

## Few Soothing Landscapes Here

By Richard B. Woodward

Visitors to "Ecotopia" at the International Center of Photography will have a hard time recognizing nature as they know it from their vacations and backyards. Almost none of the photographs and videos in this contemporary survey of images about the global environment convey the sense of unimpeded awe or temporary repose that the sight of actual water and greenery still offers to many urban and suburban dwellers.

An ominous current of anxiety, not solace, thrums beneath the show, which by and large sees nature as denatured through technology and human meddling. Passing through the galleries, we are never allowed to forget that cameras and computer screens increasingly stand between us and the palpable world, and in many ways shape our views. Oceans are seen here not as ancient sources of life but as something we know only on television during hurricanes and tsunamis.

The postmodern truism that "reality

### ECOTOPIA

International Center of Photography  
Through Jan. 7

is now mediated" has over the years inspired a lot of dull art, and "Ecotopia" has its share. But the 40 diverse artists from 14 countries identified by the team of ICP curators play many unusual and surprisingly funny variations on this theme. Activists expecting an amen chorus decrying the state of the planet, on the order of Earth Day 1970 or "An Inconvenient Truth," will leave unfulfilled. Instead, the show offers a wide spectrum of thoughtful and often incompatible work by mostly younger and underexposed artists, some of whom barely acknowledge ecological politics.

What we see here isn't pretty. A mournful black-and-white series by Robert Adams on the violence of clear-cutting forests in Oregon opens the exhibition. Retracing the route of Lewis and Clark during the late 1990s, he photographed stands of trees, including old-growth fir that, are now reduced to blasted stumps. The photojournalist Patrick Brown's video on the black market for endangered species in Asia documents both the appalling cruelty to animals—he estimates that some 25,000 to 30,000 primates, 2.5 million birds and 500 million fish are exported each year—and the rural poverty that makes poaching a livelihood for a populace with few other economic options.

Our stewardship of the animal kingdom, of which we are frequently a domineering member, is called into question throughout. The Finnish artist Harri Kallio's project on the dodo is a standout. Researching the natural history of the doomed, flightless bird that went extinct on the island of Mauritius in the 17th century, he went so far as to re-create with taxidermic precision a life-size, pliable male and female that he



**Plight of the dodo:** Finnish artist Harri Kallio's photo re-creates a moment of time on the island of Mauritius long before the invention of the camera.

photographed in their once native habitat and then multiplied into a flock through digital magic.

Our awareness that Mr. Kallio has staged his large color pictures, which pretend to "document" a time centuries before the invention of photography, only heightens the sadness of the dodos' plight. He had to reinvent, imperfectly, what had once existed on the island for eons. As more species vanish each year from the earth, whether due to human carelessness or other factors, still and moving photographic images become the primary way that dead things will appear to survive.

The voyeuristic role of the camera in monitoring the natural world is perceived with more than a little ambivalence in several works here. Catherine Chalmers explores in icky close-up the ceaseless Darwinian battles that go on at the insect level, whereas Sam Easterson has a skeptical take on science as Big Brother. His zany project involves attaching minicams (assisted by handlers and veterinarians) to a menagerie of creatures, from a buffalo to a tarantula. The brief videos that result invariably tell us more about how a camera views, say, the back of an armadillo's head than how it actually experiences the desert. Then again, these limitations also govern the heavily edited dramas seen around-the-clock on nature television.

The cruel-to-be-kind relationship of human and animal fascinates Victor Schrager, whose unnerving series of platinum prints shows the hands of ornithologists gripping various species of wild birds. Professional care in many instances is hard to distinguish from torture. Mark Dion's hilarious installation, "The Bureau of Remote Wildlife Surveillance," consists of a mock ranger's station, complete with ledgers and dinged office equipment. Tacked to the outside walls are amateurish color prints of red-eyed wildlife (mostly startled white-tailed deer) that were photographed at night by trap-cameras on the grounds of the artist's Pennsylvania farm. But our desire, driven by technology, to observe all manner of animal at all hours is less a sinister intrusion here than a *folie-a-deux*.

Even several of the more barbed pieces, designed to foster a critical attitude toward the medium, have a conceptual elegance. The 2005 Turner Prize winner Simon Starling is represented by five identical handmade platinum prints of a South Africa pit mine. The

title, "One Ton II," refers to the staggering amount of ore that must be sifted to yield enough precious metal for five platinum photographs. As an industrial process dependent on toxic chemicals, photography leaves a sizable environmental footprint.

Soothing color landscapes by Adam Brookberg and Oliver Chanarin of newly planted Israeli forests, some on the sites of razed Palestinian houses, coolly demonstrate that an image seeming to represent a "state of nature" may actually be disguising a fractious history.

In a show this ambitious and sprawling—it is billed as ICP's triennial—misfires are inevitable. The computer-generated landscapes by the Spanish trickster Joan Fontcuberta say more about the ingenuity of software than photography, even if the two are lately interdependent. Doug Aitken's cityscape built of FedEx boxes and inhabited by birds is also an inscrutable flop. The two-screen video installation by Vietnamese-born An-My Le of American soldiers training in 29 Palms, Calif., before deploying to Iraq is one of the most eloquent studies to come out of the war. Gazing at her silent images of the men and women in the desert sunshine, shifting their feet impatiently while listening to an officer, you can see not only how young they are now but the fidgety children they were not long ago. What this piece has to do with "Ecotopia," however, is anyone's guess.

The whip-smart ICP curatorial team, led by Brian Wallis, has in the past year or so figured out how to reconcile their training in art theory with visual pleasure. When they took over in 2000, their shows often demanded so much reading of heady wall texts that a visit to the museum felt like taking an exam.

The fashionable art jargon in their catalogs could still use some pruning. But lately, in adapting to the awkward two-story exhibition space, they have also mounted shows—by Southworth & Hawes, Larry Clark, contemporary African photography—that don't produce so much eyestrain and brow wrinkling by the viewer. "Ecotopia" is one of their best collaborative efforts so far and, despite the inconsistent quality of the art, should be seen, at least once and maybe often. Like it or not, this is a fair sample of where contemporary photography has been of late and where it seems to be going.

Mr. Woodward is an arts critic in New York.

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