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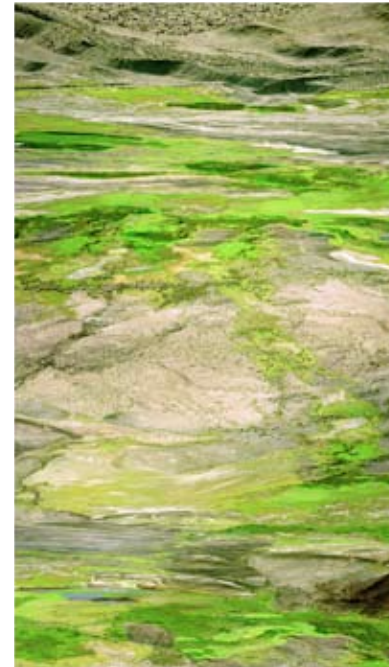


Fig.1
Untitled (Tecopa G), 2005
C-Print
Courtesy Murray Guy, New York

Noriko Furunishi's Imaginary Landscapes

In 2004, Noriko Furunishi (b. 1966) began to make a series of trips to the outskirts of industrial Los Angeles and in and around Death Valley to take pictures of its vast urban and geological sites.¹ Accustomed to the densely planned cities of Kobe, Japan, and New York, New York, Furunishi, like many photographers before her, was drawn to Southern California's "huge spaces" and to the desert's massive scale and emptiness. Some 80 years before, West Coast photographer Edward Weston described such spaces as too "chaotic ... too crude and lacking in arrangement."² Furunishi's initial impression was similar; she recalls being "nervous" about the possibilities of "where to look." Indeed, "lack of arrangement" and "where to look" point to how landscape as an object heightens the recognition of the photographer's process of selection, focus, and synthesis. Furunishi would make this process both evident and unresolved.

¹Travel is a major part of Furunishi's artistic practice. After finishing her bachelor's of fine art at Pratt Institute in 1993, Furunishi worked in Japan with her husband for a year to earn travel money, then embarked on a 16-month tour of Southeast Asia and India.

² Szarkowski, John. *American Landscapes*. New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1978, p. 11.



Fig. 2
Untitled (Dirt Track), 2005,
 C-Print
 Courtesy Murray Guy, New York

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Furunishi's trips yielded photographs from 2005 to 2007 that are vertically oriented and very large even by contemporary standards, some measuring over seven feet tall and five feet wide. They are also filled with minute and plentiful visual information. In *Untitled (Tecopa G)*, 2005, (figure 1) for example, one can follow patches of shrubbery, whose densities and multiple shades of green vary as they stretch across every part of the photo paper. Small swaths of what appears to be rock and sand, along with a dry river running horizontally up the left side of the composition, add rough, layered textures to the image and our reading of it.

Furunishi shares her interest in landscape as an object of photography with a long list of historical photographers; nonetheless, the approach and subject of her photographs are distinctly of our age. Recognizing the complex but repetitive tradition of landscape imagery that preceded her, Furunishi intentionally altered her photographic process to explore a new way of image-making, with Southern California sites as her starting point. While enrolled at the University of California, Los Angeles, she took Adobe Photoshop

classes at a local community college and began to use a 4 x 5 camera, which produces a negative dense with visual detail and data. She then scans selected negatives onto a computer and begins the process of constructing the images before her.

A photograph such as *Untitled (Dirt Track)*, 2005, (figure 2) for example, is made from approximately four to six images selected after shooting a construction site over several sessions. Within the composition, Furunishi uses the curvilinear track imprints as a formal device while breaking from conventions of scale and orientation. For instance, along the bottom of the composition, two thin strips of highways, cars, and palm trees run horizontally, one right-side up and the other flipped upside down. In proportion to the tall vertical print, their scale is too small for the foreground. At the same time, the photograph's upper half is filled with circular tracks that are too large to suggest any sense of perspective into the space.³ In this way, the final picture is as much about drawing, painting, collage, and abstract composition as it is about the "truth" of the space and the construction site.⁴



Fig. 3.
Untitled (Waterfall), 2007
 C-print
 Courtesy Murray Guy, New York

³ Contrary to initial appearances, Furunishi does alter scale by enlarging or reducing parts of the image. Indeed, she creates variations of scale by tilting her camera slightly down so that it captures the pictorial field from the ground at her toe tips to the scene before her.

⁴ The photographs' foreground-to-background relationship often appears reversed and exaggerated, especially in photographs such as *Untitled (Dirt Track)* and *Untitled (Dry Gray Stream)* in which the top quarter of each composition seems to twist and unfold from the right and flip in upon itself. After sustained looking, this creates a dizzying, even sickening effect for this viewer.

That being said, Furunishi's photographs are not formal exercises disconnected from their original subjects. They are compelling and complex as images because they present visual clues that play on our expectations of the "real" landscapes and landscape photography to which we are accustomed. Despite Furunishi's use of digital technology to meld together multiple images, the photographs' clarity and seamlessness make them feel "right."

In the case of *Untitled (Crater)*, 2005, one can construct a logical image of "mountain" off in the distance, a strip of road at the base of the composition, and an inkling of horizon beyond the scene. Look again at the mountain; it is a concave form that

Furunishi has made convex. And *Ice Park F*, 2007, looks as though it has all of the bits and pieces of the "real" image—until one recalls that Furunishi photographs over many days and from many different perspectives, eliminating the possibility of compressing the photograph into a single time and place.

If considered in the historical context of landscape photography, Furunishi's photographs might not be landscape photographs at all. Furunishi signals her ambivalent

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Fig 4.
Untitled (Crater), 2005
C-print
Courtesy Murray Guy, New York



Fig 5.
Ice Park F, 2007
C-print
Courtesy Murray Guy, New York

relationship to landscape photography through her titles, which combine two seemingly contradictory elements: first, the designation "Untitled," then a descriptive name in parentheses, such as *Untitled (Waterfall)*, *Untitled (Crater)*, and so on. The sites are secondary terms, afterthoughts to "Untitled," an anonymous designation more common to abstract painting and conceptual and minimalist works. The titles, in fact, are archival and pragmatic in nature. Furunishi added them to organize the JPG digital files on her computer, which would otherwise be difficult to keep straight. Whether conscious or not, the titles underscore the materiality and construction of the photographs as data.

The odd titles might be excused once one considers the well-traveled path Furunishi departed on in choosing to make photographs based on landscapes. The impulse to represent the landscape has existed as long as mark-making; in the fine art of painting, artists from Amsterdam to Paris continued to compose their versions of Arcadia even though the Academy declared landscapes a fourth-rate subject. Photography arrived late to the landscape, but only because of its tardy emergence a third of the way into the 19th century.

From its birth, the medium moved through genres and theories of landscape, many of which overlapped with the visual arts, such as picturesque landscapes of the mid-19th century. After the Civil War, an adventurous group of talented photographers working for the United States Geological Survey (U.S.G.S.)—including Eadweard Muybridge, Timothy H. O’Sullivan, and William H. Jackson—produced the first pictures of the rugged, unexplored Western Frontier in a direct, objective manner that possesses an understated beauty. In the 1930s, Ansel Adams and Edward Weston, among others, created photographs that focused on the shapely forms and surfaces of the land. More stylized and subjective than their predecessors, these photographs are clearly indebted to a strain of refined modernist aesthetics.

In 1975, the exhibition “New Topographics: Photographs of a Man-Altered Landscape,” organized by William Jenkins at the George Eastman House, codified the last major shift in the landscape genre by highlighting a group of works that “function with a minimal of inflection in the sense that the photographers’ influence on the look of the subject is minimal.”⁵ Deadpan and often flatfooted, these photographs updated the purity of U.S.G.S. pictures, depicting the often-destructive transformation of the land.

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Furunishi arrives at landscape with new technical tools to transform the land as image and, more importantly, with a keen historical consciousness of past approaches and photographic tendencies.⁶ She aims to photograph the western land without making a Western Landscape photograph. In doing so, she draws from a variety of references, including the vertical orientation and flattened visual space of Japanese and Chinese scroll painting, such as in *Untitled, (Waterfall)*, 2007 (figure 3). This connection is often linked to the artist’s birthplace; however, Furunishi interprets her work more broadly—as a rejection of the Western landscape’s pictorial conventions rather than an embrace of the East.

The vertical orientation was not something that I consciously thought about. I didn’t think about East Asian painting. I thought more about the Western landscape, its role and format—the sky, the horizon, and the land—and almost always, you know, where the horizon line comes into the square.... How about if I tried not to follow the rules?⁷

Given our longstanding love affair with landscape imagery, from the snapshot of the Grand Canyon on a family vacation, to the Ansel Adams calendar in the kitchen, it is hard to look at a landscape photograph without seeing an overstuffed inventory of image types flash through one’s mind: the mountaintop, preferably in the distance with a snowcap, fluffy clouds, or a vast green shapely valley in the foreground; the trail that starts somewhere in the lower right and leads into the woods or toward a mountain range; or, ominously, the beautiful body of water with a nuclear factory on the shore and clouds just beyond the horizon. It is sad but true that pictures of this type—always plentiful and readily available thanks to the Internet—have become so imbedded in our visual memory, one cannot help but be skeptical about them. Call it the recognition of ideology or simply the persistence of cliché, but this effect does dull the seasoned observer’s ability to take in another landscape.

Furunishi’s photography, however, avoids the peril of the received image by drawing us into landscapes full of power and even a bit of confusion. These are the landscapes of a new generation of photographers, landscapes that we can now imagine but can never visit.

— David E. Little, Curator and Head, Department of Photography and New Media

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⁵The exhibition included Robert Adams, Bernd and Hilla Becher, Frank Gohlke, Stephen Shore, and Lewis Baltz, among other photographers.

⁶Technically, no previous generation could “perfect,” alter, and combine images with such ease, facility, and range of possibility as is now possible. In contrast, one cannot help but think of generations of photographers who struggled with the technical limitations of photography, such as Gustave Le Gray, who attempted to overcome the limitations of camera and film to capture the land and the sky by combining two negatives.

⁷Noriko Furunishi, interview with author at artist’s studio in Los Angeles, California, July, 2009.