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Emmet Gowin: Changing the Earth. . - Media - book review

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Essays by Jock Reynolds, Philip Brookman and Terry Tempest Williams

New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2002

The catalog published by the Yale University Art Gallery in conjunction with the Corcoran Gallery of Art exhibition titled "Emmet Gowin: Changing the Earth" is a sumptuously printed volume. The exhibition that spawned this catalog is the first major presentation of Gowin's work in over a decade.

Ever since Nadar made the first known aerial photograph from a tethered balloon above Paris in 1858 humans have been fascinated by photography from above. Gowin appreciates this allure. His photographs are made from helicopters and planes with a gyroscopically stabilized camera. Each image documents human manipulation of the earth's surface, including pivot irrigation circles, tracks made by off-road vehicles, missile silos, military test sites, storage and disposal facilities for munitions, coal mining, etc. Reproduced in beautiful quad-tones on velvety paper, Gowin's formally exquisite images seem to be made from the point of view of a detached extraterrestrial, bearing objective witness to the endemic destruction of our biosphere.

The impetus for the work in this volume was a fellowship that Gowin received to photograph Mt. Sc. Helens shortly after it erupted in 0980. Gowin wasn't allowed to approach the site on foot, so he chartered planes to tour the aftermath and made photographs from the window seat. After repeated trips to St. Helens, Gowin returned for what he intended to be the last time in 1986, taking a side trip to the Department of Energy's Hanford Site. Two images, including the cover, are from this first excursion.

Two essays and an interview follow the images in the catalog. Terry Tempest Williams, the author of *Refuge* and an environmental activist residing in Utah, wrote the first contribution. Williams's essay is a touchingly poetic and personal account of family deaths from cancers that were caused by nuclear-weapons tests in the nearby Nevada desert. Jock Reynolds wrote the second essay, which is essentially a rewording of Martha Chahroudi's essay in the 1990 catalog *Emmet Gowin: Photographs*, published by the Philadelphia Museum of Art. In his essay, Reynolds (echoing Chahroudi) establishes Gowin's place in the white patriarchy of landscape photography and describes how he moved from a street photography similar to Robert Frank's, to photographing his wife, as Harry Callahan did, to creating horizonless landscapes akin to Frederick Sommer's. It is appropriate then, that this catalog is dedicated to Callahan and Sommer. Finally, an interview with Gowin by Philip Brookman asks informed questions that elicit thoughtful responses, and as such it is the highlight of the book.

The timing of this publication is appropriate, as the administration in Washington D.C. recently passed a budget that calls for a 05 percent increase in military spending over the average during the Cold War. The new expanded budget services a military that is one-third smaller than it was a decade ago. This dramatic increase in activity will undoubtedly result in an escalated destruction of the earth, and although *Changing the earth* is billed as a retrospective of sorts, it is fair to assume that anyone aligned with Gowin's aestheticized treatment of these deadly scars in the landscape will find many future "beauty spots."

ARTISTS' BOOKS

Florida: Family Portrait by Judy Quilts. Visual Studies Workshop Press/48 pp./\$25.00 (sb).

Variations of a Fall by David Schulz. Visual Studies Workshop Press/36 pp./\$25.00 (sb).

EXHIBITION CATALOGS

Art & Economy. Distributed Art Publishers/302 pp./\$49.95 (hb).

Einar Falur Ingolfsson: A Visual Diary. Reykjavik Museum of Photography/40 pp./price unavailable (sb).

Jim Knipe: Southern Storefronts/Transient Time. Virginia Museum of Fine Arts/8 pp./price unavailable (sb).

New York: Capital of Photography. The Jewish Museum/216 pp./ \$35.00 (sb).

The Magic Hour: The Convergence of Art and Las Vegas. Neue Galerie Graz/212 pp./\$39.95 (hb).

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