

DATED TRACES

Denver: A Photographic Survey of the Metropolitan Area, 1970-1974

By Robert Adams

New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009
unpaginated/\$50.00 (hb)

The Photographs of Homer Page: The Guggenheim Year: New York, 1949-50

By Keith F. Davis

New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009
144 pp./\$50.00 (hb)

The Pictures Generation, 1974-1984

By Douglas Eklund

New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009
350 pp./\$50.00 (hb)

What We Bought: The New World. Scenes From the Denver Metropolitan Area, 1970-1974

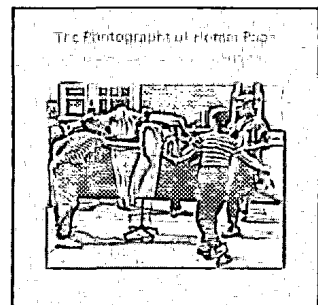
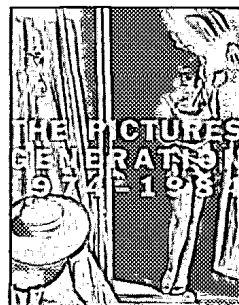
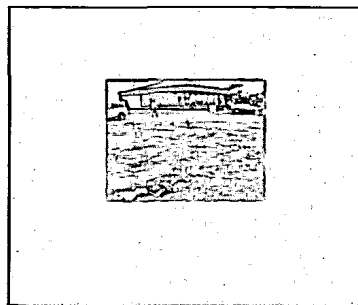
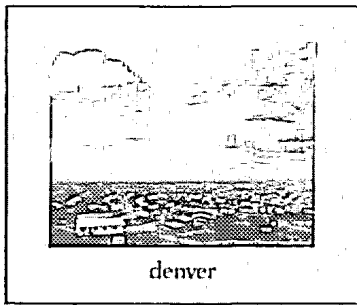
By Robert Adams

New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009
208 pp. /\$60.00 (hb)

Four recent books published by Yale University Press capture the distinctiveness of place and the singular geography of two cities, East and West: New York and Denver. For artists and photographers, New York is an established place, fundamentally grown up, a finished product where ideas matter more than locale. Its canyons and peaks are man-made constants, seemingly as old as any western mountaintop. Denver, on the other hand, was, until recently, an adolescent, still growing in awkward, unregulated spurts.

Fittingly, two works by Robert Adams began to document the growing sprawl of Denver's growth in the 1970s, well before an end result could be predicted. But with the initial publication of *What We Bought: The New World. Scenes from the Denver Metropolitan Area, 1970-1974*, predict it he did. Sadly, the photographs were not collected and published until 1995. As Adams says in the introduction, "The pictures record what we purchased, what we paid, and what we could not buy. They document a separation from ourselves, and in turn from the natural world that we professed to love" (n.p.). The photographs expertly track the outskirts of Denver, where a single bush struggles to hide huge swatches of tract housing in the background, migrating inward to a place where nothing is centered and physical relationships within the landscape are discordant, if they exist at all. Indeed, Adams seems to have captured something being destroyed rather than being built up, something dying rather than being born. As the light fades across these photographs of car lots, bulldozers, and churned earth, darkness finally falls at the doorstep of the photographer himself. The address of his house, 1051, is the final shot of the book, lit above a crooked mailbox like a numbered prophesy.

Also by Adams, *Denver: A Photographic Survey of the Metropolitan Area, 1970-1974*, mines much of the same ground, but is an expansion of the theme rather than a redundancy. Of this work, Adams says, "New buildings, it



In an odd, almost awkwardly choreographed way, the camera and railroad shared a dance across time. Not the identical steps of a perfect partnership, but something more modern and uninhibited. As the railroad's infrastructure grew in the mid-to-late nineteenth century, more and more trains trekked their way across the country, spewing jets of blackened smoke like mobile replicas of the factory chimneys back East. Tracks crisscrossed the country like fine ribbon-like roads. Two years after the Civil War, Alexander Gardner was hired by the Union Pacific Railroad to document the march westward. In hindsight, the so-called "Golden Spike" that linked the transcontinental railroad was the first concentrated industrial blow from which the earth has never fully recovered. The camera, as a benign accomplice, traveled along as the car and airplane supplanted the railroad. Yet, this phenomenon is not about how we traveled, but instead, where we ended up, the places we settled into, how we changed them, and how they changed us.

is true, began to change some of the geography, but the light was clear enough to disinfect car agencies, and cheap bungalows; smog was so rare, in fact, that I refused to photograph when it was present" (n.p.). Here, despite what he sees growing up around him, Adams persevered, saying, "I tried to photograph the city and the high altitude brilliance that distinguished it" (n.p.). The black-and-white photographs eviscerate the landscape he finds. In one, children play in a schoolyard that resembles a refugee camp, while off in the distance the striped roof of a fast food restaurant is the only distinct location marker on the horizon. In the foreground, the earth falls away like a receding wave, and one can imagine the children playing in the surf of some muddy ocean.

Both books present a startling moment, captured in a specific place with an almost scientific doggedness. What Adams articulates as he watches a city roll out onto these shaggy High Plains stretches the purposes of

art and changes the metrics of how we look at things. The photographs, taken together, are a small masterpiece of both intellect and vision.

In contrast to Adams's work, artists in New York during the 1960s and '70s were flooded with visual information from television, magazines, and billboards, causing them to question the transparency of the image. Intuitive at first and lacking critical literacy, these artists and photographers, brimming with cynical innocence, subverted what until then had been a secondary art form—photography. As Warhol had done before them, they blurred the last remaining lines that structured the art world.

As a widening grid of streets spread across Denver, the map changed in New York, too, albeit differently. *The Pictures Generation, 1974–1984* casts a wide net across a ten-year span: gelatin silver prints with coffee labels by David Salle, Sherrie Levine's first fetish objects (shoes), and photographs with text added by Richard Prince. Many other artists working in various mediums are also included. Taken as a whole, the catalog is a rich example of a place exerting an immense gravitational pull on a generational mindset.

What stands out, almost strikingly so, is the work of Cindy Sherman. As Douglas Eklund, who wrote the essays that accompany the book, says of her photographs, "Like the music of the Beatles, they seem somewhat ossified by praise, so that the viewer who has absorbed all the hagiography is walled off from seeing them with fresh eyes" (133). Yet, Sherman's series "Untitled Film Stills" still retains a freshness that avoids datedness and overexposure, and possesses the same emotive vitality that initial viewers found so captivating.

A tawdry display of books arranged on the wall of a New York City newspaper kiosk predate more than a few of Sherman's "characterizations." The photograph is the work of Homer Page, and

is the product of a single, feverish year in New York where, with the aid of a Guggenheim Fellowship, he photographed the streets and people of the city. The resultant book is a collection called *The Photographs of Homer Page: The Guggenheim Year: New York, 1949–50*. Page, a lesser-known artist, created work that bridged the documentary idea and the more modern approach of an artist like Robert Frank. "If confusion of values is an important part of our life today," Page writes, "we must analyze and record the confusion" (34). This gray area he describes is articulated in his work. One isn't given a single strand of information, but rather a tangle of images. A couple lies on the beach at Coney Island surrounded by sand that is littered with cigarettes and other debris. It is a decidedly up-to-date image, resplendent with multiple meanings and not limited to a single storyline, which is exactly what one finds in most of Page's work. It is a poetic view rather than a practical one—a rich, elongated question as opposed to a simple answer or observation. So why then has Page's work been neglected for so long? One would have to assume that he himself might have an answer to that question, given the complexity and depth of his work. Deep down, one feels he knew everything was a roll of the dice. No doubt, the publication of this book will change that.

Indeed, the republication of Robert Adams's work illuminates the meandering progress of photography across time and space while greatly adding to the photo-historic record. Taken together, these books triangulate that progress and order what might only appear as disparate spots on the map into a coherent march westward from New York and back again.

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[Ed. note: See *Afterimage* 37.1 (July/August 2009) for a review of the exhibition "The Pictures Generation, 1974–1984."]

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