

# The New York Times

## Art Review | 'Mount St. Helens' – Museum of Modern Art, New York Quiet and Formal Photographs of a Natural and Violent Devastation

By KEN JOHNSON  
August 5, 2005

On May 18, 1980, Mount St. Helens blew its top. The amount of energy released by this volcanic eruption in Oregon was equal to the detonation of one Hiroshima-size atomic bomb every second for nine hours. It burned and flattened trees and houses over a 250-square-mile area, caused mudslides and flooding and killed 60 people.

The landscape photographer Frank Gohlke visited the area the next year and began documenting the effects of the eruption on Mount St. Helens and its surrounding terrain. He returned four times over the next decade, and compiled an impressive portfolio of large-scale, panoramic photographs.



Now a selection of those pictures is at the Museum of Modern Art. Organized by John Szarkowski, director emeritus of the museum's photography department, the exhibition is compelling for the story it tells in words and pictures about the effects of a major volcanic eruption. But it is also at least as interesting for the questions it raises about the limitations of fine-art photography as a witness to natural history.

Formally and technically, Mr. Gohlke's photographs are impeccable, and the scenes shot from near and far are often spectacular. But considering the scale and the violence of the event they are supposed to document retrospectively, they are curiously anti-climactic.

Favoring straightforward compositions and a muted range of tones, Mr. Gohlke avoids the kind of kitschy, high-contrast picturesque drama that makes the photography of Ansel Adams so popular. But Mr. Gohlke's pictures so understate the story they are meant to tell that you have to read his notes, printed on wall labels, to appreciate the enormity of what happened.

The note accompanying a quiet aerial view of downed trees talks about the ash cloud that devastated the land north and west of the mountain. It consisted not only of ash but also of magma and crushed-up rock, soil and trees. "I once heard it described as a superheated brick wall moving at highway speed," Mr. Gohlke writes, conjuring an image more vividly scary - as well as more informative - than anything represented by his photographs.

Mr. Gohlke acknowledges photography's limitation in the note that accompanies a picture of logs filling a lake, which he shot from an airplane. In the picture, the logs look like thousands of matchsticks. But, as Mr. Gohlke writes, "the ambiguity of scale typical of aerial photographs is particularly deceptive here: the largest pieces are up to seven feet in diameter."

Mr. Gohlke's tendency toward photographic understatement is partly generational. In 1975 he was included in a famous photography exhibition called "New Topographics," along with Lewis Baltz, Robert Adams, Bernd and Hilla Becher and others who studiously avoided romantic approaches to landscape photography.

The "New Topographic" photographers favored an almost anonymous documentary style, and they also took an interest in the impact of human industries on the natural world. Among Mr. Gohlke's best-known works is a series of pictures that he produced in the mid-1970's of grain silos in the Midwest. (Some are in an exhibition devoted to his work at Howard Greenberg Gallery in Manhattan through Aug. 19.)

The human dimension is included in Mr. Gohlke's Mount St. Helens project, but again, you have to read the wall labels to get the story. Some images that show new dirt roads and newly planted areas have to do with the logging industry's efforts to make the best of the situation by harvesting downed trees before they rotted and by starting new forests. Here, too, Mr. Gohlke maintains a neutral attitude. His notes express neither ideological support for, nor opposition to, the logging business.

Nor does he get up close and personal. There are no portraits of loggers, and no logging machinery is ever in sight. In fact, few people of any sort appear in the photographs, and there are hardly any animals, either. The landscape seems strangely unpopulated.

A curious exception is a two-part sequence in which sightseers who have climbed to the rim of the volcano appear in the first picture, but have scurried away in the second because a nearby chunk of the rim has just collapsed. This suggests that there may be more social activity around Mount St. Helens than Mr. Gohlke is willing to let us see.

It is, of course, important to realize that what he does is not science or journalism but art. Despite the stylistic restraint, his work does convey something mythic. The devastation wrought by the volcano is like the retributive act of an irritable Old Testament God. And showing the effects of a destructive force of unimaginable proportions calls to mind the 18th-century idea of the sublime: the frightening and exhilarating confrontation with an unfathomably vast and powerful universe in which human life seems but a minor and fragile accident.

In this respect, Mr. Gohlke's ancestors are 19th-century painters of storms and deluges like J. M. W. Turner and John Martin and the Rocky Mountain painter Albert Bierstadt. You think, too, of photographic explorers of the American West like William Henry Jackson and Carlton E. Watkins, whose big scale and profuse detail are echoed in Mr. Gohlke's pictures.

Mr. Gohlke remains a modernist, however, an artist for whom the formal integrity of the picture is paramount. That may be why, in part, he sticks to black-and-white film; although color film would capture more information, it might disrupt the formal unity. Also, there are all those aerial views in which the topography becomes a busily textured abstraction, recalling the early days of modernist photography, when photographs that verged on pure abstraction were an exciting novelty.

But eventually Mr. Gohlke's formalism starts to seem not only beside the point but also unnecessarily obscure. The idea that everything important about the Mount St. Helens eruption is somehow packed into these pictures is not entirely implausible, but you may wonder how much more a less stringently high-minded photographer - a humble, work-a-day photojournalist - might tell us about the natural and social history of Mount St. Helens.