

# Los Angeles Times

## The Wasteland

**The world of photographer Lewis Baltz lies just beyond the city, where he records bleak images of the American West**

March 29, 1992 | CATHY CURTIS, Cathy Curtis is a staff writer at the Orange County edition of The Times.

Photographer Lewis Baltz, known for his pitiless scrutiny of bleak landscapes on the outskirts of cities, cuts a dark figure on a balmy Sunday afternoon in Santa Monica. Swathed in a black turtleneck, he sits with shoulders hunched, cradling a steady stream of cigarettes, as if his sunny seat by a hotel pool had metamorphosed into a table at a Paris cafe. The 46-year-old California artist--better known in Europe than in the United States these days--speaks in a quiet rush of words that the drone of passing airplanes nearly drowns out.

"I was trying to find a vocabulary to mediate my sense of unspeakable horror at being born when and where I was," he says, laughing ruefully as he describes the origins of his early series of stark black-and-white photographs. Baltz Country is the edgy space beyond the city that we don't think about much, the scrubby places near the freeway where debris collects and cheap, homely buildings sprout.

"Coming from Orange County, I watched the ghastly transformation of this place--the first wave of bulimic capitalism sweeping across the land, next door to me," he says. "I sensed that there was something horribly amiss and awry about my own personal environment."

"Rule Without Exception," a retrospective of Baltz's work (organized by the Des Moines Art Center) currently at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, traces the development of Baltz's chilly vision, from the bland anonymity of his black-and-white series of the late '60s to the gorgeous sterility of his recent Cibachrome transparencies.

One of the earliest series, "The Tract Houses" (1969-71), zeros in on the banal details of a housing site under construction: flat expanses of concrete wall, paint-stained sliding aluminum windows; louvered exhaust ducts; doorways that open onto dirt yards.

"The New Industrial Parks Near Irvine, California" (1974-75) offers a further refinement of this outlook, with 51 fragmentary views of boxy factory buildings built on a featureless land under a bleached-out sky. The blank facades offer no hints of the type of work that might actually go on inside.

The catalogue for the current exhibit quotes a comment Baltz once made about the factory views: "Look at that," he said. "You don't know whether they're manufacturing pantyhose or megadeath."

Baltz prefers the series format as a buffer against viewing any one image as more significant or truthful than another. The 102 black-and-white photographs in "Park City" (1978-80) poke around the exteriors and interiors of a ski resort in Utah, a crass outcropping of vacation homes on the rich land of the High Plains.

The 58 images in "San Quentin Point" (1981-83) constitute a meticulous and oddly elegant survey of a wasteland of discards--tires, newspapers, old cans and bottles--next door to an affluent California suburb.

"Continuous Fire Polar Circle" (1985) offers a filmstrip-like view, in seven photographs, of a miniature apocalypse: a huge incinerator burning rubble at the top of the world.

The American West is prime Baltz territory because, as he says, "the dialectic between the natural and the man-made" is particularly stark. In 1986, nine years after completing a series called "Nevada," he returned to the state to shoot "Near Reno."

Although no people make an appearance in these images--the human figure is exceedingly rare in Baltz's work--their presence is depressingly visible. Photographs show a beer can exploded into lacy metal shards by countless bullet holes, the blasted rear end of a washing machine, the metal frame of a ghostly TV set, flies alighting on a dead sheep.

"The place had really turned mean in funny ways," Baltz says. "Reno is really a blue-collar town, with . . . exactly the people who were most devastated economically during that decade. . . . To live a life where the best thing you could

find to do is to drag some discarded object in the middle of the desert and blow the hell out of it--it seems like a major recreational activity in Northern Nevada during the late '80s."

Baltz, who grew up in Newport Beach, has been taking pictures in an obsessive way since he was 11 or 12. ("I was a repulsively serious kid, and I was really serious about (my photographs) being art.")

A product of the San Francisco Art Institute and Claremont Graduate School, he says he "never had any desire to make anything in any other medium," yet he also never had much interest in art photography. His early influences worked in other media--contemporary artists such as Robert Irwin, Robert Smithson, Richard Serra and Carl Andre. Baltz also was hooked by painter Ed Ruscha's books of photographs from the '60s ("26 Gasoline Stations," "Some Los Angeles Apartments," "34 Parking Lots"). Ruscha's work of that era "had none of the pretensions of the art photography that was going around," Baltz says. "It was witty, it was ironic, it was full of information. It was really accurate documentation."

In a major 1975 exhibition, "New Topographics: Photographs of a Man-Altered Landscape," Baltz was linked with such artists as Hilla and Bernhard Becher (who produce straightforward images of aging German industrial structures) and Robert Adams (whose photographs sympathetically document the clash between heroic landscape and urban sprawl in the American West).

But Baltz's work is signally different. "I recoil a little at having my earlier work seen as being elegant formalist objects and not having them seen beyond that," he says. "It's like people read the seduction but didn't read the entrapment."

On the other hand, despite the social and political implications of his work, it isn't intended as a call to arms for environmental activists. "In my work you could talk about ecology or the environment or development or technology," Baltz says. "But . . . those things don't really interest me.

"The phenomena of that interest me--the idea of something being just phenomenal, just there. What implications that might have, if any. . . . I would hope that people would spend time examining things that have become marginalized, things that have become invisible because there's no excuse to look at them. Our environment is . . . the result of a very complex and not always generous set of social relations (that) have physical manifestations in the stuff we see."

Baltz's landscape vision is frequently compared to the work of such filmmakers as Michelangelo Antonioni ("Red Desert") and Wim Wenders ("Paris, Texas").

Brushing aside any qualitative comparison between Antonioni and himself, Baltz agrees that his chief interest in cinema is "the representation of urbanism and modern life. . . . In an interview 30 years ago, Antonioni was asked why he opened 'Red Desert' with (images of) roadsides and factories outside of Ravenna. He was asked, 'Does (the whole area) look like that?' He said, 'No, in fact there was a very lovely ancient pine forest on the other side of the road. But I was more interested in the factories.'

"The industrial world is our world. It seems more real to us. We may not want it to. We'd prefer that it didn't. In a certain way, there is a pastoral, bucolic impulse that's very very strong in our society, but it's not lived by very many people. And it's an ethos that, by and large, isn't held by the people who live it. The great support for the Sierra Club comes from here and San Francisco and New York. It doesn't come from people living on ranches in Wyoming."

Having a retrospective strikes Baltz--who lives and works in Europe and California and is a visiting artist at CalArts this year--as "somewhat frightening at my age. It's like having your hair gray at the right time. If your hair turns gray when you're 20, that's great; if it doesn't until you're 60, that's great. . . . But for it to be in mid-life is just a little too appropriate. . . .

"This period has been the most intense period of work for me than I can ever remember. I've been doing more projects in more places. It turns out I like it. Since I have the sort of character and mentality that I can feel anxious and pressured about nothing, I might as well be going places and doing things to feel anxious and pressured about.

"Also, when you have a retrospective, you're kind of on a roll. I feel like I've gotten rich during this period. Not that I've made a penny actually, but something has changed--I'm in a position where I can find support for projects. I work kind of like an architect. I make proposals for projects, a lot of them, and . . . enough get realized now to take all my time."

One project is his "Technologies" series, begun in 1989: large-scale color images of work areas in high-tech companies in France. The series is "a kind of blank look at technology, just the environment of technology, the sameness of it, the fact that it's global," Baltz says.

"You can see everything and it tells you nothing . . . unless you're a computer person, unless you're trained that way, you can walk through this place for years and no secrets would be (revealed). . . . It's completely impenetrable to vision."

Baltz began using color in a low-key way in 1988 in "Candlestick Point," a series of photographs of a flat terrain pockmarked by piles of industrial and personal rubble--tires, scrap lumber, bricks, old billboards, a mattress.

"My idea was to see if I could illustrate a concept of (Harvard philosopher and cinema scholar) Stanley Cavell's about color having a sense of presentness in time and black-and-white having a sense of nostalgia," Baltz explains. "Black-and-white is two seconds ago and color is now . . . . You accept the black-and-white as reality and the color seems totally fake."

Baltz says his work has always been "confrontational in the sense of what it refuses to offer you." But in his new Cibachrome images--which also include a group of nocturnal city scenes--he is aiming for overt seduction.

"I hate color," he says. "I think it's really vulgar and awful. That's also what I like about it.

"I wanted to do something so meretricious and so ingratiating and still see how much of that edge I could retain in the works. . . . It's always very difficult for me to know how far to push something in a work, how much information I should reveal, how seductive it should be or not be."

For the retrospective, LACMA commissioned a piece from Baltz. He says "11777 Foothill Boulevard" resulted from his search for "completely generic locations" in Los Angeles.

"I suppose there's a kind of nostalgia in that, because Los Angeles is really becoming less generic. As it becomes more of a built city, it is taking on some sort of a flavor rather than just of being sort of the id of the Midwest.

"(But) there are still vast vast tracts of featureless stuff in Los Angeles. I wanted to make up a photograph that looked easy and typical. Anybody can see that. It's something that's completely unextraordinary. . . . It looks like a skin graft from 50 other locations around here."

Baltz says he intends all his work "to be difficult to the point of being demanding. It's not made to be seen in four seconds. . . . Which is not the same

thing as being mystifying or playing exclusive (in the sense of), 'Well, I got the message of the work, and the message was, it's supposed to exclude me.'

"In a peculiar way I want my work to be present to people and I want people to be present to it. It's not just going to lie there and make you happy.

"Photography basically has been promoted as the art for the developmentally challenged, (for those who think), 'Contemporary art is just too damn tough and obscure, and photography is great stuff. And, what's more, I can understand it or I can see something recognizable.' That expectation is consistently being defeated by all the most interesting work being done today."