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Women in the Landscape

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Women in the Landscape :: Jessica Auer

This is the first installment in a new ongoing feature, *Women in the Landscape*, a series of conversations between women photographers whose work focuses on the land.

This first interview is with Jessica Auer, an artist working in Montréal. Her work is largely concerned with the study of cultural sites and our changing perception of what 'landscape' is.

— LAUREN HENKIN
CO-EDITOR, TILTED ARC

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LAUREN HENKIN :: JESSICA AUER

lh In her text titled "Revealing Landscape from Sea to Surface," Karla McManus wrote about your work, "The photographs of Jessica Auer...reveal both the artificiality of the human preoccupation with wilderness and the history of humanity's shaping of the land." First, do you see the main subject of your images as the land, or are the landscapes themselves simply acting in a supporting role to another subject—us, or how we view or encounter it?

ja In terms of content, I do generally point my lens towards landscape, but it would be more accurate to imply that in theory, I'm not just examining the land itself, rather our relationship to it. On an apparent level, I am drawn to photographing cultural sites, places where human impact is visible on the landscape, whether that may be the built environment or more subtle traces of human activity. But I'm also interested in the way that we observe and consider landscape - as tourists, as spectators, and as people with preconceptions and memories.

Sometimes I include people in my images that act as 'viewers,' and other times I simply try to imply the idea of spectatorship by playing with scale and installation in the gallery environment. Through these subtle observations and strategies, the viewer may become aware of the subject(s) outside the photographic frame. I do hope that these images of land somehow lead us back to ourselves.

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lh I know that the installation is a major component in how you want your viewer to experience both the individual works themselves and the landscapes that are presented. Can you expand how you “play” with scale and installation to imply what is on the exterior of the frame itself?

ja Perhaps I could elaborate on some specific projects. For one of my early bodies of work, I traveled around the perimeter of Montreal Island, my home city. Using a large format camera, I photographed the shores looking outward, repeating the same composition but capturing different views. I thought it would be interesting for the viewer to consider the city as an island, but when I looked at the prints in a sequence, I realized that it seemed as though I may have been photographing a river, which is linear. At that point I decided that installing these photographs as relatively large-scale prints in a four-walled gallery or a circular space would be imperative, so that the viewer would be surrounded by these views, and perhaps sense the experience that I had

while photographing – traveling around an endless trajectory. I’m also considering what is outside the frame – the city behind the camera, which is implied by the artificiality of the shoreline. I was also hoping this consideration of looking outward can lead viewers to look inward.

In a more recent project, I enlarged a photograph of a meadow to fill an entire wall, like wallpaper. At this scale, the viewer doesn’t just think about the subject of the photograph but also how they begin to inhabit the image. My goal with the meadow was to address how humans perceive nature or wilderness, but also how landscape images have played a role in shaping these perceptions.

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Jessica Auer, Installation View, Patrick Mikhail Gallery, from the series "[Meadow.](#)"

© Jessica Auer. Courtesy of the artist and [Patrick Mikhail Gallery.](#)

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lh You also talk about examining the relationship between landscape and regional identity in “[Unmarked Sites](#).” Can you talk about what we can learn about identity through the landscape (and in particular through photographing it)?

ja or “Unmarked Sites” I traveled around Newfoundland and Labrador with the goal of learning about this place by simply looking at traces on the landscape – archeological sites, protected natural or geological areas, small villages and iconic landmarks. Because of low population density and the relative remoteness of Newfoundland and Labrador, history and tradition have been well preserved. An important theme throughout the photographs I captured relates to identity by showing a place that has been colonized by European settlers, whose relationship to the sea and to the land is directly connected to their work and survival. From this thread some more specific stories emerge, for example the collapse of the cod fishing industry. As a photographer, I am also considering my own identity and perspective, as a Canadian but also as an outsider to this region. Being aware that photographing exotic places can perpetuate clichés, I try and challenge these clichés by looking beyond subjects such as icebergs and dramatic windswept coastlines. They may be part of the story but the idea is to dig a little deeper and think about why these subjects are iconic.

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lh I'm sure your experience varies when photographing in these 'iconic' areas. Can you write about the difference for you, as an artist/Canadian/human between photographing on the Inca Trail in Peru versus the Las Vegas Strip versus Iceland? How do you approach each area differently? Is the response to the land the same, regardless of 'place?' How much influence does the place itself hold over how you photograph it?

ja These places can be called iconic because they are beautiful or 'awe-inspiring.' However they also gain iconic status for their historical or cultural significance. This is usually what I research in advance of my visit by searching the web, reading literature, browsing through popular images and looking at the work of other photographers, both historical and contemporary. This research is part of the artistic process, but it also grounded in basic personal interest. With Machu Picchu, I was specifically interested in how this Inca city had not been discovered at the time of the Spanish conquest but much later in the 20th Century, and how this

delay assisted in the preservation of the site. Yet with most of my photographs, I also look at how the designation of 'protected site' contributes to a manufactured experience of place. With completely different places, such as Las Vegas, I may be thinking about the lack of history and how such a place came into existence. In Las Vegas, I knew it would be important to feature water in the image to hint at the irony that Las Vegas was built in a desert. So these different approaches may be more about the content I choose to focus on rather than a visual approach.

"I also look at how the designation of 'protected site' contributes to a manufactured experience of place."

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In terms of my own cultural response to place as a Canadian, I am aware of my own western perspectives on place as both a visitor and a photographer but I'm not intentionally trying to bring this into a visual discourse. My own personal interest in the north may be more obvious. In the last few years, I have been working mostly in northern Canada and northern Europe which has helped me focus on the history and culture of the north, where the division between nature and culture is not so polarized.



Jessica Auer, "Machu Picchu, Peru, 2007,"
from the series "Re-creational Spaces."

© Jessica Auer. Courtesy of the artist.

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Jessica Auer, "Las Vegas, Nevada, 2005," from the series "Re-creational Spaces."

© Jessica Auer.
Courtesy of the artist.

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"...the idea is to dig a little deeper and think about why these subjects are iconic."

Jessica Auer, "Skogafoss, Iceland, 2011," from the series "Re-creational Spaces."

© Jessica Auer.
Courtesy of the artist.

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lh When you look at the work of other photographers, what are you looking for exactly?

[John Pfahl](#), "Two Miles below the Falls (August 1985)."
© John Pfahl. Courtesy of the artist.



ja When I look at historical photographs, I'm mostly interested in examining how places have transformed over time. With the work of contemporary photographers, I'm thinking more about how different artists approach photographing similar places. Before I went to shoot at Niagara Falls, I was looking at John Pfahl's "Arcadia Revisited," a series by an accomplished photographer and artist who would have had a local, in-depth knowledge of the Niagara area. By looking at his work, which is intimate and pictorial, I decided that I would take a more documentary approach.

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ja The irony is that the same year that I photographed Niagara, so did Alec Soth, and we ended up producing a very similar image. Had I seen his photograph before, I would have probably used a different view from my archive, however in the end I think it is interesting how these photos play off each other. Alec approached the idea of Niagara throughout a series whereas my image of Niagara belongs to a body of work on tourism. It becomes clear when you look at the differences between our images.



[Alec Soth](#), "Falls 26, 2005." © Alec Soth. Courtesy of the artist.



Jessica Auer, "Niagara Falls, New York, 2005," from the series "Recreational Spaces."

© Jessica Auer. Courtesy of the artist.

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lh As the title of this work, "Re-creational Spaces," suggests, you are presenting what we have in our collective imagination of significant cultural landmarks and using the evidence of contemporary human existence as visual marks (the paths, the rows of figures) to correct those imaginations, to imply that what we envision as historical is not, in actuality, what these sites are anymore. Can you explain the "commodification" of landscape?

ja The title "Re-creational Spaces" is meant to imply how places of historical or natural significance are re-purposed for leisure and tourism. In a very factual way, places can be commodified through structure, such as the creation of built environments and boundaries, leading to access fees and so on. I've called this process a "commodifaction" rather than commercialization of landscape because it is also about the idea of landscape and our attitudes and desires towards these sites. I feel that it relates to the way in which museums commodify art. The notion of the spectacle tends to obscure the past and take on new meaning. However, I would like to clarify that I am not necessarily critical of these approaches - the issue is not a black and white one; I simply want to look at these historical or natural sites within this fascinating context.

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lh Finally, in a 2010 [interview with Louis Perreault](#) you wrote, "I realized there is a relationship between the bank of images we see in the media and how they influence the collective memory of specific places." How do you imagine these images influencing that collective memory? Do you want these images to impact a viewer over time?

ja Lauren, yes actually, I came to this realization when I was struggling with the problem of photographing places that had already been photographed countless times before, and I was concerned with collapsing under the weight of previous depiction. But why not confront this? When I referred to media, I was talking about all the images that we see in public, in advertising and postcards but also what we see on the Internet, in the news and blogs and so on, and that made me think about how these images may affect a person's preconception of place, and

even broader, to blend and influence our collective memory. This is how so many clichés have been assigned to places - for example Machu Picchu is a spiritual place or National Parks are wild. These perspectives however evolve over time. If we look at images of Niagara from the first engraving made in the late 17th century to images of hotels and casinos today, the archive reflects the western obsession with domesticating this site. However the archive also shows our specific preoccupations throughout different eras. When you ask if I want my images to impact the viewer over time, I do certainly hope that they will! But I'm also conscious of my rather limited audience. But why not try? I think that in my work, I'm trying to go further than documenting a specific place at a specific time, by questioning how we "see" these places, and if the viewer comes to understand that, well then the idea of examining how we "see" can push the boundaries of time.

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