

# Art

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## Reviews

### “Into the Sunset: Photography’s Image of the American West”

★★★★★

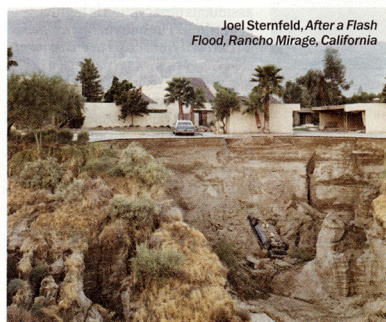
Museum of Modern Art, through June 8 (see Museums)

MoMA explores the dreams and delusions of the frontier.

By **Barbara Pollack**

Photography plays the outlaw in this searing survey of images of the American West, building up 19th-century fantasies surrounding this landscape and accountable for shooting down those very dreams in more recent years. This history has often been told through photographs—forging the railroad, exploring Yosemite, colonizing the Native Americans, all prime photo ops for some of the greatest of American photographers—but that’s not the intention of curator Eva Respini. Instead, we get an interrogation of that history as a fabrication with often dangerous, or at least depressing, consequences.

The exhibition begins and ends with Richard Prince’s *Untitled (Cowboy)* from 2003, a color-saturated print of the Marlboro Man twirling a lasso, a telltale sign that the show is about more than documentary images. Sure, there are plenty of old standbys, including Timothy O’Sullivan’s image of a stagecoach trudging through *Desert Sand Hills Near Sink of Carson, Nevada* (1867), Edward Curtis’s romantic *Canon de Chelly* (1904) and Dorothea Lange’s topical *Migrant Mother* (1936). But these are framed by less heroic works, such as Robert Frank’s lonely urban cowboy in *Rodeo—New York City* (1954) or Bill Owens’s dim-witted suburban family in *We’re really happy. Our kids are healthy, we eat good food and we have a really nice home* (1972). Savvy juxtapositions abound, making it clear that for every photograph that builds a myth, there is another ready to cut it down to size. Ansel Adams’s beatific 1944 depiction of Mount Williamson with streams of light piercing through the clouds is paired with a picture of an advertisement for a similarly awe-



Joel Sternfeld, *After a Flash Flood, Rancho Mirage, California*

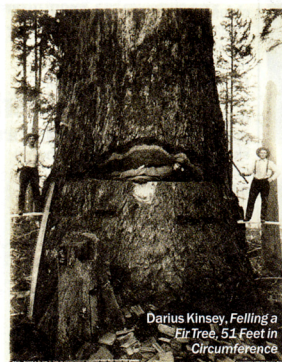
inspiring mountain range, plastered on a billboard by the side of a desolate road in Stephen Shore’s *U.S. 97 South of Klamath Falls, Oregon* (1973–2005).

In this retelling, Manifest Destiny anticipates the overexpansion of the western landscape by the mid-20th century. Here, the exhibition shines with stunning examples of work—Ed Ruscha’s 1967 parking lots, William A. Garnett’s 1950 aerial views of housing developments, Robert Adams’s 1970 picture of suburban tracts and Lewis Baltz’s 1985 study of human intervention at San Quentin Point—that demonstrate the way in which home on the range became a place of little boxes on the hillside. In this period, a legion of photographers opted to go on the road, most notably Frank, Edward Weston, Garry Winogrand and Lee Friedlander, though one

### Postmodernism couldn’t have existed without the West.

of the best images of drive-by America in the exhibition is provided by Dennis Hopper in *Double Standard* (1961).

Photography emerges as not only the chief publicist of Western mythology, but its primary

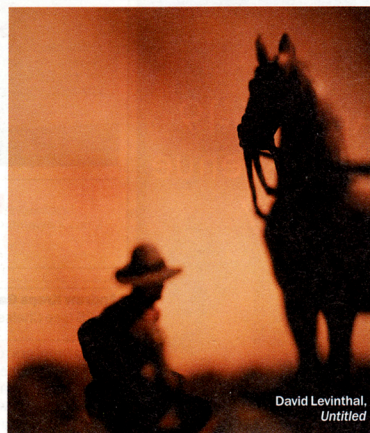


Darius Kinsey, *Felling a Fir Tree, 51 Feet in Circumference*

beneficiary as well. Hollywood’s role in this narrative is key, since the movies have provided rich subject matter for photographers, while also changing the way that artists look at and make pictures. This show is short on Hollywood glamour (as it is on happy-go-lucky California surfers and hippies), instead providing plenty of the negative aspects of the movie industry. A drifter lies down on Sunset Boulevard in Philip-Lorca diCorcia’s *Major Tom* (1990–92), while a brutal teen plays with a gun in Larry Clark’s *Dead* (1970). Richard Avedon’s downright discourteous series “In the American West” is represented by *Carl Hoefert* (1983), described as a portrait of an

“unemployed blackjack dealer,” and Larry Sultan provides an intimate take on a porn shoot with *Tasha’s Third Film* (1998). These are the victims of the American dream hoping to cash in on the riches that the West once promised.

But there are plenty of postmodernists who’ve gone West in pursuit of these fantasies and mined the Hollywood dream industry like prospectors in the California gold rush. The show even implies that there couldn’t have been postmodernism without the American West, tracing the roots of self-invention and self-presentation back to early images of Butch Cassidy and the Wild Bunch, and Buffalo Bill’s Wild West show. These are exhibited along with David Levinthal’s 1989 close-up of a toy cowboy with his tiny horse and Cindy Sherman’s 1979 staged self-portrait as a ruffe-skirted heroine in Monument Valley. John Baldessari is represented by one witty work, *Black and White Decision* (1984), a montage with cowboys. By the time we wind up back at Prince, it is impossible to avoid the conclusion that, just as the West could not have developed without the presence of the camera, photography could not have grown into the field of dreams it is today without the existence of the American West. ■



David Levinthal, *Untitled*

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