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Frank Gohlke's New Topographics

By GREG COOK | January 15, 2013



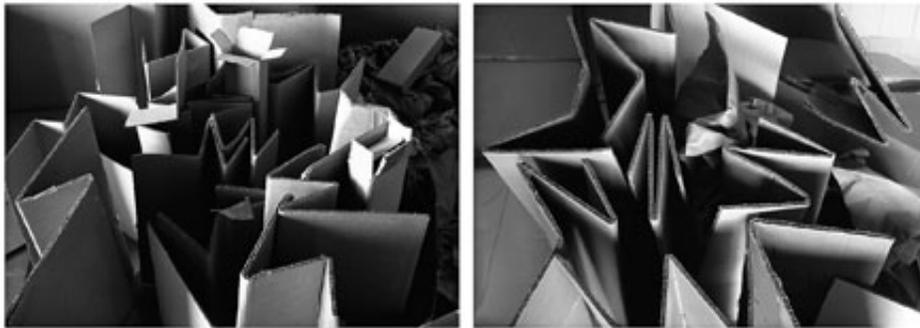
"When that show was created, as odd as it seems now, it was extremely controversial," Frank Gohlke says of being featured in the landmark 1975 exhibit of deadpan

photography, "New Topographics: Photographs of the Man-Altered Landscape" at New York's George Eastman House.

"A lot of people just hated it," says Gohlke, who lived in Boston from 1987 to 2007, and still often summers here. "It seemed as though it was going to be one of those ideas that had a moment . . . It would just be a minor eddy in the stream of art history. But it didn't turn out that way." In fact, New Topographics remains probably the most prominent style of art photography today.

Plastic, cookie-cutter post-World War II America and the growing awareness of its environmental costs prompted Gohlke to mull ordinary, even ugly places and the way "the culture worked through its landscape." His black-and-white photos depict flat Midwestern landscapes, grain elevators, the destruction and rebuilding of a Texas town after a tornado, the aftermath of the 1980 eruption of Mount St. Helens, and the poisoned Sudbury River.

The UMass Dartmouth exhibit "Miles and Miles of Things I've Never Seen" features two projects: *Ten Minutes in North Texas* from 1995 and *Unpacked* from 2008 and '09. In the first, he photographed wide-open Texas fields and rivers and the skies above them. Then he'd wait 10 minutes and photograph the same scene again.



"I wanted to replicate that experience of just standing in a field and looking at the horizon. And the less that was there, the better," he says. "In most cases, [the paired photos] looked almost identical. But that was okay because they were about the passage of time."

When he left Boston for Tucson to teach at the University of Arizona in 2007, his new living room had sliding glass windows facing the desert. But he turned his back on the landscape and arranged cardboard still-lives to photograph. Some are tangled zigzags of cardboard. Others could be models of, say, Boston.

He shows them in pairs so they don't feel too metaphorical or too abstract. "I didn't want them to make great claims for themselves. I was just happy for them to be peculiar pictures of things I made with cardboard that I just happened to have on hand and I had fun playing with for a year."

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"FRANK GOHLKE: MILES AND MILES OF THINGS I'VE NEVER SEEN" :: UMass Dartmouth University Art Gallery, 715 Purchase St, New Bedford :: Through January 27 :: 508.999.8555 or umassd.edu/cvpa/galleries

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