photograph

©Andrew L. Moore, Golden Valley Norwegian Lutheran Church, Perkins County, South Dakota, 2013. Courtesy the artist

INTERVIEW

Andrew Moore

By Lyle Rexer

The late novelist Kent Haruf said of Andrew Moore's most recent book, *Dirt Meridian*(Damiani 2015), that it "understands the sacredness" of the Great Plains. The photographs from the project, including images which have never before been printed, are on display at the Joslyn Art Museum in Omaha, Nebraska, through January 8, at the edge of that vast and underappreciated landscape that Moore has evoked.

Lyle Rexer: As someone with a conceptual bent when it comes to photography, I had imagined *Dirt Meridian* as rather more impressionistic. What attracted and surprised me was a certain rigor to the pictures. It got me thinking about Joe Deal's *The Fault Zone*, from the 1970s, in which he was very careful to take the pictures from the same angle, to achieve a certain kind of information.

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Andrew Moore: It's funny, as you were talking I was thinking of Deal. And I'm happy to hear that you see a consistency to the project. It comes the closest of any of my work so far to realizing a coherent vision. On the plains, I was confronted by a vastness, an emptiness I wanted to capture. To fill the frame with nothing, I had to start from the edges and be very careful how I brought that vastness inside. Much of that depended on taking the photographs from the proper height, which is why I credit my pilot, Doug Dean, on the title page. He understood that what I wanted was a low horizon, the height a raven might fly, as Doug said, high enough to get an overview but not so high as to make the human traces disappear.

LR: I am reminded of Emmet Gowin's unearthly aerial photographs of subsidence craters from atomic bomb tests in New Mexico.

AM: I think of Emmet's vision as Old Testament, giving us God's-eye view of our follies. Mine is more New Testament, lower down, closer to the earth with all its messiness.

LR: Where, then, does the project find its place in the tradition of the American sublime, represented most spectacularly by Ansel Adams?

AM: Perhaps it's the anti-Adams. There is a spiritual call of empty space that I wanted to translate, but the landscape is more forbidding than what Adams presents, and it feels as alien as the Steppes or Siberia. It is also less monumental. Not a single mountain appears in *Dirt Meridian*, and that is intentional.

LR: And when we do touch down, in your photos, we often find ruins, decay.

AM: Partly because of my work in Detroit and in Cuba, I've acquired a reputation as the king of ruin porn, the promoter of a kind of visual *schadenfreude*. It disturbs me, because that is not my intention. I am profoundly interested in the fact that human beings' attempts to mark their passing, to establish a permanence, take place on a longer timeline, within a wider context. I've read Giambattista Vico and Jorge Luis Borges, so I am thinking about historical cycles but also natural processes. In the Detroit photographs, nature absorbs all our efforts. As opposed to the formlessness of nature, its fecundity, the geometry of buildings – of man-made structures – represents the trace of human ambition, and in their decay we can read the failure of dreams, for all the complex reasons history presents. But I want to add one thing: as bleak as the Detroit pictures may seem, they are not empty. In terms of nature and culture, what I show is a repurposing of that landscape, and a resilience.

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LR: I am probably one of those people who would have gotten on you about disaster never looking so good, but I find so many of the photographs to be moving, dignified, and deeply sympathetic. I am not sure you can ask more of a photographer.

AM: I want to – not redeem, that's too grand a word – discover something of value in these traces. On the Great Plains, the footprint of a sod house is still visible after 100 years. The houses I photograph were all built by their owners, usually from plans and materials ordered from a Sears Roebuck catalogue. One of my subjects, the Murray house, was constructed of concrete blocks shaped to recall Renaissance stone work, and the concrete was made from the very sand the house stood on. The passing of all this is sad, even tragic, but it speaks to a landscape that inspired the inhabitants to dream, to imagine.

LR: The flip side of that wilderness imagining would be the wonderful interiors you shoot, whether someone's quirky museum or a country cafe or a faded parlor in a house in Cuba.

AM: These are portraits of people's minds, of their imaginations as manifested in the way they live their lives.

LR: People, after all, are your subject, and paradoxically, we can't comprehend the landscapes you show us without access to the people, without their portraits, without a sense of their persistence.

AM: Some critics saw the Cuba photographs as shabby chic, but I love how a room, a wall, a niche can be expressive of a human being. In *Dirt Meridian*, there is a photo of Edgar Simon's crowded, one-room Schoolhouse Museum, for example. I have to admit that I am also attracted to the pathos of decline, the symptoms of a late empire, whether it's Russia, the United States, or Cuba.

LR: I stubbornly refuse to think of photography as a guilty pleasure. What I always liked about the medium was that it showed me the look of things, not as I would see them (if I were there), but as someone other had seen them – or the camera had seen them. It's not the where or the what but the how that makes photographs important. I don't ask your photographs to solve social problems but to connect me to whatever is in the picture, to make me want to look.

AM: I make pictures that contain a lot to look at and think about. Rhythms, patterns, contradictions, changing relations of light and dark, and they work on every level, from the formal to the symbolic. Just for the pleasure of it. One of the things that's great about the Joslyn Art Museum exhibition is that I have been able to print the work very

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©Andrew L. Moore, *Olson House, Harding County, South Dakota*, 2013. Courtesy the artist

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