

notes on looking

Mark Ruwedel's Report on Lake Bonneville at Gallery Luisotti

by Geoff Tuck
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From American Art, Spring 1996 (included among gallery bibliography for Mark Ruwedel):

"In the process of decay, and in it alone, the events of history shrivel up and become absorbed in history." Walter Benjamin¹

And then further in the same excerpted text:

"...I have come to think of the land as being an enormous historical archive. I am interested in revealing the narratives contained within the landscape, especially those places where the land reveals itself as being both an agent of change and the field of human endeavor." Mark Ruwedel (ibid.)



Looking at Mark Ruwedel's untitled photograph, I recognize that the artist is not asking me to think about what the dirt and the wind and the cold might feel like to touch, he is not showing me what they look like; rather, by including as secondary titles the modern, specific name for this place – the Great Salt Lake – as well as the epochal, encompassing name – Lake Bonneville – he is asking me to consider the land itself, and to think about the distance between the two names we have given it.

I know from reading an article by the artist (available in the gallery, and from which I have quoted above) that Lake Bonneville is the name geologists give to the pre-historic Great Basin depression that formed as a lake during the Ice Age (the most recent one, that is). Mountain ranges, climate-scale wind patterns and shifts in earth's temperature all have played roles in the slow dynamics of geology at Bonneville, and so this photograph, and the series, offer evidence of what Ruwedel calls "land as an agent of change" and specifically, land as an agent of its own change.

Of course, man has wrought changes on this landscape, too; for example, the automobile in the photograph alludes to the history of auto racing at Bonneville Salt Flats, and the Great Salt Lake is home to several celebrated works of land art. Both these activities have left their marks on this place.

I think again of Mark Ruwedel's use of the word "report" in his title. A report is not a thing, a report is the telling of a thing, a report offers evidence – documentation from which one is encouraged to draw conclusions. A report is also evidence of itself, of the medium used for the telling.

I appreciate the surprise the artist inspires in me by his use of such a technical term, I like that it makes me wonder. As a signifier for art, report challenges me to consider the artist's intention, and to read his material beyond what I can see, toward what I can find. I am encouraged to draw on what I know and can learn about the subject, and to combine this with the evidence artist presents.

The art and the science of photography are in perfect balance in this picture, and in perfect tension; Ruwedel's photograph of the spare and debased landscape captures the facts on the ground, and it also evokes the very human mythology of the West. In this way, Ruwedel's "report" expands to include his

thoughts on photography (the facts and the mythology of that art) in his essay on the American landscape.

¹ Ruwedel, Mark. "The Land as Historical Archive." *American Art* 10, no. 1 (1996): 36-41.