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PHOTOGRAPHY REVIEW

Heedless Urban Landscapes That Have Squandered Their Wealth of Trees

By MARGARETT LOKE

On the corner of 79th Street and Broadway in Manhattan one day, passers-by gasped at the startlingly painful sight of a tree on the sidewalk with its trunk broken in two. Like people familiar to us, the trees on the street are probably taken for granted, but they are expected to be there forever.

The specialness of trees to urbanites is implicit in the Robert Adams photographs now at the Matthew Marks Gallery in Chelsea. Mr. Adams is known for his spare, dispassionate views of an American landscape hard-pressed to escape human encroachments. But in this two-part exhibition — “California: Views of the Los Angeles Basin, 1978-1983” and “What We Bought: The New World Scenes From the Denver Metropolitan Area, 1970-1974” — Mr. Adams seems to approach the subject of trees and their displacement with the elegiac affection that Eugène Atget brought to his photographs of

Photographs by Robert Adams are at the Matthew Marks Gallery, 522 West 22nd Street, Chelsea, (212) 243-0200, through Dec. 2. Mr. Adams's photographs of the Los Angeles Basin are also on view at the Fraenkel Gallery, 49 Geary Street, San Francisco, (415) 981-2661, through Dec. 29.

Paris.

Atget's luminous albumen prints are overtly inviting. Mr. Adams's black-and-white images, on the other hand, are usually small, understated and might strike a casual viewer as uninteresting. In exchange for close attention, though, they offer a subtly biting intelligence and a quiet classical beauty normally associated with subjects more pleasing than the fate of trees in a despoiled landscape.

Mr. Adams belongs to a group of photographers, including Lewis Baltz and Stephen Shore, whose path-breaking work in the 1970's, labeled “new topographics,” looked coolly at the paving over of vast tracts of America. Not surprisingly, he views trees with eyes radically different from those of William Henry Fox Talbot in the 1840's or Alfred Stieglitz in the 1910's and 20's.

Arranged in groupings along the gallery's walls, Mr. Adams's images of trees found in the Los Angeles Basin suggest both despair and unexpected hope. In the accompanying book, published by Fraenkel Gallery of San Francisco and the Matthew Marks Gallery, the essayist and poet Robert Hass refers to this area as a “ruined kingdom.” A wicked brew of car exhaust, sunlight and cold sea air trapped in the basin seems to have had an unhappy effect on some of the vegetation.

Bedraggled, wintry looking, the

trees in one group of photographs compete with asphalt and cars and look as if they are not long for this world. In one notable image, a pine tree off a dirt road is flanked by a droopy palm tree and the stray branch of another tree. Inexplicably denuded of its branches, the pine resembles a telephone pole.

In another grouping, the trees seem to hold their own against a proliferation of telephone poles and lines. An attenuated tree rises physically and metaphorically above a distant town. The tree trunks, branches and delicate leaves of a bevy of trees fill the frame of what would be a classic landscape portrait if, behind the trees, there weren't three barely perceptible horizontal



Matthew Marks Gallery

telephone lines. A roadside formation of imposing trees marches in lock step with power poles. And another row of trees, tall and thin, poses with all the elegant grace of ballet dancers, oblivious to the power lines in the misty distance.

Although one grouping shows trees suffering in inhospitable terrain, relegated to being roadside furniture or worse, Mr. Adams is not bereft of hope. He also shows trees coexisting peaceably with the manmade. In an exceptionally lyrical image, palm trees stand like sentinels between some low houses and the sloping side of a mountain. A Lilliputian car passes enormous trees, festooned with creepers, which present an exuberantly unruly front. Defying gravity, the thick trunks of two leaning palm trees form an "X" — which could represent nothing more complex than nature having fun or could signify a "No" to the kind of development in the background.

So hostile to nature are the residential and commercial buildings in the second part of this exhibition that trees can barely be found, existing luxuriantly only in a tacky framed print in a shopping center. The absence of trees is keenly felt and contributes in no small part to making the subjects of these pictures even drier and more desolate than they already are.

Like the Los Angeles segment, the

pristinely precise photographs of the Denver metropolitan area are shown in four groupings. From 1962 to 1997, Mr. Adams lived in Colorado (he now resides in Oregon), and his ironic title "What We Bought: The New World Scenes From the Denver Metropolitan Area" may refer specifically to one city but could well apply to residential and commercial developments in other cities across the United States.

In the foreword to his 1995 book of the same name, Mr. Adams wrote that the Denver area's "ruin would be testament to a bargain we had tried to strike." He added: "The pictures record what we purchased, what we paid and what we could not buy."

What Denver bought was a soulless urban landscape that out-Hoppers Hopper. Here, people appear to live in tacky-tacky boxes, sleep in motel-style bedrooms and work in cheerless offices. Here, babies are left outside houses in the sun like laundry. Here, irony probably unintended, a trailer park is named Camelot, and the buttocks and prancing legs of a mannequin dangle from a shopping-center ceiling, not far from a "Cashier" sign.

What Denver, in these pictures, most certainly failed to buy was a place where people could feel the shielding embrace of trees.