

TILTED ARC

Women in the Landscape

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New York, NY

Women in the Landscape :: Jennifer Colten

This is the second installment in an ongoing feature, *Women in the Landscape*, a series of conversations between women photographers whose work focuses on the land.

This interview is with Jennifer Colten, an artist working in St. Louis, Missouri. Her work focuses on the ambiguous landscape—sites unnoticed, unexplained marks and the question of what makes 'place' important.

— LAUREN HENKIN
CO-EDITOR, TILTED ARC

lh You titled one of your projects, *Of Place and Non-Place*. In describing this work, you say that the photographs are not exact records and do not describe particular locations, yet in the first sentence of that project statement you state that they were made “at the margins of the urban environment.” How important is “place” to you in depicting Nature, and to what degree do you feel it is a necessary component in landscape photography?

jc The notion of place has been a long time question for me, and for many years I worked with the question: is it possible to identify the significance of a place, and can that be felt? seen? communicated to others? There is the idea that place can be intimately attached to one’s history or one’s culture or one’s memory, and while I find those relationships interesting, that is not where the focus of my work lies today.

I am most interested in the **dis-location** of place and how that concept reflects our contemporary position in relationship to the environment. The “margins of the urban environment” are neither built for purpose and use, nor are they completely wild and untouched. These are places of residue and are often ignored or seen as problematic wasteland. These sites hover at the in-between, making the identification with these spaces uncertain.

These complex spaces exist both because of and in spite of our human presence. By this I mean we have built the infrastructure of the urban space, and we have marked the land and changed our environment in dramatic ways. But in spite of our interventions, nature, or the wildness of natural forces, persists. Humans have a responsibility to care for our environment and the destruction we have created. That is a daunting task. But, at the same time, I find it reassuring to see that Nature moves on—changed by human intervention for sure, but ultimately “uncaring” of our presence.

This is why many of my photographs depict nature overtaking the built environment. I am interested in shifting the focus from a human-centered view to one which contends with the environment as a sustaining and powerful force.

Through the continuing body of work *Of Place and Non-Place*, I play in both territories. I am making work that focuses on the sites of human residue—the lost wastelands of sorts, while simultaneously making work that shows ways that Nature overcomes.

I hope the growing body of work expresses the sometimes contradictory and sometimes symbiotic relationship that humans and the natural environment have in co-existence.

“I am interested in shifting the focus from a human-centered view to one which contends with the environment as a sustaining and powerful force.”



Jennifer Colten, “Encounter # 21: 63102.20130529.0006, 2013,” from the series, *Of Place and Non-Place*.

© Jennifer Colten. Courtesy of the artist.

lh To what degree do you find the depiction of “place” to be important in landscape photography?

jc Early landscape photography, that of the 19th century photographers of the American West, was about depicting the grandeur of space, it was about exploration of the land, it was about the awe of the view, and it implied the journey to the unknown. The framing of the photograph and selection of site, began the process of defining a cultural identity through the depiction of Nature in its relationship to human intervention. This was not new. Painters and writers had considered these ideas as well, but photography’s dual ability to express the subject as document alongside its ability to depict it through personal or subjective interpretation, made for the unique coupling of site as information and site as reflection. For me the notion of “place” likewise holds this duality.

lh You titled the photographs using the word “Encounter.” Do you meet these places of residue unexpectedly or are you confronting them? Why title them with that word?

jc This relationship of site defined through information or data, and site that reveals a personal encounter with a place is expressed very powerfully through photography. Touching back to the idea of exploration, the titling of *Encounter* : conveys the sense of the unknown or that of wandering a landscape as explorer with eyes wide open. My process involves literal wandering on foot, or meandering in a car to find these places. Once I have located a site, I will often return over and over.

This relates to my early questions regarding *how*, or if a place holds certain resonance. I wonder why some places make me stop and take notice especially when these places are often seemingly unremarkable or banal. In this way, the “encounter” is an unexpected event. I do not approach the place as confrontation, and unlike the early Exploration Photographers, I do not see the making of the photographs as somehow conquering the place. Instead I hope the photographs express the internal force and sustainability of Nature albeit alongside the obvious degradation that human intervention has created.

Actually, the whole title is *Encounter # : Date. File number*; for example:
Encounter #14: 63110.20130323.4976

I wanted to reference the idea of stumbling upon the site and maybe the surprise in the view whether that be banal or remarkable. I wanted this information to be presented as data, referencing possibly the police crime record or the geographical survey. I also wanted to reference time/date and then the file number pointing to the photographic process and specifically digital data. The idea of finding or encountering the residue becomes important because not only is this information that has been left behind, but it is then witnessed and documented through the act of making the photograph.

“I hope the photographs express the internal force and sustainability of Nature albeit alongside the obvious degradation that human intervention has created.”

lh It seems like there is a tension between the specificity and ambiguity in these photographs, especially when you take into account the titles. On one hand the photographs themselves are completely void of context, the viewer is left with as you said, the “residue.” Yet the titles provide a marker, and while they may not offer an exact location that could be identified, they offer a specific record or document of the making of the image. In *Untitled (Landscapes)* you state, “Here, pictorial romantic beauty is paired with discomfort and discord.” How important is it to you to have these paradoxical relationships in your work?

WOMEN IN THE LANDSCAPE:
Lauren Henkin :: Jennifer Colten



Jennifer Colten, "Encounter # 43:
62201.20130406.5220, 2013," from the series,
Of Place and Non-Place.

© Jennifer Colten. Courtesy of the artist.

jc The paradoxical relationships in my work are central to the way I want the work to communicate. I remember being in high school English class and learning for the first time about the complexity of a paradox. I was so taken with the idea that two things (ideas) could be presented as contradictory, but in fact were so interconnected that they could also articulate something that was true. I fell in love with American Southern writing at this time. Authors such as Flannery O'Connor, Reynolds Price, Carson McCullers and others, made a huge impression on me and later their styles became great inspiration and influence on my photographic work. These writers depicted a strange and deeply beautiful portrait of life and the landscape. They used language in a direct descriptive manner while simultaneously constructing allusions to something else—something that was just beneath the surface, not seen directly, but felt.

I am interested in some of the very same capabilities that photographic language can present. Like writing, photography has the capacity to describe with clear

detail while also pointing to that which is beyond easy articulation or observation. I intentionally play on that very line you mention between “specificity and ambiguity” as a way to create uncertainty. I will often consciously eliminate horizon lines or create visual chaos within the controlled space of the frame as a way to deny the viewer access to context. At the same time, I tease the viewer, creating anticipation that what they see might give them access to verifiable truths. The bits of detail suggest one might know something about the place, but those bits become just information left behind, detached from their larger source or context.

Photography itself embodies paradox. The indexical relationship inherent in the medium, the relationship between the thing in the world photographed and the representation of that thing, opens endless questions about how we understand our relationship to our surroundings. The ability to express the very concept of paradox is one reason I love the photographic medium.

lh I agree with you about photography as *paradox*. Within the medium itself there is a tension between those working to express some kind of truth with their work (social documentarians and photojournalists) and those with a strong belief that photography only gives the allusion of truth—that at best, it’s a representation of reality. For me, I find questions like, “How much manipulation do you do in Photoshop?” ridiculous, but representative of a misunderstanding of what photography is. I find the beauty of photography lies in its ability to set an expectation for truth [the indexical relationship to its subject], while leading a viewer away from it. Do you want your audience to think these photographs are truthful?

jc Photography’s ability to set up an expectation, but then leave the viewer with a measure of doubt is powerful. The fact that a photograph can present with detailed and “knowable” information, while simultaneously raising questions of all sorts is so compelling. So I do not want the viewer to see these photographs as necessarily “truthful.” That they are places and things that exist/ed in the world is important because in a way, I am playing with the idea of a record of events or a selection of information, but I am most intrigued to open the questions and leave the viewer in a state of uncertainty. While I use the visual language of the social documentarian, I really want to construct a whole set of parallel possibilities where the viewer really cannot completely rely on what they see.

I do not feel tied to some kind of purist approach to my photography. After all, all photographs are sliced from a larger whole so the process of selection alone presents a very “untruthful” representation of reality. But that just gets us back to that beautiful idea of the paradox.

lh You talk about “wandering at the margins of the urban environment.” Does a new project usually begin by wandering? Do you conceive of a conceptual foundation for a project from the beginning and then go hunting for specific subjects or do the projects normally evolve from photographs taken without intent?

jc I do not think I have ever conceived of a project prior to beginning the investigation of a subject. I am very interested in the creative process and initially work somewhat from an intuitive place. I do not see the early intuitive work as work without intent. Rather, I see it as work that might be interesting yet still needs a framework or context within which to develop. I often incorporate research: lots of reading, looking at other artworks, sometimes talking with other people, and making a lot of work—these are the things that eventually lead to a more clear articulation of my ideas.

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Often towards the ending of one project I will begin to notice new aspects that seem aberrant yet continue to hold my attention. For instance when I was making the *Surveillance* work I would wander at night in all kinds of empty and extremely banal places. When people would ask me what I was doing I would respond that I was “making photographs of nothing.” I was serious about being interested in the idea of *nothing*. The idea of nothing led to my interest in the places of residue. One of the early photographs I felt held real meaning during that transition from *Surveillance* to *Of Place and Non-Place* was, *Encounter #19: 63102.20100622.2318*.



Jennifer Colten, “Encounter # 19: 63102.20100622.2318, 2010,” from the series, *Of Place and Non-Place*.

© Jennifer Colten. Courtesy of the artist.

The place where this image was made was very much like the kind of place where the *Surveillance* work was made. It was here that the idea of residue clearly began to evolve. It was also with this photograph that I began to think about the idea of the police report and all kinds of data recording of places. With the bright red that might be blood, I began to think about the crime scene. Police photographs that record traumatic events are often so banal and clinically dry. The presentation of an emotionally charged subject in a detached manner mirrors the duality in the photographic medium we were talking about earlier. The simultaneous record of fact (objective) coupled with the expression of (subjective) interpretation was finding visual voice.

The work I made in *(Untitled) Landscapes* finds its way over and over again in current work. In addition to being continually drawn to the dense and imbedded vegetation, questions regarding how to photograph the landscape in ways that extend historical and traditional ways of depicting the landscape still remain. The earlier *(Untitled) Landscapes* challenged conventions of the view. I denied the viewer's eye a resting point and often eliminated a horizon line. I was interested in the expression of beauty residing alongside unrest. Many of the photographs had areas out of focus, and the last ones had large areas of darkness. I wanted to create a seductive desire to look and yet ultimately have the viewer's expectations disrupted.

So even here you can see the ideas within this earlier landscape work found their way into the *Surveillance* work and parts of those ideas still remain in the current work.

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Jennifer Colten, "Untitled. 1997," from the series,
Untitled (Landscapes).

© Jennifer Colten. Courtesy of the artist.

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Jennifer Colten, "Untitled. 1996," from the series, *Untitled (Landscapes)*.

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lh Finally, what do you see as the ultimate outcome of the work? Is it online? In installation? In a book? Does it vary depending on project? Is the presentation of the photographs something you are thinking about while working?

jc I feel final presentation is very important. How the work is seen and how it is experienced is critical to how the ideas are communicated. I do spend lots of time thinking about many aspects of the final execution of the work. In fact, I feel decisions, from type of camera, to color or black and white, type of papers on which to print, size of image, framing choices and the viewing context are critical. With the *Surveillance* series, I made video from which I captured still frames and did some small manipulation in Photoshop. The final images were printed and face-mounted to plexiglass and then floated 1 1/2" away from the wall. I wanted to reference technology and I wanted the images to

move into the viewer's space. I wanted that bit of aggressive presentation instead of the traditional mat and frame which would have the viewer looking into the image distanced from their physical experience.

With the current work *Of Place and Non-Place* I am printing somewhat large- 24" x 36" and still deciding on final form the framing/mounting will take. I have presented the work framed, and also tried it floated against a white wall. I like the immediacy of the prints "floating" and I like the accessibility of the viewing experience. So, for that series I am still imagining possibilities. I have also dreamed of publishing some works in book form. I do think even though many of the ideas deal with experiencing space in one way or another, the opportunity to sequence for a book and design the work to be seen on a more intimate level would be exciting.

So this part of the process is integral to the ideas I am trying to express and I do think about the final execution from very early on in the making.

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Jennifer Colten, Installation View, Des Lee Gallery, from the series, *Surveillance*.

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