
Reviewed by Phil Gold, Toronto, Ontario

In New York, the landscape of Evelyn Bernstein’s youth, she experienced the world on paved streets, exploring the built environment. Her world was manipulated and constructed. Asphalt and concrete and steel became natural elements of the constructed space. “The Spirit of Nature” Evelyn Bernstein has aimed her lens at both the touched and untouched world around us.

Pastures and ranch fields, wonders preserved in national parks, birds in flight, and the view through an underpass build symbolic meanings that connect us to nature. Bernstein has an artist’s eye, accentuated by the camera lens, for panoramic vistas that border on the mystical. She waits for the perfect moment capturing the sculpted, curved neck of a horse, at the Rainbow Falls, Yosemite National Park and the ideal arrangement of cattle at the Lost Creek Ranch.

Throughout Bernstein’s photography there is a clear distinction between the panoramic vistas and close observation of the natural that places mist and fog and rainbow in her lens and the constructed, manipulated space of the ranch and park that create simulacra of nature. These simulacra are the spirit of nature, no longer unspoiled and untouched.

Bernstein presents us with images that evoke the spirit of nature. While the world around us is nature much of this has become manipulated or created space. The national parks and ranches serve as the objects of her lens are created space for the preservation of a natural environment. They are bounded and interact with us in a way that the unspoiled has yet to do. We see that the ranches and parks are bound by mountain and desert, or by river and ocean. They are, surrounded by nature and represent an island that reconstructs nature through human interaction.

So, can we consider the open expanse of a landscape carved and constructed by human interaction as nature? Manipulating nature for our uses, reconstructing nature, putting a fence around it may help to maintain a status of natural, untouched or reworked. It is through the lens of the viewer that we establish our perspective on the world around us.

The lens of Bernstein’s camera allows us to see the moon at twilight over Mono Lake or dawn on the north coast of California; pristine moments. Light and
reflection, sunrise and sunset, shadow and shade are used as a tool by Bernstein to capture moments in life. Landscape images or sunlight reflecting off of a leaf, flowing river or rolling sand dune, what seem like undisturbed trees each evoke the themes of her presentation.

The images presented by the author may remind viewers of several painters of symbolic landscape such as Caspar David Friedrich (1774-1840), who, like Bernstein, used the morning mist, light effects, trees and landscape features such as hills to both closely examine and show people the wonder of the world around him. Friedrich also presents humans as small, almost insignificant in the sweeping panorama of his art. Like Friedrich, for Bernstein, humans are isolated, alone, silenced by the world around them in spite of the gust of wind that rustles leaves or splashing water as it courses along a river or the majestic gallop of a horse. In photographs and paintings we cannot hear the sound of nature’s rhythm.

Bernstein’s lens is a tool used in the pursuit of truth. Her choices of landscapes manipulated by human hands and the wild unbridled flowing river, the sunset, the pond present us with truth; that the world around us is vast and diverse filled with beauty, even in the shadows.