

Fall 2003 VALiS

Cwood @ Bennington.edu
Presented to John Umphlett

The American West – *The Photographs of Ansel Adams and Carleton Watkins*



I feel like I had seen most of these photos before, reflected in movies, illustrated in books, and lauded as the core of American History. I liked this print best, "Section of the Grizzly Giant Mariposa Grove No. 118" by Carleton Watkins. I was thinking that if this photo got back to Western Europe, where these men were probably originally from, no one would have believed there could be a forest full of trees that were this big.

These photographs of Watkins glorified this time, and made it seem larger than life-literally. I rather passed over Adams' photos, as they seem to be so popularised, and it was difficult for me to be able to witness them in any sort of a fresh or new fashion. I was fascinated to find out that it was partially due to the impact Watkins' photos had upon the American government at the time, urging them to set aside huge nature reserves to preserve the beauty of these lands for future generations. It was gratifying to see that these photographs saved part of the earth for us to enjoy in the future, so I suppose I perceived the entire show as a tribute to that- to their successful efforts to preserve beauty for us.

Jacqueline Humphries

When I first saw her current paintings, (featured at right, Untitled, 1999) I really couldn't understand at all what she was trying to do. I didn't find anything worth nothing in it. As the lecture went on, I learned a lot about her process, and rather enjoyed one of her most famous paintings, *Black Beauty*, mainly because of what I





learned of her work, but also, because she did create an entirely new world within her paintings, one that you could just walk into. She was using paint to create slight distinctions, small changes.

I didn't like her work much on its own, but I did love her process, and the very innocent and unassuming way she addressed her own work. I found that to be very gratifying. In *Black Beauty*, featured at left, I am left with a sense of

walking into a wide open darkness, perhaps on snow, into the arctic during the long months of darkness one experiences above the Arctic Circle.

Bill Jacobson

This man's photographs reminded me a lot of Gerard Richter's paintings—memories of a place you could have been, maybe the photos are if you—you just can't remember. The places are set in rural country scenes or in huge cityscapes, the season is usually not specified, making it seem the way dreams are, where you know some things to be true, but you don't know how you know. Your brain fills in the context for you, and makes the photograph uniquely yours in your interpretation.



Charles LeDray



This work was shocking—I felt like he was making huge demands upon me as the audience, pushing my limits to what I can understand as art, and what I can accept. Works like *Milk and Honey*, left, were strange and left me wondering what it

meant, but it was a safe feeling, one in which I could feel as though I could potentially understand, but was more of a curiosity than something I need to accept as a *challenge*.

However, this attitude changed when I saw works such as *Cricket Cage*, at right, which made me feel a small bit of repulsion. Why make a cricket cage out of human bone? I mean, yes, it is cool in a dark and twisted way, but then I realized, we feel repulsion and hopefully the smart ones of us will wonder why we are repulsed by such a seemingly innocent object. I had some thinking to do that night.



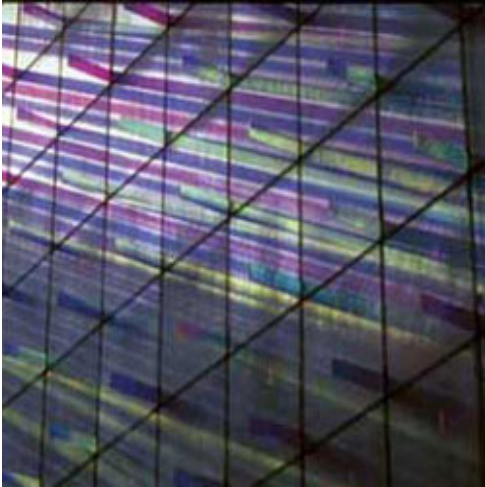
David Sutherland

David's "real life" film series, *The Farmer's Wife*, was a rather upsetting piece of work, in that it presented this couple that was living a life that I imagine would terrify most people. I didn't really know how to react to Sutherland's involvement in their lives—I hate reality TV, and it seems grotesque that he was filming this series while these people were seeing their lives fall apart. Perhaps it is good that it has been recorded for posterity, but I didn't agree with his reasons for doing it, or that it was art. I felt that he was offering a way to allow people to feel that they were involved with their lives, when they weren't. His actual technical production was excellent, but I was left with this horrible feeling that he hadn't clearly thought through his reasons for doing this, or if he should- or if he had thought them through, I didn't agree at all. I felt it did the characters a disservice, and



while beautiful- God. Even now I am changing my mind, as I look at this photo of Juanita, realizing that probably no one outside of Nebraska would have ever looked at her and saw her to be so beautiful. It is a hard problem to wrestle with.

James Carpenter



Carpenter seemed to be obsessed with light as an illusion, making entire elements and styles as definition to his buildings. Just as solid, texture-less forms, his buildings are rather boring, but it is the aspect of interaction that makes his work come alive. As the light, weather, atmosphere, human use of his buildings intensifies, his buildings become more beautiful respond to these

things in an intelligent way.

The Luminous Threshold, right was probably my favorite piece of his, as it seemed like a series of rainbow towers. It was very successful in seeming otherworldly. The *Dichroic Light Field*, above left, was joyous, completely transforming an otherwise boring wall into something entirely new and playful.



Judy Pfaff

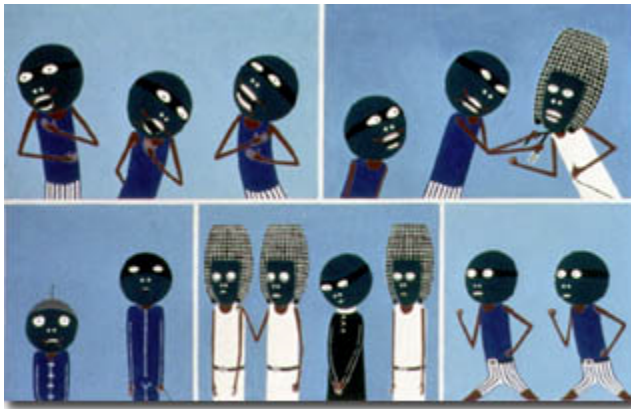


I did not enjoy her work at all, nor was I particularly inspired by what she had to present. She was mainly interested in the recreation of materials through the destruction of their original intention, from what I

understood, but, her work didn't give me any understanding of what she meant by her work, or what she was trying to communicate. I did rather love her artist book, though, in that she had this lovely, intimate atmosphere in them, filling them with aspects of her own life, organic objects, and pieces of beauty. It was wonderful to see her workspace, and the things that inspire her work. How that got translated though; I must admit complete ignorance.



Laylah Ali



While Ali expressed that she was trying to communicate complex issues through simple means, I was left feeling that her work did require explanation, at the end, and that she perhaps wasn't as effective as she had hoped. Her *Greenheads* series, left, attempts to communicate emotions of family struggle, and aspects of

what it means to grow up in a family-racial or not. I think that in her struggle to create "greenheads" and therefore the "every color", she is denying her audience of her own personal truth—dumbing it down so that it is universally accessible. I felt like she could have challenged the audience more in understanding her relation to her own work- but she didn't provide us that opportunity.

And this concludes my Visual Arts Lecture Series notes for Fall 2003.

Thanks for reading!