

Did Ansel Adams's Male Gaze Influence His Landscape Photography?

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Anyone can seek out a connection to the land and witness its beauty away from the trappings of modern life. The sublime quality of nature itself knows no gender, but the practice of landscape photography has been a male-dominated field.

A photography exhibition on view through August 31st at [Jackson Fine Art](#) in Atlanta suggests that there can be a gendered way of visualizing the natural world. A contemporary series of technicolor “Psychscapes” (2017–present) by [Terri Loewenthal](#) is curated alongside the [black-and-white landscapes](#) of iconic 20th-century photographer

Ansel Adams

, promoting the notion that the male versus female gaze has shaped their approaches, a century apart.

In the early aughts,

Mark Klett

traveled through Yosemite National Park to photograph the places where Adams spent much of his life. Klett told the *New York Times*: “What we saw in the Adams photographs is: ‘This is nature. And it’s beautiful because you’re not there.’” Loewenthal proposes that her own vision offers the opposite experience. She wrote in her artist statement: “I’m extending an invitation, not to view untouchable, pristine places from a distance, but rather to step inside and move beyond the confines of our everyday perceptions.”

The “male gaze” describes the objectification of women in images, but Loewenthal seems to refer more generally to the way men and women view the world. Is there a male gaze when it comes to capturing the land?

The idealized image of the American explorer has long been masculine: Lewis and Clark mapping out the wild Western lands, or Daniel Boone in his racoon-tail cap. Western art and literature of the era were similarly romanticized in the swell of Manifest Destiny, from the solitary nature of Henry David Thoreau’s *Walden* (1854) to the gauzy landscape paintings of Thomas Cole

Adams was born a century after Lewis and Clark set out on their 8,000-mile expedition, yet the image of American Western masculinity was still being canonized. The photographer entered the world during the presidency of the mythologized Teddy Roosevelt, the same year that novelist Owen Wister introduced the strong, silent cowboy type through the landmark fictional western *The Virginian*.

Adams would have likely been fast friends with Transcendentalists like Thoreau and Ralph Waldo Emerson. He was captivated by the spiritual power of nature, and spent weeks at a time in Yosemite each year from 1912 until his death in 1984, often working until he was ill. He was a lifelong conservationist, and wanted to protect the land from man’s neglectful instincts. French photographer

Henri Cartier Bresson

once said of Adams and

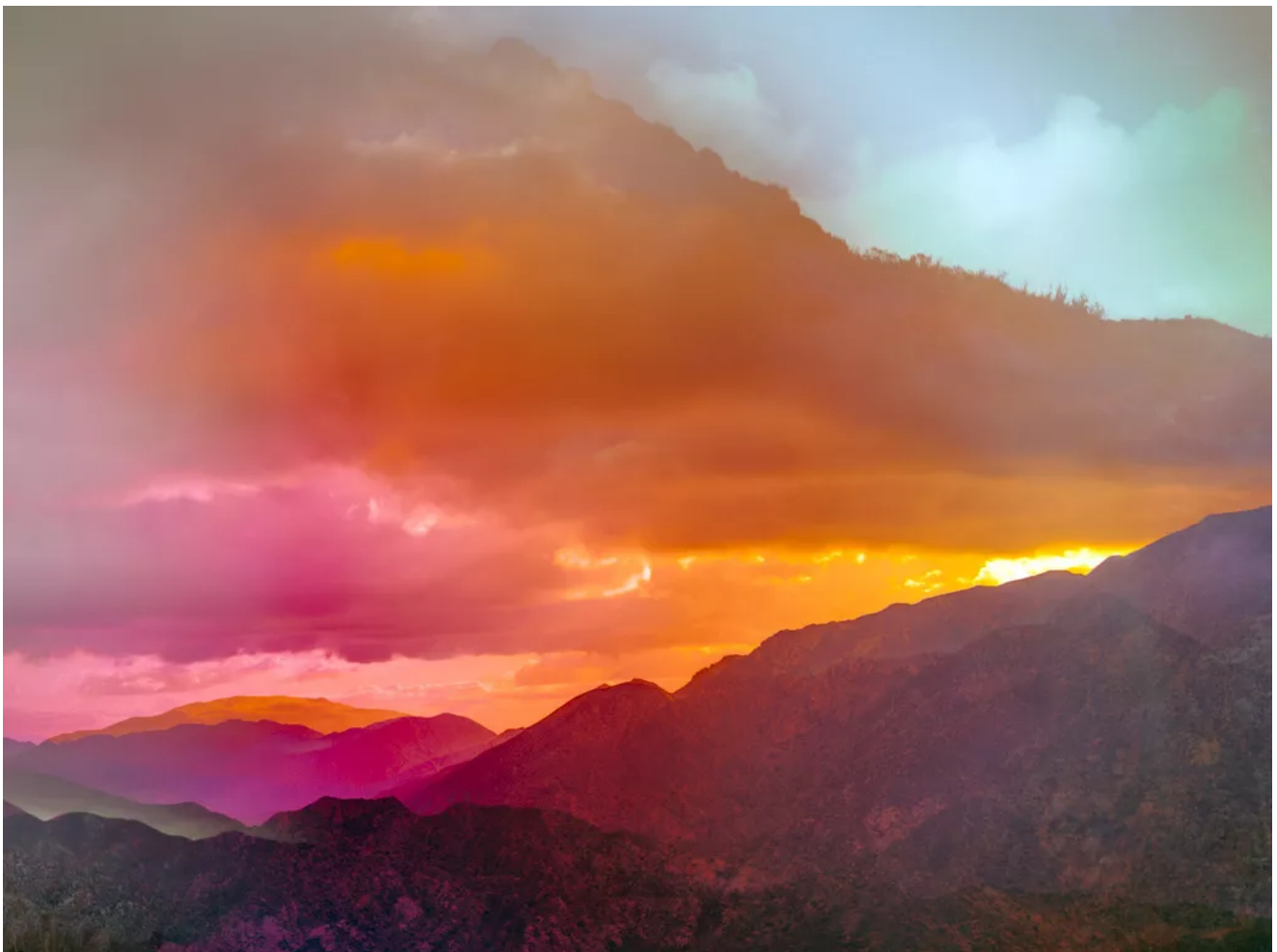
Edward Weston

: “The world is falling to pieces and all Adams and Weston photograph is rocks and trees.”

In many ways, Adams made the peaks and valleys of the High Sierra famous around the world, and it’s his view of American wilderness that has reigned. Philosophically, Loewenthal holds many of the same notions as Adams. She feels connected to the natural world in a spiritual way, and seeks to create an emotional experience for viewers. She often treks over the same territory where her predecessor once walked, in a stretch of wilderness that has since been named after him.

But visually, their images could not be more different. Loewenthal would have fit in more with the pictorialists just ahead of Adams. They embraced the painterly qualities of photography in their mission to position the medium as an art form, and included photographers like Alfred Stieglitz and Edward Steichen

. Adams became a staunch believer in “straight photography”—prints that don’t reveal the artist’s hand in the darkroom. His crisp views of monumental cliffs; lithe, snowy trees; and billowing clouds may have been grand, but any manipulation to the photograph was a well-kept secret. With color photography still in its infancy, he could never have imagined the aquamarine, magenta, and golden hues bleeding across rugged canyons and lakes, joining together pieces of sky and land that have been rearranged in Loewenthal’s camera.



Loewenthal is more influenced by painting than photographs, and her practice involves a unique handbuilt optic that allows her to add colors and reflections, yet still capture the scene in a single exposure. “I’m not trying to make a feminist statement when I’m taking the

photographs—I just happen to be female,” Loewenthal said. “I’m not sure that a male photographer would approach landscape the same way I do.”

Loewenthal began the “Psychscapes” after years of experimentation. She has practiced photography for around two decades, following a six-month camping trip around the West, during which she developed her film at one-hour photo spots to teach herself the nuance of analog photography. Mountains were her first inspiration. “They are also very patient subjects for me, and always have been,” she said.



She doesn’t put a lot of stock in technical perfection, something Adams would have balked at. “I have always had a little bit of a renegade attitude toward photography,” she said. “I’ve always thought focus is overrated. I’m definitely not striving for perfection in my work, and I think there’s something about perfection that’s off-putting to me.” Her custom optic is precarious, she noted, so the decisive moment for her is slim: If she misses the second where the colors, composition, and light all come together, she won’t be able to recreate it.

Loewenthal and Adams both rely on the emotional power of their images as a call to conservation—Adams when the idea of national parks was still new, and Loewenthal now, as protected lands are threatened. But Loewenthal doesn’t necessarily want to keep us out of

the frame; instead, she asks us to experience the sanctity of the natural world ourselves. Being in nature allows us to connect with our subconscious mind, she emphasized. But you have to relinquish control and make space for that side of yourself to take over.



If Adams had been born a century later, how would he have visualized the same scenes?

We can look to the female gazes of his era to make a more direct comparison: through

Dorothea Lange

's documentarian eye in the West, or

Anne Brigman

, who photographed her body among the splendor of the mountains that Adams loved.

Adams himself came of age during the rugged, romantic ideation of the American West, and his mighty vision of it fit neatly in that lineage. More female interpretations of the sublime are welcome in a space where masculine tradition has long prevailed.

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Correction: A previous version of this article misspelled Terri Loewenthal's last name.