The Social Landscape, 1955-2001
Selections from the Permanent Collection

6–29 May 2011

Mount Holyoke College Art Museum
South Hadley, Massachusetts

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1955 marked an important turning point in American photography. In that year, Edward Steichen unveiled a blockbuster exhibition called *The Family of Man* at the Museum of Modern Art in New York. Containing 503 photographs made by 273 photographers from 68 countries, *The Family of Man* was an exhibition of global dimensions. It brought together the work of some of the most well-known photographers of the day and proposed that pictures from all regions on earth shared a common interest in "families"—the births, the raising of children, the marriages, the deaths that all families experience. The exhibition's intent was hardly subtle. In an age of Cold War paranoia about an atomic holocaust, Steichen argued, through photography, that humans across the globe were more alike than unlike, had more in common in daily life than either the governments of the United States or the Soviet Union liked to admit. Whatever one thinks of the argument—and there were certainly detractors, then and now—the larger point is that photographs were given a seriousness and weight in cultural and political matters than they had never previously enjoyed.

But it was not only Steichen's show that marked a turning point. That same year, Robert Frank, a Swiss immigrant, began a two-year project of traveling the interstate highways and photographing the many peoples and cultures he found in America. The final product, a book of 83 pictures called *The Americans*, published first in 1958 in France and a year later in the United States, was diametrically opposed to the vision proposed by Steichen in *The Family of Man*. Where Steichen proposed commonality, Frank saw difference. Where Steichen regarded photography as a public language, Frank viewed it as a private meditation. Where Steichen had very little concern for artistic individuality—*The Family of Man* notoriously did away with the photographers' names and exhibited the pictures unattributed—Frank insisted on the camera as a vehicle for individual, even temperamental expression. His photographs were often grainy, off-kilter, unfocused, under- or over-exposed—all elements of a finicky personality behind the lens.

One way to view the veritable explosion of photography since 1955 is to see it as working through and out of the examples provided by Steichen and Frank. *The Social Landscape* is one such attempt. It is the curatorial product of thirteen

students who took part in a semester-long seminar called "Photography Since 1955." In the seminar, the students tackled the famous 1955 projects and then, on a weekly basis, worked through a series of case studies—other landmark projects—that reflected the on-going tensions between photo history, the transformations of photographic practice, and pressing historical concerns in the second half of the twentieth century. The case studies included the work of Diane Arbus, Lee Friedlander, and Garry Winogrand in the 1967 exhibition *New Documents* at the Museum of Modern Art; Larry Clark's *Tulsa*, about teenage drug use (1971); the 1975 exhibition *New Topographics*, about suburban, industrial, and post-industrial landscape; the censorship controversies surround Robert Mapplethorpe's pictures in 1989; and recent photographic work on war and global conflict by James Nachtwey and Fazal Sheikh. Towards the end of the semester, the students turned their attention to works held in the Mount Holyoke College Art Museum; and then, also, to how their scholarly efforts with these works could be made available to a broader audience in an exhibition and small catalogue. What you have in your hands is one of the results.

The Social Landscape brings together a range of pictures made in the five decades since the landmark works of 1955 and observes how photographers have tried to address some of the most pressing social issues of their day. The subjects—families, race relations, incarceration, celebrity, history and renewal, street and subculture, the trauma of September 11, 2001—invited a range of photographic experimentation and response. What aspects of Steichen's and Frank's examples seemed most useful to photographers in these cases? What attitudes—photographically, ideologically, temperamentally—seemed most contemporary? What parts of the 1955 legacies, as well as the legacies provided by the other landmark projects, seemed most practical? What needed jettisoning in order to adequately confront the subjects at hand?

Although *The Social Landscape* includes work spanning the entire five decades—the earliest, by Ogle Winston Link in 1956, and the most recent, photographs by Michael Garlington and Michael Jacobson-Hardy in 2001—the students eschewed a chronological arrangement and chose instead to organize the pictures by themes and parallel interests. We invite viewers to explore these themes—portraiture, community life, landscape and trauma, among several others—and to develop ideas and connections of their own. For their final

projects, the students wrote research papers relating the Museum's pictures to the various key works we had studied. I challenged them also to provide brief captions—judicious and concise—to help viewers, who have not had the benefit of studying the same semester materials, with ways to understand the photographs. They have each taken different tactics and emphasized different strategies of interpretation. One notable example of these differences can be observed in the competing captions for Harry Callahan's *Venice* (1957). Rory McAuliffe sees the picture in terms of an American fine art context; Sarah Zabek in terms of a Japanese photographic aesthetic. We invite viewers to decide which of these two attitudes is most helpful when seeing the picture. Indeed, we invite the same kind of inspection with all of the captions.

Finally, we wish to thank Ellen Alvord, Rachel Beaupré, and Brian Kiernan of the Art Museum for their hard work in support of the exhibition.

Anthony W. Lee
Professor of Art History
Mount Holyoke College

Michael Garlington (American, 1977-   )
Brotherhood and the American Flag, 2001
Pair of gelatin silver prints mounted in hinged wooden frame with American flag
Purchase with the Madeleine Pinsof Plonsker (Class of 1962) Fund
2005.3

In the first panel of *Brotherhood and the American Flag*, the viewer is confronted with a portrait of two Ku Klux Klan members in hooded Klan guise. When the panel is opened to reveal a second picture, the viewer is met with the un-hooded identities of the Klansmen. Against expectation, the men are revealed to be African Americans—in fact, two brothers—and take the places normally reserved for whites. The sequence of portraits suggests that not everything is as clearly "black and white" as one would assume. Augmented by a dirty, ragged American flag, and considering that the photographs were taken only months after September 11, 2001, the destruction of the World Trade Center in New York, and the ensuing violence aimed at Muslim Americans, the work is a reminder of a long history of racial tension in America.

Miki Yoshida '11

Bruce Davidson (American, 1933 -)
Centennial Fanfares, 1969
Gelatin silver print photograph
Gift of Inge Heckel
1987.14.1

This photograph was made for a record album produced by the Museum of Modern Art in New York. Seated (left to right) are Leonard Bernstein, Virgil Thomson, Walter Piston, Aaron Copland, and William Schumann, the five composers commissioned to write original compositions to celebrate the museum's centennial. Davidson, primarily known today as a documentary photographer, had also done copious work in celebrity portraiture. Prior to this photograph, he had made studies of both Bernstein and Copland. In contrast to his other celebrity work, this group portrait is reduced to a bare minimum of description. The setting is spare, the figures static, piled up into an indistinct mass and, uncharacteristically of Davidson's work, not involved in any telling activity—of "making music" or "composing." Rather, the men are themselves composed as one. The photograph is also in stark contrast to Davidson's documentary street photography, which is more concerned with New York's fascinating subcultures, including those in the tenements of the Lower East Side, and with people on the streets, including circus dwarves, teenage gangsters in Brooklyn, and African Americans during the Civil Rights era.

Hannah Greenberg '11

Andy Warhol (American, 1928-1987)
Truman Capote, 1978
Gelatin silver print photograph
Gift of The Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts
2008.3.115

The paparazzo-like automatic flash of Warhol's 35mm camera captures famed author Truman Capote instantaneously. He is a notable figure, lit up against the dark background of the room and becomes for us, and for Warhol, the central focus of the busy scene.

Warhol's various photographic projects during the late 1970s and early 1980s focused on celebrities and members of New York's high society. He sought their company after an attempt on his life in 1968, as if pursuing the rich and famous was a way to distance himself from the more bohemian and sometimes sordid culture of his studio, then known somewhat infamously as the Factory. Thanks to his own rise to fame, Warhol had access to the normally closed circle of the city's upper crust social life. Emulating tabloid photographers, who he admired greatly, Warhol brought his camera to every social event. His criterion for a good society photograph was "one that's in focus and of a famous person doing something unfamous."

Here we see Capote, who Warhol had idolized since his childhood in Pittsburgh, casually sitting at a table engaged in conversation with someone just outside the picture frame. Capote is not idealized or presented to the viewer in any unusual way. He exists for the viewer in the same way he existed for Warhol. His mere presence was all that was needed inspire the photographer's fascination.

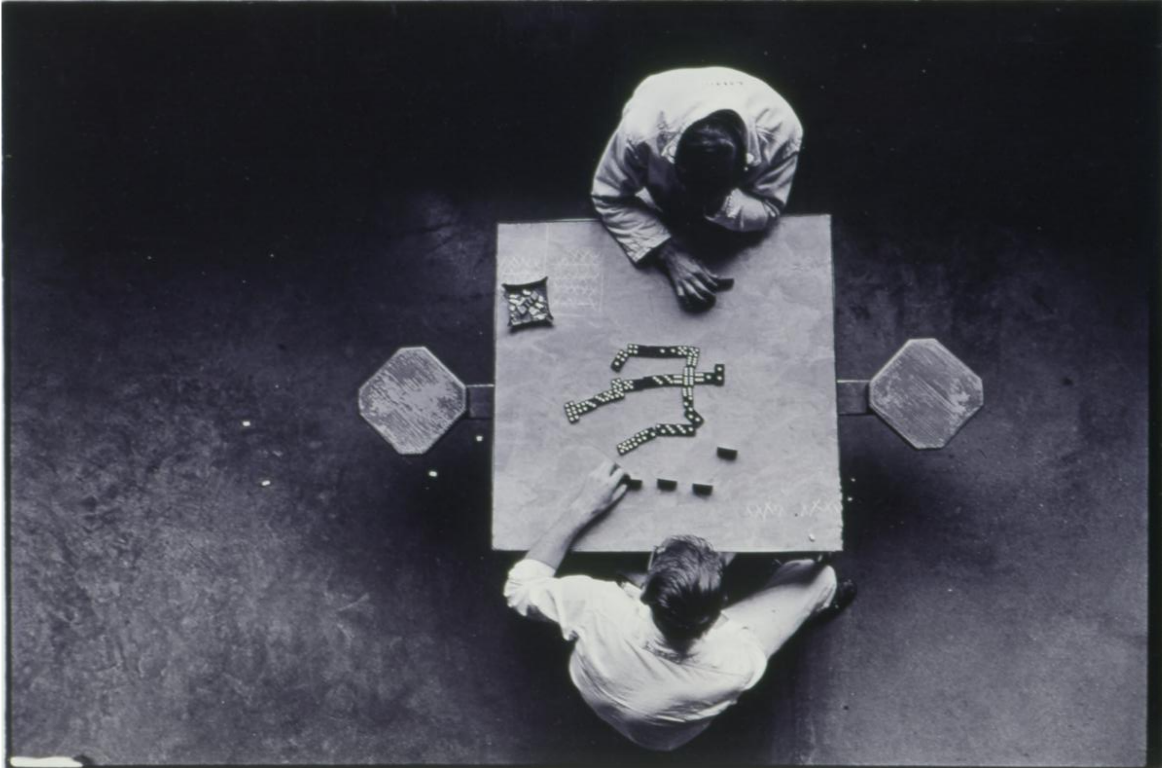
Chelsea Leighton '11

Danny Lyon (American, 1942 -   )
The Walls, Huntsville, Texas, 1967
Gelatin silver print photograph
Gift of Marilyn and Wilson S. Mathias
2000.5.12

Having graduated from the University of Chicago in 1962 as a history major, Lyon was an activist for social justice and civil rights. This picture belongs to his best-known project, *Conversations with the Dead*, devoted to a study of Texas prisons. Between 1967 and 1968, Lyon moved freely among six state prisons with the full permission of the Texas Department of Corrections. His photographs gave an arresting look at the inhumanity of an American penitentiary system in the late 1960s.

This picture shows two inmates playing dominos in their cell block. The men and the game table are seen from above and form a simple geometry in a spare setting. The photographer's point of view resembles that of a controlling authority, as if the men were being watched even during the quiet moments of a leisure activity. It was in such juxtapositions between sociality and surveillance, leisure and restriction, emptiness and control that Lyon embedded a critical voice. He presented the convicts in a world marked by emotional distress and physical isolation.

Lingyao Zhong '12



Harry Callahan (American, 1912-1999)
Venice, 1957 (printed 1981)
Dye transfer print photograph
Purchase with the Art Acquisition Endowment Fund
2009.7.3

A man and a woman walk on an isolated street in Italy. They are a small component of the picture and are captured within a framework of vertical and horizontal forms—buildings, trusses, shadows—that make up the foreground. The point of view suggests Callahan's working method. He positioned his camera amidst the foreground elements and waited for the right moment, when strollers entered the scene, to release the shutter.

The location and size of the man and woman within the frame describes well Callahan's tendency to treat human figures not as typical "subjects" but rather as formal elements in a composition. He resists any suggestion of narrative and aligns himself with the Abstract Expressionists painters who worked during the same period. The dark structures that cut across the foreground are reminiscent of the thick, black, slashing brush strokes of Franz Kline. Rather than developing a picture around a central object in the foreground, Callahan often worked from background to foreground or from edge to edge, creating "all-over" compositions in the manner of Jackson Pollock.

The contemplative qualities of his images were intended to "touch the spirit in people," he once said. That Callahan continues to be regarded as a master of the medium of photography suggests that his pictures may still touch in the same way.

Rory McAuliffe HC '12

The photograph reflects Callahan's intuitive, patient, minimalist approach to subject matter and composition. It is characterized by a precise framing of the scene with shadows. The figures are anonymous—we have no clear view of their faces—and remain at an emotional distance from the viewer.

The techniques in this photograph were inspired by the work of other photographers, including Callahan's student, Yasuhiro Ishimoto. In keeping with a Japanese photographic aesthetic at mid-century, Ishimoto emphasized a meditative and spare photography and valued the moody, even mythic qualities of darkness over the descriptiveness of clear light. The sources of Callahan's inspiration are a testament to his power as a teacher and his humble artistic vision. He cherished collaboration, wherever that effort might take him, an educational philosophy he advocated throughout his life.

Sarah Zabek '11

Harry Callahan (American, 1912-1999)
Venice, 1957 (printed 1981)
Dye transfer print photograph
Purchase with the Art Acquisition Endowment Fund
2009.7.3

ELLAN

Robert Adams (American, 1937-   )
Pioneer Cemetery, Near Empire, 1969
Gelatin silver print photograph
Gift of Marilyn and Wilson S. Mathias
2000.8.8

Adams was one of nine photographers whose "photographs of a man-altered landscape" made up the famous 1975 Rochester exhibition *New Topographics*. His work for the show presented the suburbs of his adopted home state of Colorado, void of people but full of their trappings, their cookie-cutter tract homes, their matching status-symbol cars, set beneath a pitiless sky. In the show pamphlet's foreword, Adams wrote that his artistic intention was to document "the Form that underlies this apparent chaos."

Pioneer Cemetery, Near Empire, though earlier than his work for *New Topographics*, remains a compelling example of Adams's unwavering attention to form. The light/dark contrast that makes his later photographs so chilling is present here; the forms of sunlit mountain and dark shadow seem to mirror one another, enclosing the viewer in a lonely valley, among the stones of its desolate cemetery. Especially stunning about this photograph is the light—so bright and perfectly cast that it can't be real. It may be reminiscent of the glorious, spiritual gold bath of life of earlier artistic representations of the Western landscape by artists like Albert Bierstadt; but Adams's work contains the overarching feel of modernist melancholia: even elements of the man-altered landscape will inevitably be forgotten.

Genevieve Oliver '13

Michael Jacobson-Hardy (American, 1951-)
South Tower Remains, World Trade Center, November 2001 (printed 2006)
Gelatin silver print photograph
Purchase with the Madeleine Pinsof Plonsker (Class of 1962) Fund
2006.4.1

Jacobson-Hardy photographed the remains of the World Trade Center in New York two months after September 11, 2001, when two airplanes flew into the Twin Towers. For many Americans, he captures an iconic site—a place that unified the country in mourning.

Ground Zero is described by high contrast, elevated viewpoint, and bright lights, and is framed by surrounding downtown buildings. The rubble and remains of the Twin Towers are in the foreground; the bright lights illuminate the night sky and direct our focus to the gaping hole at the center of the photograph. Jacobson-Hardy slows the shutter speed, capturing the blurred movement of tractors and construction crews clearing the site. The cranes are moving large portions of rubble, yet also, in the composition of the photograph, visually project into the sky and complement the verticality of the skyscrapers. Stylistically, Jacobson-Hardy individualizes himself from other 9/11 photographers; his elevated viewpoint focuses on urban destruction and renewal rather than the emotional devastation wrought on individuals.

Amanda Noumoff ‘11

Edward Burtynsky (Canadian, 1955-   )
Nickel Tailings #30, Sudbury, Ontario, 1996
Chromogenic color print
Purchase with the Madeleine Pinsof Plonsker (Class of 1962) Fund
1999.1

Burtynsky's industrial landscape transforms the detritus of industry into an image of aesthetic pleasure. The meandering red tailings, which are due to the oxidation of iron, signal danger. The juxtaposition of dark earth and distant horizon set an ominous scene. But in the photographer's vision, disaster can harken back to the idea of the sublime.

Edmund Burke defined the sublime as "whatever is fitted in any sort to excite the ideas of pain and danger; that is to say, whatever is in any sort of terrible, or is conversant about terrible objects… is a source of the *sublime*; that is, it is productive of the strongest emotion which the mind is capable of feeling." *Nickel Tailings #30* is a contemporary version of the sublime in its vision of environmental disaster amidst a vast and forbidding landscape. The picture awes, yet also inspires a sense of foreboding at man's capacity to change nature so dramatically.

Alyse Muller '11

Tod Papageorge (American, 1940-   )
Boston, Mass., 1975
Gelatin silver print photograph
Gift of Marilyn and Wilson S. Mathias
2000.5.22

Papageorge began his career as a street photographer in the mold of Garry Winogrand. He curated Winogrand's *Public Relations* in 1977 and developed a similar street practice. In *Boston, Mass.*, however, we confront a different side of Papageorge's work. He wrote of the picture: "It was made in the Boston area, as the title suggests, in a park full of noble trees. I was trying out a new camera for me, a so-called 6 x 9 camera that produced a 2 1/4 by 3 1/4 negative, four times larger than the negatives my 35mm Leica made. So I was interested in the greater amount of detail and the more beautiful gray tonal scale that I imagined, and hoped, the camera would produce. And this picture was an attempt to find out if it would. And it did."

As if to acknowledge that he was using a larger, less nimble, but more intensely descriptive camera than he normally used for his street work, Papageorge has literally turned his back on the busy sidewalks and given the viewer a detailed inspection of what was normally behind him, a pleasant park scene.

Margaret Swanson '12

Larry Fink (American, 1941-)
Oslin's Teen Party, Martins Creek, PA, 1977 (print 1983)
Gelatin silver print photograph on semi-gloss paper
Gift of Holly and James Bogin
2006.27.2

> *"In the early days, I used to think that I could take one picture, and if it were successful, it would epitomize that human being. Now I think that is an absurd notion because I see that all people are 360 degrees around."*
>
> *Larry Fink*

The close and uncomfortable proximity to the subjects in the photograph gives the viewer a false impression of intimacy. In fact we know nothing of the two figures' relationship or their relationship to the photographer. While this photo may appear to offer an intimate glimpse into the lives of teens, it is just that—a glimpse, a captured but fleeting moment. The picture's overexposure not only indicates Fink's use of a hand held flash and but also contributes to the photograph's sense of the impermanence of the moment.

This and several other photographs taken at Oslin family parties were included in Fink's exhibition *Social Graces* at the Museum of Modern Art in 1979, which contrasted images of rural Pennsylvania society with those of urban (and decadent) New York City. In the style of his predecessors Diane Arbus and Garry Winogrand, Fink highlights the imperfections of human life with honesty and also respect. He doesn't document situations in order to change them, but simply to record them.

Lucie Castaldo '12

O. Winston Link (American, 1914-2001)
Hotshot Eastbound, Iager, West Virginia, 1956 (print 1987)
Gelatin silver print photograph
Purchase with the Friends of Art Fund
1988.23

On the hot night of August 2, 1956, Link posed two locals in his 1952 Buick convertible at the town drive-in and created one of his most famous images. Part of a larger series of photographs devoted to the last days of the steam engines, the picture was a carefully crafted image of small town life that had sprung up along the railroad tracks. Snuggled up in their cars, the movie-goers were watching the 1955 film *Battle Taxi*, about a helicopter pilot during the Korean War who shows a "hotshot" jet pilot how to become a team player.

The photo required two separate exposures. The first concerned nearly the entire scene; the second only the airplane on the large movie screen. Taken with a large format view camera on an extension tripod, the first exposure required 43 flash bulbs, which Link had made by hand; but the bright light washed the movie image.

Jordan McMullen '12

NORFOLK AND WESTERN
243-958

William Gedney (American, 1932-1989)
Brooklyn Bridge, Summer 1959, 1959
Gelatin silver print photograph
Gift of Marilyn and Wilson S. Mathias
2000.5.9

Although less well-known before his death in 1989, Gedney is now acknowledged and celebrated as a photographer of modern social landscapes. He was a prolific and also meticulous craftsman. For each image he took, Gedney wrote detailed notes about such practical matters as exposure times but also penned many more poetic thoughts about the symbolic meanings of his pictures. In a related journal entry, he wrote, "what am I trying to accomplish 'in the night'? A group of pictures of the essential strivings of man. The mystery of his being and death, his lost groping in darkness to deliver himself, his longing and desire . . . restless-black representing the mystery of existence."

In contrast to the majority of his work, which is concerned with the human figure, this photograph of the Brooklyn Bridge becomes a hymn to human aspiration. Groping in the shadows of the night, we, like the cables and pointed arch, reach upwards, longing for answers, seeking deliverance. Abstracted and cloaked in darkness, the bridge becomes not only a poetic symbol but a revelation of human existence.

Isis Kayiga '11