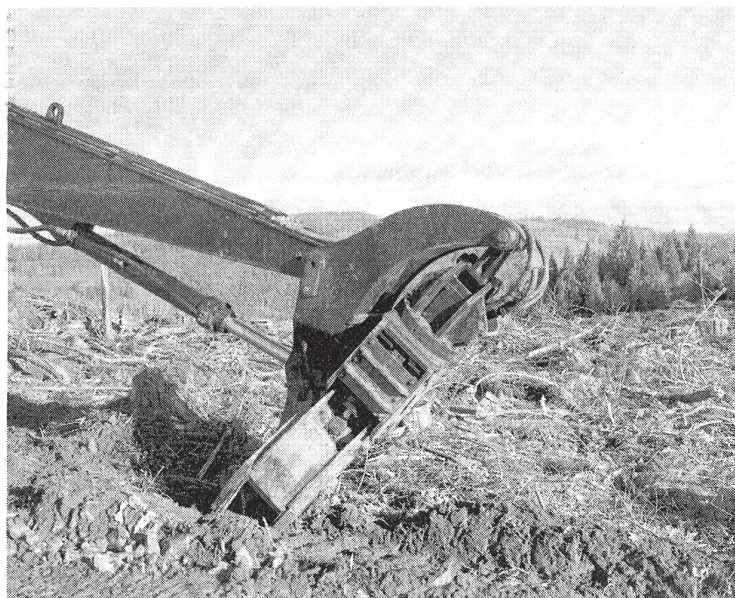
By MICHAEL KIMMELMAN

Inspired by the bicentennial of the Lewis and Clark expedition, the photographer Robert Adams recently spent a few years retracing the explorers' path back home: from the Pacific, along the Columbia River, across eastern Oregon, through stretches of timber cultivation and clear-cutting and past family farms, where picnic tables are parked in the shade of apple trees.

Lewis, it is said, lapsed into depression and may have committed suicide a while after he returned east in 1806. "Going east was more difficult than going west," Mr. Adams has noted, implying that discovery and progress carried the burdens of civilization.

There is time to catch "Turning Back," the pictures the photographer shot on his trip. The show, at the Matthew Marks Gallery in Chelsea, closes on Saturday. Like the book that goes with it, it needs pruning. But its gravity wins out. Exhibitions like this don't come along often, nor do photographers like Mr. Adams.

Some people who love photography have never grasped him. His métier is emptiness. I don't mean the heroic emptiness of a vast, virgin West whose prospects looked infinite to Lewis and Clark when they first passed through it in 1804 and 1805. And I don't mean the emptiness of



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A picture from "Turning Back," taken in Columbia County, Oregon.

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clear-forestry and spoliation, notwithstanding that the destruction of the West is Mr. Adams's persistent worry.

I mean an emptiness that exists at the edge of something else. The edge of civilization is also the beginning of wilderness, a nowhere place, neither one thing nor another — a shifting point. Photography is inherently about edges: about where a photographer chooses to stand, in what direction he or she points the camera, and where the picture's frame then makes an edge out of what shows through the viewfinder.

Lewis and Clark explored the edge of the world as they knew it, when everything looked fresh. You might say Mr. Adams makes pictures that restore freshness to seeing that same part of the world, not via spectacle, but by focusing on what is at the edge of our vision, on what we tend not to see or to consider worth seeing.

In general, he does this by avoiding incident and a sense of time. His featureless skies are mostly sullen, without passing clouds. Bearing silent witness, the pictures flirt with a kind of banality while striving toward the elemental. Their obvious opposite is the work of Ansel Adams, a virtuoso who devised fantasies of escapism for Depression-era Americans, turned Yosemite into paradise, the redwood forests into prelapsarian cathedrals.

Robert Adams, on the other hand, inspects what is scarred, flawed and humdrum, his virtuosity, which at its peak is every bit as considerable as

Some of "Turning Back" is heartbreakingly beautiful: a farmer's field in the expectant light of an autumn afternoon; a gauzy view through leafy saplings; the great mass of an uprooted tree stump; and the cross section of a toppled fir, cracked like a piece of Japanese pottery, which leads Mr. Adams in the book to cite the nature writer Barry Lopez, who likens the sound of a tree succumbing to a chainsaw to the cry of a whale: "a thin screech."

There is also a remarkable sequence of increasing close-ups, focusing on what looks like a single poplar in a field crisscrossed by telephone wires. The sequence ends at the gnarled trunks of what turns out to be a pair of nestling trees, lone survivors in silent communion.

Often there is no point of focus, no center, in a picture by Mr. Adams. You don't immediately know what you are looking at. The images require unpacking. People are mostly absent, too, save for the machinery and wreckage they sometimes leave behind.

Mr. Adams descends from a long line of Western photographers, starting with great ones like Timothy O'Sullivan and Carleton Watkins, but including the early surveyors who mapped the landscape. "At their best," Mr. Adams has said about these journeymen surveyors, they "accepted limitations and faced space as the anti-theatrical puzzle it is — a stage without a center. The resulting pictures have an element almost of banality about them."

He adds, as if talking about himself, "it is exactly this acknowledgment of the plain surface to things

that helps legitimize the photographer's difficult claim that the landscape is coherent."

You can detect the influence of Walker Evans and then of the whole cool, stripped down aesthetic of minimalism and post-minimalist land art, which emerged on the scene, claiming its stake out West, as Mr. Adams did, during the 1960's and 70's. Many of the pictures in "Turning Back" linger over stretches of cleared timber, branches littering the foreground like bones at a mass grave, the clinical affect mitigating pictorial theatrics.

The memorial mood is gradually superseded and overwhelmed by the uplifting sense of a photographer who really sees. The grace of well-made art is its own form of redemption, Mr. Adams reminds us.

Ultimately, the narrative he had in mind, retracing Lewis and Clark's homeward journey, isn't entirely clear. The last pictures of "Turning Back," peaceful ones of gathered apples and sunny farms, suggest that perfect moments can still be found in the remote, beleaguered West, where Mr. Adams lives.

But perhaps the point was the journey itself, a search for understanding. In the event, even ordinary and ruined nature is endowed with an eloquence that two centuries of commercial encroachment and human intervention still can't silence.

At the Matthew Marks Gallery, 522 West 22nd Street, Chelsea, (212) 243-0200, through Saturday.