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Fall 1997

## The Relevance of Nature Photography in Environmental Work

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# **The Relevance of Nature Photography in Environmental Work**

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Honors 490  
November 1997

A Senior Project under the advisement of Dr. John Miles

## HONORS THESIS

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## **The Relevance of Nature Photography in Environmental Work**

As we near the end of the twentieth century, our society faces an uncertain future. Can we continue on our present pathway of exploitation and degradation of the natural world and hope that it will continue to sustain us? Our wanton wastefulness and destructiveness have damaged and destroyed many natural ecosystems and pushed many more to the brink of collapse. This degradation has been the result of such factors as overpopulation, industrialism, rapid and extensive development, and economic incentives; but ultimately, our unsustainable social structure is the product of a society which has become distant from the natural world and which feels compelled to conquer nature rather than live together with her.

Reconciling the current situation will require the integration of scientific, social and economic forces to develop a fundamentally changed relationship between our society and nature. While a sound scientific understanding of the natural world is essential for the making of responsible decisions regarding our interactions with the environment, such an understanding alone would be ineffective. Scientific research must be coupled with advocacy and education if it is to generate change.

If we are to truly alter our relationship with the natural world, we must first create a social context in which scientific knowledge can be applied and ecologically sound practices enacted. Integral to this is the development of an environmental ethic, both on an individual basis and in our society as a whole. Being able to communicate and convey such an ethic is therefore a critical element of environmental work. Thus, it is important that those engaged in environmental work possess the tools necessary to generate an atmosphere in which scientific knowledge can be applied towards the betterment of our environment and the creation of a more sustainable society. The arts, and nature photography in particular, are here presented as an important medium for the development of such an ethic.

Images of nature provide an important component of how we develop our understanding of, and relation to, nature. Our attitudes towards the land are, in turn, an important force in shaping the land. The images of our world to which we are exposed are significant in developing and reflecting these attitudes, in creating our concept of the land, of nature, of wilderness. Photographic images are often

successful at revealing the beauty and majesty of nature, instilling in many a deep respect and reverence for the environment. Such images can imbue a society with a sense of its relationship to, place in, and responsibility towards nature, and subsequently, inspire ecologically responsible actions.

Beyond having the potential to instill in people an appreciation and admiration for the natural world, enhancing an individual's sense of place and strengthening one's connection to the land, nature photography allows one an opportunity to gain insight and intimacy with many places one might not otherwise experience on a personal level, thus extending one's connection to nature beyond one's immediate environment. Photography may serve as an alternate mode of discourse, allowing the artist to communicate an idea, an ideal, or simply an artistic expression. In so doing, nature photography has the potential to enhance our understanding of, and strengthen our relationship to, nature, thus fostering the development of the social context needed to embrace an ecologically sound societal structure.

Nature photography can also play a direct role in environmental work. Photography can be used to document and record the state of the landscape and how it has been shaped by human activities. Images of pristine regions may be used as an aesthetic argument for preservation and conservation efforts, just as images depicting the mass degradation of natural areas can be used to protest further development and environmental degradation. By allowing people to see powerful or moving images of a particular subject, nature photography can provide people with a tangible reason to care about an issue at hand. Consequently, landscape photography can play an important role in shaping the American landscape.

Traditionally, nature photography consisted primarily of images in which only nature unfettered by human constructs or influence, was portrayed (figure 1). Contemporary nature photography, however, is a much broader genre, comprised of a wide array of subject matter and photographic techniques. In today's world, our environment no longer consists primarily of pristine wilderness, and as such, our environment must be redefined to include the environments in which we live. Thus, while some nature photographers still seek images which depict undisturbed nature scenes (figure 2), many now include human elements in their photographs. Contemporary nature photography embraces unnatural constructs both as a force in shaping nature and as an undeniable component of our environment, and thus

produces images portraying the integration of humans with nature (figure 3), urban landscapes (figure 4), and depictions of the damage we have inflicted upon natural systems (figures 5 and 6). Further, some branches of contemporary nature photography not only break away from the traditional subject matter, but also embrace new techniques and photographic styles. Whereas early nature photography worked largely within the tradition of romantic realism, creating images of high technical quality, the work of contemporary nature photographers often utilizes new techniques as a means to provide a unique, often magical, view of the natural world (figures 7 and 8). Thus, nature photography is not a narrowly defined discipline, but rather an art comprised of a wide spectrum of styles and subject matter.

The development of this genre in American photography may be traced from its origin in the nineteenth century. At its beginning, most photographers were engaged in very specific documentary assignments for both public and private clients. They were hired by the railroads, mining companies, expeditions, real estate developers, geological survey teams and other such agencies to document the seemingly endless landscape and its development. Thus, in the earliest American nature photography, "it [was] human scale rather than nature's being measured."<sup>1</sup>

By the end of the nineteenth century, however, the once vast American wilderness had been greatly diminished, and a "cult of wilderness" developed out of pragmatic concerns combined with romantic notions to preserve the land and resources which were being rapidly exploited.<sup>2</sup> This era in nature photography emphasized the "expressive possibilities of natural forms,"<sup>3</sup> and is characterized by technical perfection and the absence of any reference to society. The works of photographers such as Ansel Adams and Eliot Porter (figure 1) are representative of this era in American nature photography, and demonstrate the value that such images may have in environmental efforts: "A visionary sense of the redemptive beauty of the wilderness has made these photographs...persuasive promotions for twentieth-century

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<sup>1</sup> Merry A. Foresta, "Between Home and Heaven: Contemporary American Landscape Photography," in Between Heaven and Home: Contemporary American Landscape Photography, Consolidated Natural Gas Company Foundation Collection of the National Museum of American Art (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institute, 1992), 38.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid, 42.

conservation movements.”<sup>4</sup>

Increasing development of the American landscape, however, imposed great limitations on the nature photographer working within such a framework. With the American wilderness as one’s subject, one had to search out remaining fragments of the original landscape to portray as the wilderness ideal. Ultimately, human presence became so prominent that it had to be contended with:

[Humans] have managed to intrude upon nature to the point where an aesthetic of romantic wilderness simply will not do as a philosophy of landscape...In this current context of balanced weighing pans between the spread of human culture (not to mention the sheer number of human beings) and the persistence of nature before and without us, aestheticians and philosophers of landscape simply must factor us in.<sup>5</sup>

As the twentieth century progressed, many photographers became frustrated with the limitations on American wilderness as their subject, and some became scornful of those who created wilderness images simply by cropping out signs of human presence. Out of this, a new tenet of nature photography developed known as New Topography. The New Topographers advocated what they felt to be a more truthful representation of nature. Their images demonstrate a reductive style, and were intended to be “anthropological rather than critical, scientific rather than artistic.”<sup>6</sup> Artists of this photographic movement, such as Nicholas Nixon, Joe Deal, and Lewis Baltz, claim their work to be neutral with the intent of documenting the world. However, despite such assertions, the New Topographers, by portraying the imposing presence of human constructs on the natural world “opened up the possibilities of a photographic critique of our culture’s relationship to the environment.”<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Foresta, “Between Home and Heaven,” 42.

<sup>5</sup> Stephen Jay Gould, “Form and Scale in Nature and Culture: Modern Landscape as Necessary Integration,” in Between Home and Heaven: Contemporary American Landscape Photography, Consolidated Natural Gas Company Foundation Collection of the National Museum of American Art, (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institute, 1992), 75.

<sup>6</sup> Foresta, “Between Home and Heaven,” 43.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

Contemporary nature photography takes this critique a step further, often being created to specifically express social and political content, but also moves beyond such a critique, attempting to reach a synthesis of the natural and built environments, representing the potential for the integration of humans with nature: "In a post modern world, where meaning is often constructed through images, art may lead the way to affirm beauty in, and man's unity with, the world."<sup>8</sup>

Nature photography thus encompasses much more than images of undisturbed, and isolated, natural settings. Indeed, it is largely through the inclusion of signs of human influence and human constructs that much of the environmental work of nature photography is accomplished. While traditional images of wilderness are valuable tools for both the development of an environmental ethic and for focused conservation efforts as they appeal to our aesthetic sensibilities, nontraditional subjects in nature photography work to further heighten our environmental ethic and may also be used to directly address the political and social components of environmental issues. As such, they may provide more pointed arguments for the adoption of sound ecological practices.

Nontraditional subject matter often focuses on disturbed, rather than pristine, systems, emphasizing the discontinuity of developed landscapes. Such images depict the development and degradation of the environment due to human practices, and act as blatant protests against the disrespect which often guides our actions towards the natural world (figures 5 and 6). This realm of nature photography is also important in its role of documenting the history of the land and the impact humans have had on natural systems.

Other contemporary nature photographers believe that their art may assist environmental efforts in a more subtle way. Rather than creating images that rage against industrialism and environmental destruction, they strive to create a visual model of how humans and nature can exist in harmony. Such images argue that nature photography:

must move beyond the theme of squalid waste dumps versus beautiful countryside, for it is profoundly unhelpful in casting the two realms of nature and culture as intrinsically apart. We must seek a unity in mutual respect; not in fusion, but in the interesting interaction of similarities and

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<sup>8</sup> Foresta, "Between Home and Heaven," 45.



differences.<sup>9</sup>

In such images, elements of the natural world are typically a dominant aspect of the composition, but care has been taken to not crop out signs of human society. Rather, human constructs are intentionally included in photographic images, presented in a way so as to make their appearance blend with the aesthetics of the overall scene (figure 3). These images serve to advocate a respectful disposition of humans in the natural world, and by creating a visual context for this union, may help us to achieve such a dynamic in our own relationship with nature.

Still other photographers have departed from the traditional subject matter entirely, moving completely into the realm of created environments. Thus, we now see such images as cityscapes falling under the category of nature photography, as they are one of the many contemporary landscapes which we encounter (figure 4). Just as traditional landscape photography worked to foster the development of a sense of place, connecting people to the land which sustained them, nature photography depicting urban landscapes can instill in people a similar sense of connection to, and subsequent responsibility towards, their urban environment.

Another characteristic setting contemporary nature photography apart from traditional practices, is the use of new photographic techniques and media. Traditionally, the basis of landscape photography was the rendering of factual details that described a specific location. Today, artists "have begun to assert a new kind of imaginative control over the landscape."<sup>10</sup> In a changing world, with changing relationships with the land, perspectives, perceptions and representations of nature are also changing.

Some prominent examples of experimental nature photography include the aerial photographs of William Garnett (figure 7), cibachrome images created by Steel Stillman (figure 8), and mixed media images such as those by Ellen Brooks in which paintings and photographs are rephotographed through a diffusing screen. These images enlighten the viewer with a new, often mystical, perspective of the natural world, utilizing media unique to our time, thus helping us to establish an intimate connection with the world in the context of the time in which we are living. These new

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<sup>9</sup> Gould, "Form and Scale in Nature and Culture," 75.

<sup>10</sup> Foresta, "Between Home and Heaven," 45.

representations of nature may serve to expand our perceptions of the world and allow us the opportunity to relate to nature on a new level, possibly bringing us to a better understanding of her. Referring to the artwork of William Garnett, Ansel Adams addresses how this may be accomplished:

From the air our overview is greatly expanded...We see areas of surpassing beauty that must be protected and preserved intact...Aerial photographs such as Garnett's show us, as no other medium can, the compelling obligation we have toward the future of the world we inhabit.<sup>11</sup>

Thus, in contemporary nature photography, new techniques bring to light new perceptions of the natural world, and add another dimension to the work of the arts in addressing environmental issues.

In the context of environmental work, nature photography can positively impact people's attitudes towards nature and thus inspire them to take action. Photographic images may heighten our knowledge and understanding of nature, evoke our emotions, and give us a tangible reason to care about the world around us. As Ansel Adams stated:

If we succeed in establishing...some moratorium with destiny, if we can truly interpret what we have as well as what we might lose forever, if we can augment the power of art as a vital factor of our lives, we may prevail in establishing protection for our remaining natural and cultural beauty, and also provide for the repair of damaged lands, environments, and people! With this creative protection, conservation takes on an additional dimension.<sup>12</sup>

While science must provide an essential basis for our attempts to remediate disturbed systems and conserve those still intact, science alone cannot reconcile our long history of disrespect and degradation. To effect a true change in how we, both as individuals and collectively, treat the environment, a new dominant paradigm is

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<sup>11</sup> Ansel Adams, foreword to The Extraordinary Landscape (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1982), xi.

<sup>12</sup> Ansel Adams, "Give Nature Time," commencement address to Occidental College, 11 June 1967.

required, one that incorporates an environmental ethic into our every day lives. Such a shift in our society will only be realized if a sincere respect and reverence for the natural world is internalized.

By utilizing the arts as a mode of discourse for communicating an environmental ethic, and by realizing the potential of an aesthetic medium as a means to explore the world in which we live, we can come to a better understanding of the natural world and how to best interact with the environment. Because an objective, scientific assessment of nature alone would leave one with an incomplete understanding of the world, it is important that scientific work be balanced by other disciplines and perspectives. Being able to approach environmental issues on a multitude of levels is essential for those involved in environmental work, and, as such, a comprehensive understanding of the natural world is integral to effective work in environmental fields. As nature writer Henry Beston so eloquently stated: "Poetry is as necessary to comprehension as science."<sup>13</sup> Thus, nature photography presents itself as a valuable tool in environmental work.

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<sup>13</sup> Henry Beston, The Outermost House, (New York: Ballantine Books, 1956), 173.

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Figure 1. Eliot Porter - Pond with marsh grass and lily pads. Madison, New Hampshire.

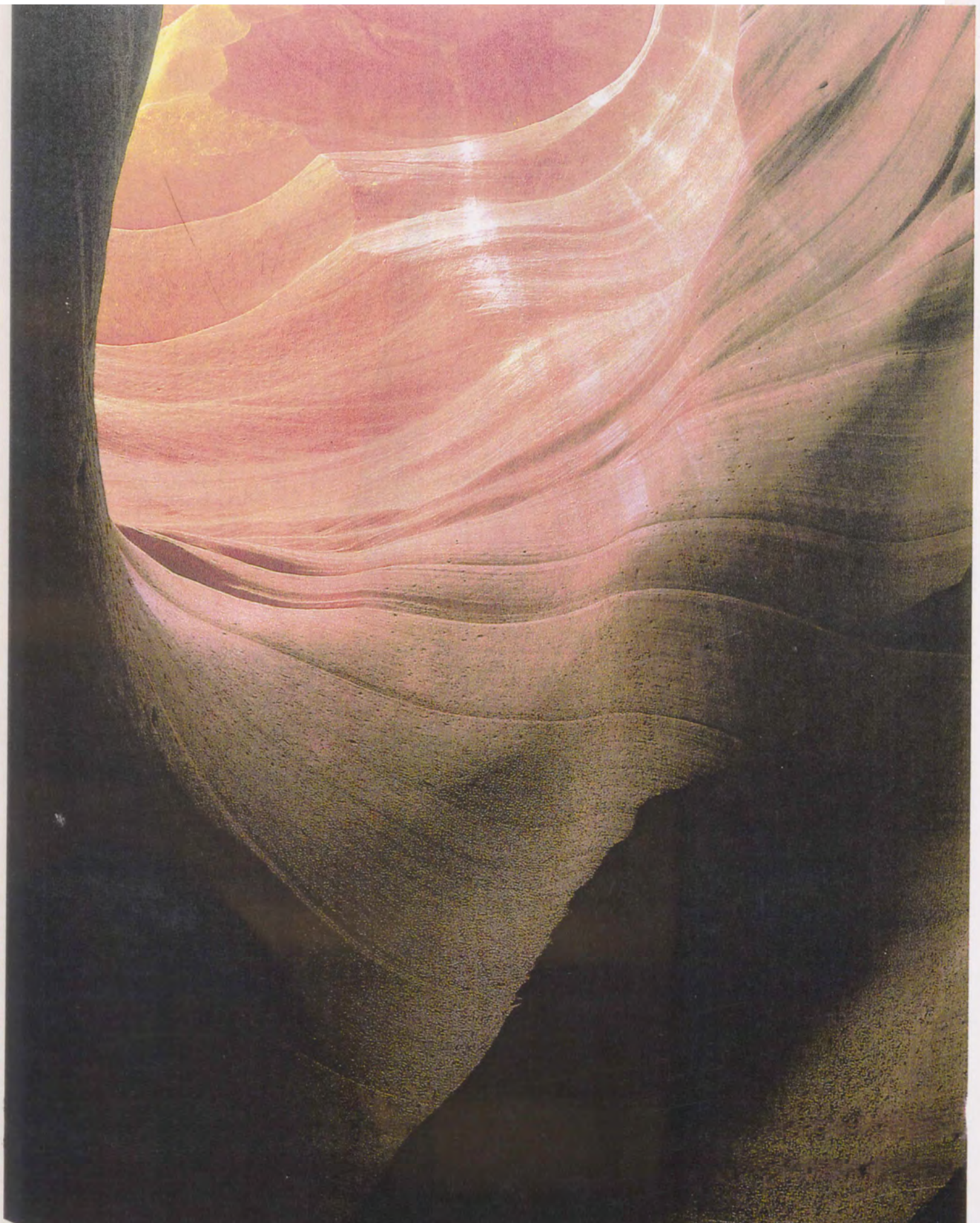


Figure 2. John Telford - Slot Canyon near Page, Arizona.

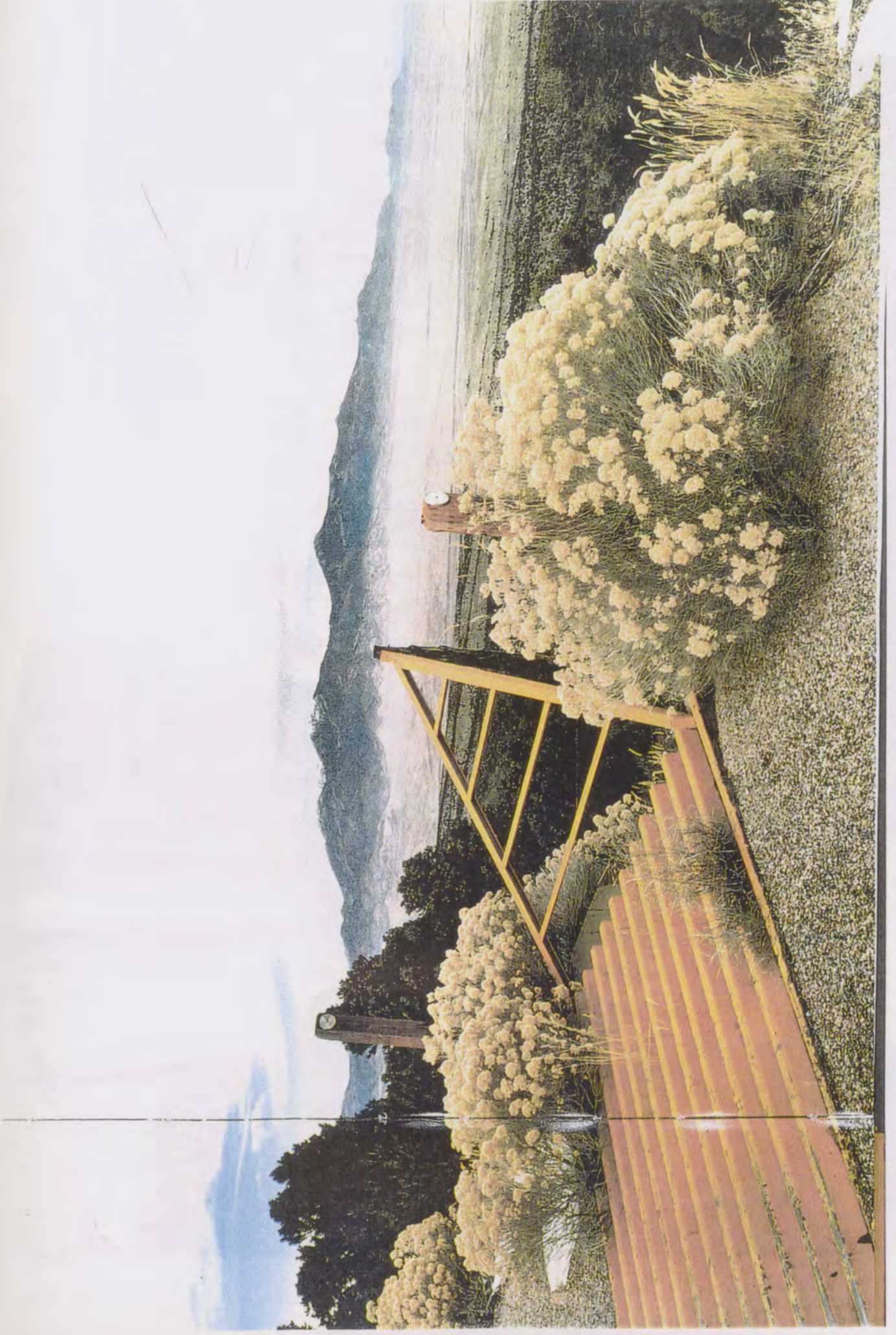


Figure 3. Len Jenshel - Great Basin National Park, Nevada.

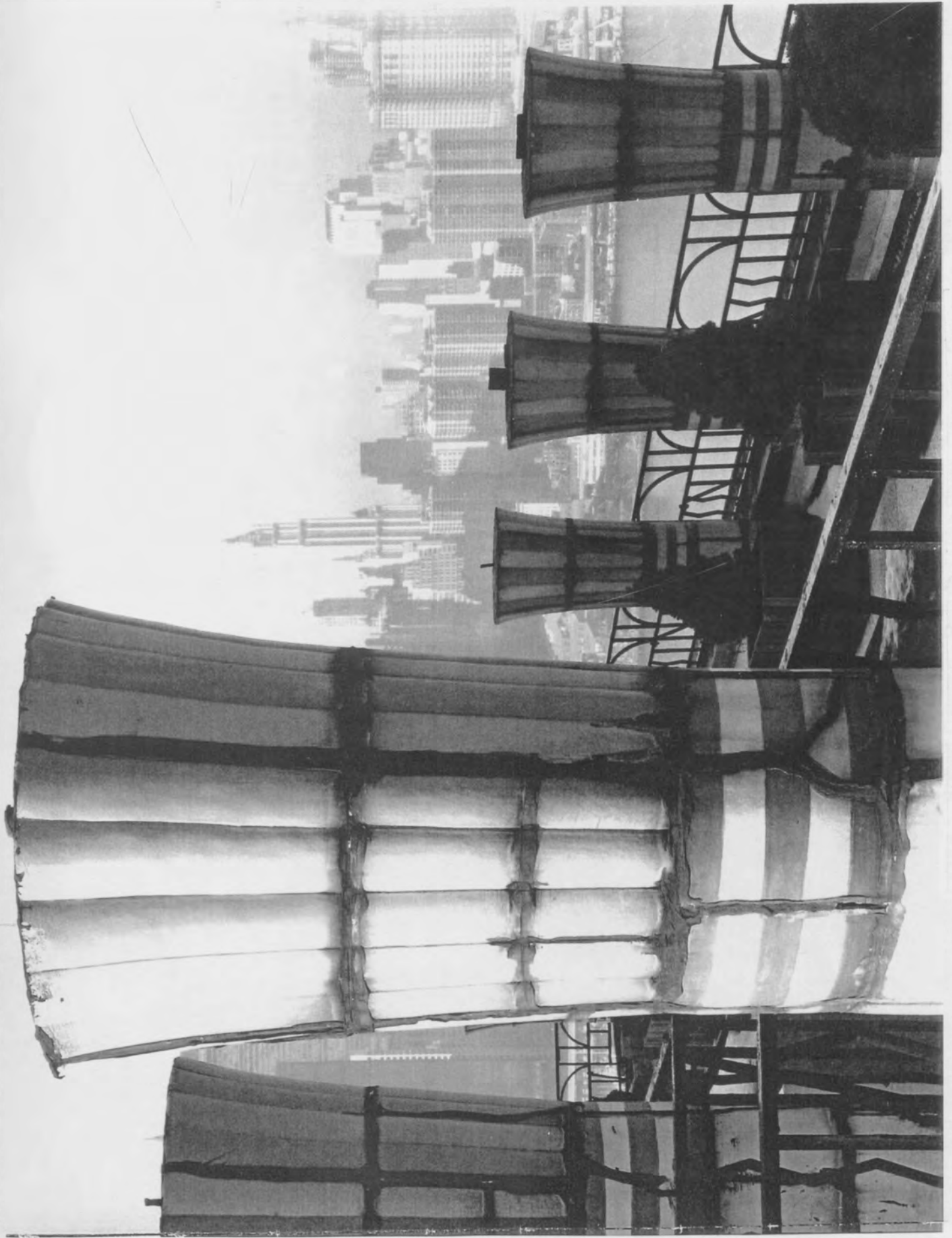


Figure 4. Lois Conner - St. George's Hotel, Brooklyn, New York.



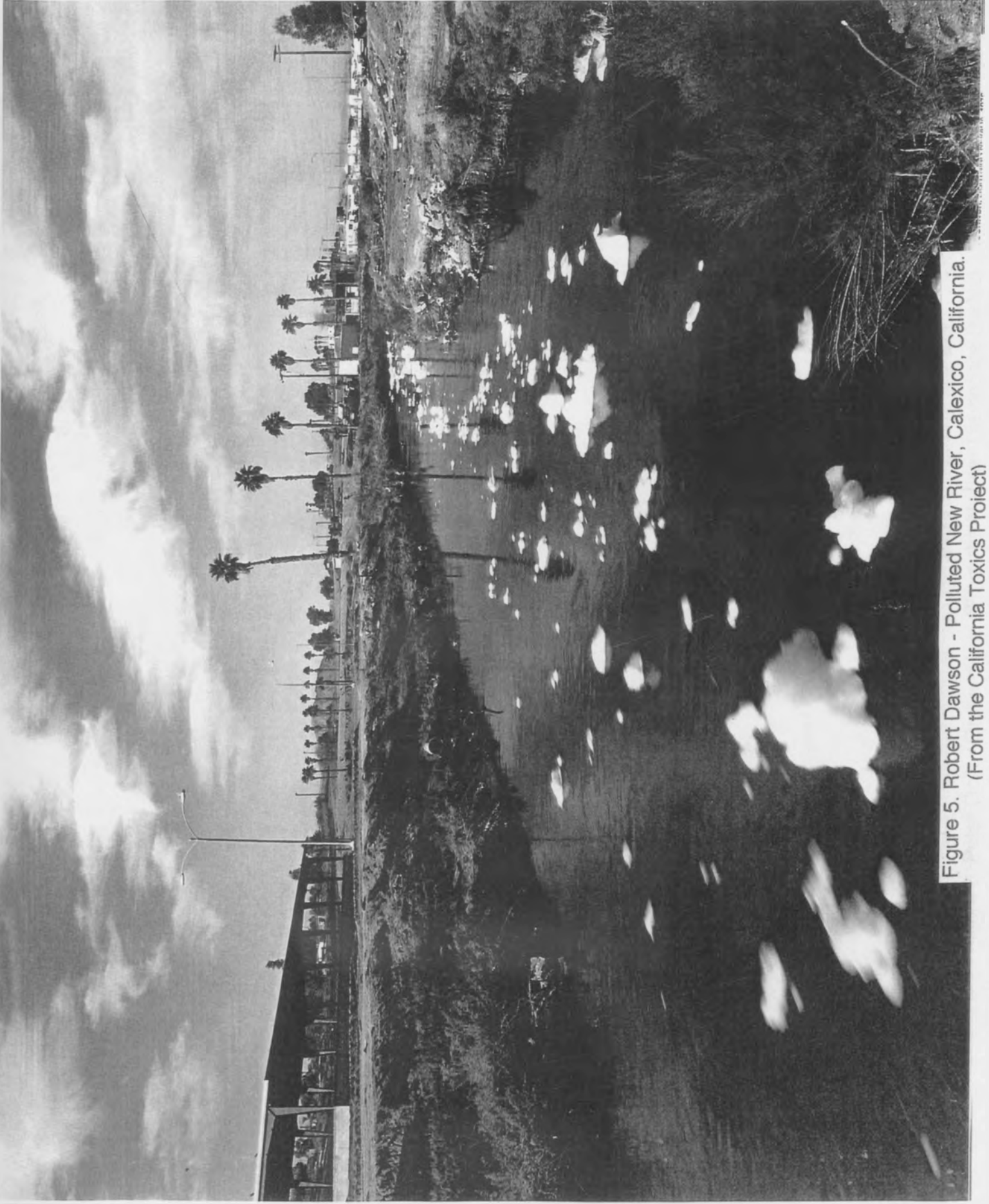
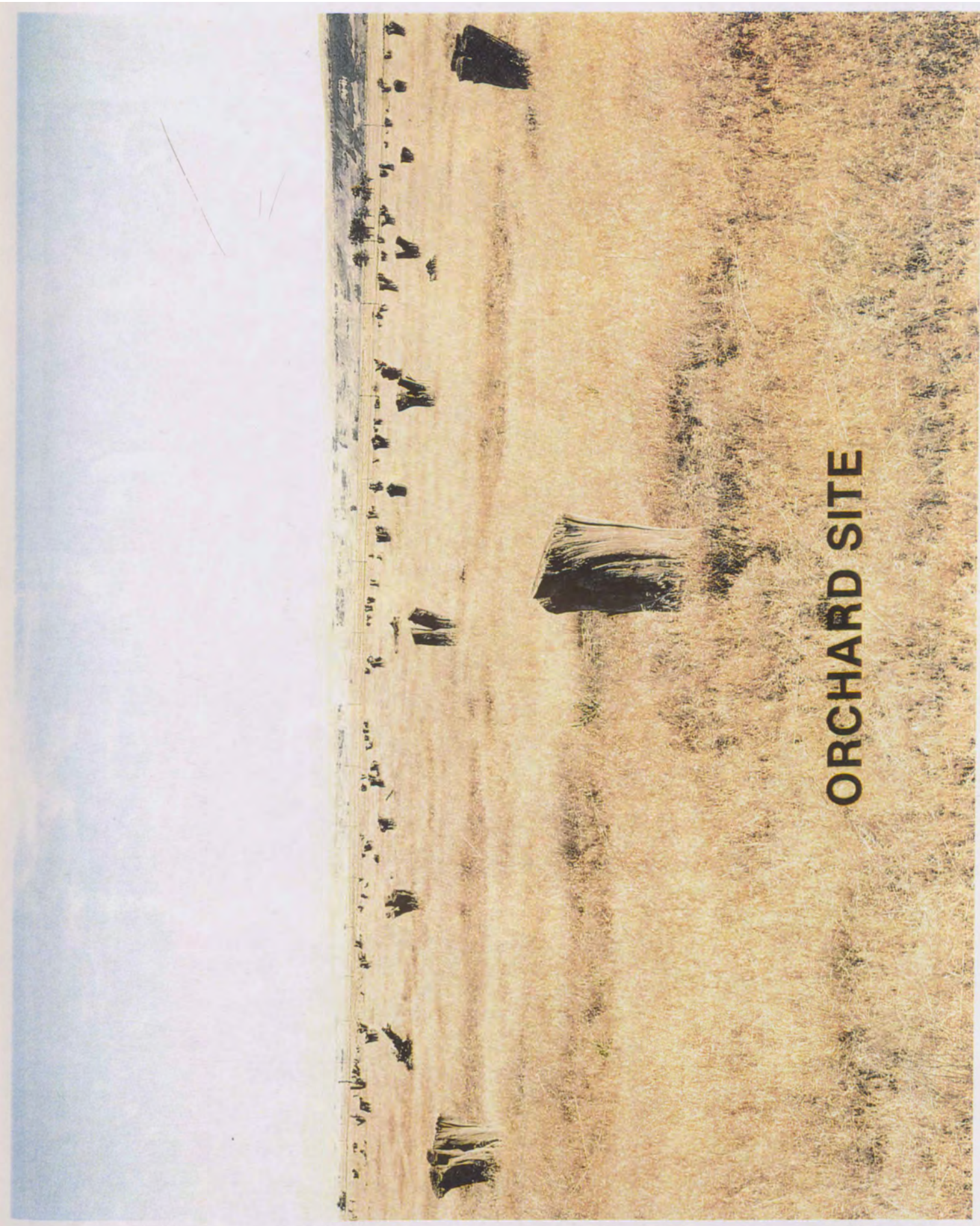


Figure 5. Robert Dawson - Polluted New River, Calexico, California.  
(From the California Toxics Project)



# ORCHARD SITE

Figure 6. Peter Goin - Orchard Site (From the Nuclear Landscape Series)



Figure 7. William Garnett - Detail of eroded butte.

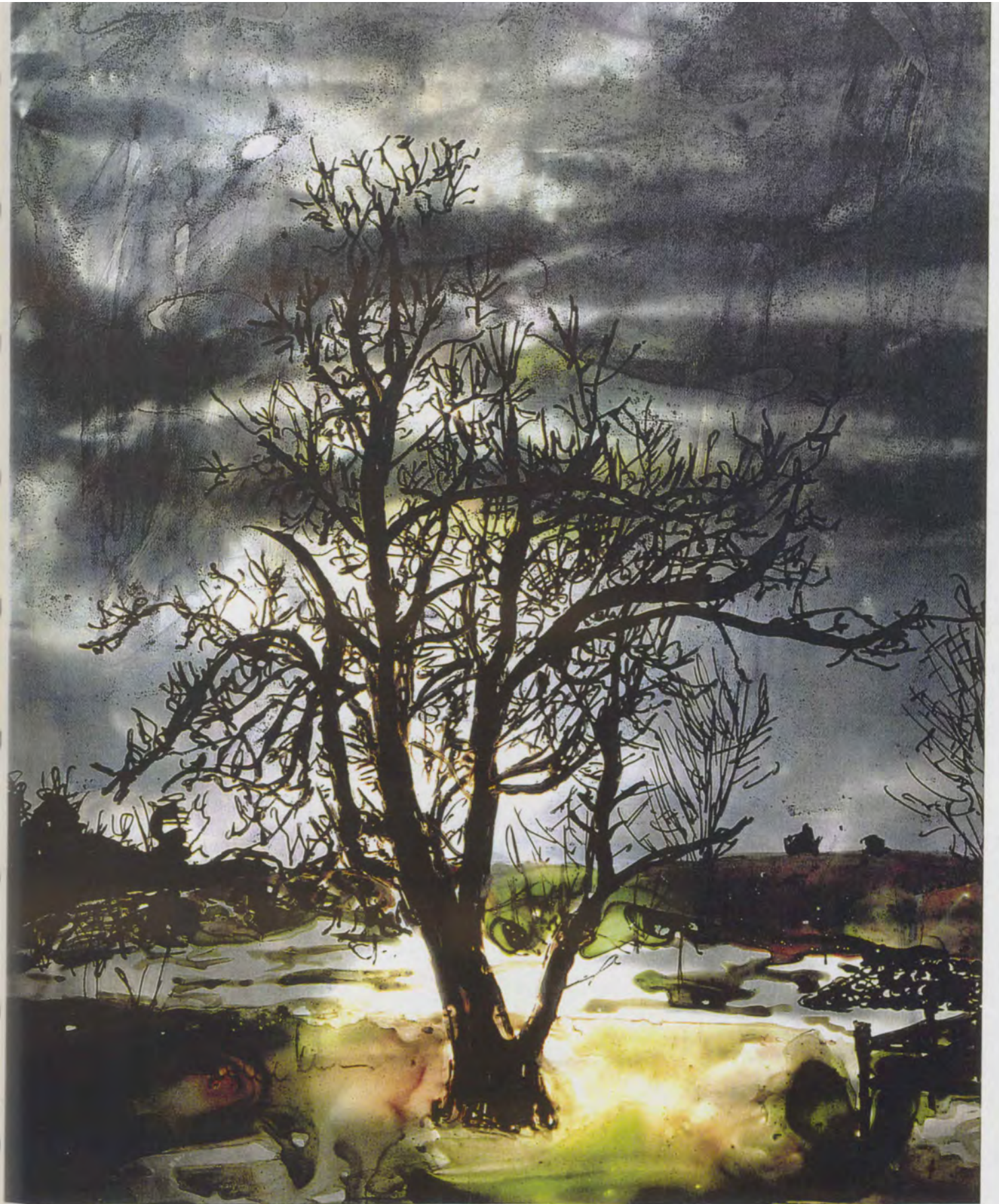


Figure 8. Steel Stillman - Plane Tree.