

Excerpt from MA Thesis:

Reengaging with the American Landscape Through the Photographs of Deborah Bright

Introduction

Like the female nude, landscape encodes its own aesthetic histories in Western art, but unlike the former, these have not been subjected to much scrutiny as tokens of exchange in the larger political economies of class, gender, race and national identity. For the most part, contemporary photographs present oversimplified, if visually spectacular, dramas of “the human” and “the natural.” Their emotional tone is either ironic, showing us a nature that has become the butt of some huge visual joke, or apocalyptic, mesmerizing us with the sublime spectacle of nature’s immolation.¹¹

A worn, concrete doorframe stands alone amidst a scene populated by newer buildings, fences, and rocky terrain in Deborah Bright’s *Yehudiyya Gate* (fig. 1), an image from her most recent photographic series *Destruction Layer* (2009). Shot in Israel, the photograph depicts the hot midday landscape, dry and grassless, with palm trees and scrub brush filling in bare patches. The ramshackle houses surrounding the doorframe on all three sides are pieced together with a variety of mismatched materials. Eroded concrete, shades of brown staining its top and sides, indicates the doorframe’s age. The sense that the current suburban environment was built up around the doorframe is exaggerated by Bright’s choice of a panoramic format. The elongating of the composition allows Bright to include the contemporary structures as a means to complicate the narrative occurring in this landscape.

Although, the doorframe no longer functions as an entrance for the now-demolished structure that originally housed it, the gaping frame now operates as an entrance into Bright’s photograph. Centered in the composition, the doorway allows the viewer to peer beyond the multiple chain link fences, telephone wires, and clotheslines crisscrossing the frame to the family home in the distance. This residential building is significant as it declares a new presence in the landscape.

Bright refers to the concrete frame as a “gate” in the photograph’s title. But what is this a gate to? How has this gate’s role changed over time? The *Destruction Layer* series provokes a conversation about residual historical markers that are apparent within the contemporary Israeli landscape. In several cities across Israel Bright locates structures from both the Israeli and the Palestinian peoples and presents them together within the photographic frame, confronting the viewer with a complex landscape that reveals much more than official Israeli culture dictates.

Bright’s *Destruction Layer* photographs clearly depict a landscape in transition. Bright’s *Destruction Layer* series, like the earlier landscape series she produced between 1981-2003 that concern this thesis—the *Battlefield*

¹¹ Deborah Bright, “The Machine in the Garden Revisited: American Environmentalism and Photographic Aesthetics,” *Art Journal* 51:2 (Summer 1992), <http://www.deborahbright.com/PDF/Bright-Machine.pdf>.

Panoramas, the *Manifest Series*, and the *Glacial Erratics*— function as palimpsests: The photographs record the traces of history left, if often overlooked, upon the land. As such, the photographs, like the landscape itself, maintain a historical record within the terrain. The *Destruction Layer* series emphasizes the remnants of a destroyed Palestinian culture in a rapidly colonized landscape. Juxtaposed with new Israeli buildings, the Palestinian structures, some in ruin and others still in use, emerge from the cluttered scenes as distinctly out of place. The most overtly political series of work Bright has produced thus far, *Destruction Layer*, through its examination of the landscape's palimpsest embedded in structural ruins, reveals the ongoing destruction of Palestinian people and culture under Israeli occupation.

Yet such social and cultural inequities have always been the focus of Bright's landscape photographs as this thesis will show through an analysis of these three earlier series that address the colonial history of the United States. The three series discussed in this thesis are subtler than *Destruction Layer*, but they provide a guide chronicling how Bright's most recent work has evolved. Her earlier works take time to decipher as the scenes— historic battlefields, crumbling stone walls, and Plymouth Rock—are not as vividly divided as those in Israel. However, the American landscape in which she works produces other kinds of divisions. Bright's compositions and titling unearth a landscape in flux. Each series is a careful balance of crucial aesthetic decisions, very specific text, and direct references to landscape photography's history and tropes. Her photographs illustrate how landscape imagery can examine and document our continually changing relationship to the land.

Chapter one, *Battlefield Panoramas: Reengaging with the Battlefield*, discusses Bright's earliest series of landscapes, battlefield images from the United States and Europe. She created these multi-panel panoramic images on a gigantic scale, overwhelming the viewer with black and white scenes of historic battlefields. The chapter concentrates on three aspects surrounding the work: its relationship to the contemporary tourist's battlefield experience; the domination by men in the production of landscape imagery; and the often unacknowledged losses on the battlefield. This series, Bright's first foray into landscape photography, sets the stage for her later works.

The discussion of Bright's work continues in Chapter Two with *Manifest Series: Links to Local History*. In this series, Bright presents a monochromatic series of stone walls photographed in New Hampshire. Adjoining these photographs are short titles describing early land transactions. Resembling an ethnological collection of nineteenth century comparative studies, the photographs speak to early land organization and social structures in the United States. Her images present the viewer with jumbled stone piles—now surrounded by forest—that at one time helped early Americans fulfill their ambitions as independent landowners. *Manifest Series* depicts the change in land value in the Northeast along with the shifting goals of Americans over time. The primary points for examination in this chapter include how the walls were a critical element of land development and are now an important part of the vernacular landscape, and how the landscape encompassing the walls has evolved along with the American Dream.

Finally, Chapter Three, *Glacial Erratics: Demystifying American Myth*, will look at Bright's series on Plymouth Rock. Multiple color images of the Rock, shot from the exactly same place over a three-year span, attempt to

negate the myth of Plymouth Rock. Through composition and repetition, Bright presents the viewer with Plymouth Rock over and over again, removing the Rock's unique status while simultaneously employing a medium partially responsible for perpetuating its myth. Critical to this chapter's discussion are the Rock's history, a narrative created and enhanced by locals; an understanding of Plymouth Rock's glacial formation; and the importance of time in both Bright's imagery and the Rock's lifespan.

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In all the works discussed herein, Bright pairs imagery with text to speak to a particular history contained within the depicted landscape. However, each series is photographed and presented in a distinctly unique manner. Bright works "in discrete projects" altering her presentation and aesthetic decisions to best suit the scenario.² The choices are made very deliberately and Bright has no reservations about working in various photographic mediums. She is not concerned about maintaining a "look" like most photographers. Working against the ironic or apocalyptic landscape, Bright subjects her landscapes to "scrutiny as tokens of exchange in the larger political economies of class, gender, race and national identity."³ The resulting images are challenging to parse: they negate the perception that landscape imagery is overwhelmingly neutral and provide a fuller interpretation of our relationship to land. Bright's work raises many questions about how landscape imagery can function and what its relevance is to the contemporary world. The following three chapters examine how Bright melds specific histories and aesthetic choices within her photographs to reflect the historical development of America.

² Deborah Bright, email correspondence with the author, January 22, 2010.

³ Deborah Bright, "The Machine in the Garden Revisited."

Illustration

Figure 1



Deborah Bright, *Yehudiyya Gate*, 2009, from the *Destruction Layer* series. Digital color photograph. (Chazan Gallery at Wheeler, <http://www.chazangallery.org/bright%20and%20wells.htm>)