



BY ROBERT CURRIE

WHEN AN ARTIST makes a photograph of the landscape, Ansel Adams's shadow falls in the frame. Adams, famous for his black and white depictions of the pristine American wilderness, still exerts his influence more than 50 years after he began creating his images of mountains and forest. His romantic vision of the landscape as unharmed by human activity has inspired and provoked responses from the landscape photographers of today.

Dalhousie Art Gallery's concurrent exhibitions, Ansel Adams: Three Portfolios, and Rephotographing the Land, an exhibition of six contemporary landscape photographers, present contrasting

ways of looking at the landscape and at landscape photography.

Mounting the two exhibitions simultaneously creates a powerful dialogue between them. The Rephotographing the Land photographers dispute much of Adams work. Lorraine Gilbert uses similar tools as Adams — large format black and white prints of mountain vistas — but while Adams shows nature thriving, Gilbert shows it devastated. Her photos of deforested mountainsides look like Adams after a clearcut. In José and Pam in the snags, two weary tree planters stand in a burned out desolation, their bags of frail seedling seeming almost comic in contrast to the enormity of the task which awaits them.

In Lisa on the block, a single, tiny figure is lost in the remains of

♦ *Manèges*, Sylvie Readman

♦ *Carole tree-planter*, Lorraine Gilbert

another forest. But while there is an element of horror in Gilbert's vision, there is also an equivocal beauty in it, a potential for redemption and regrowth underlying her work's shocking treeless scenes.

PHOTOGRAPHY
Rephotographing the Land
 Ansel Adams: Three Portfolios
 Dal Art Gallery

Rejecting notions of distance between the landscape and the artist, Marlene Creates's where my grandmother was born alternates black and white portraits of relatives with photographs of the area of Newfoundland where her family lived for generations. Her installation resembles the results of a voyage of exploration using sketch maps, written accounts and collected objects like a rock and pressed leaves to convey an impression of a landscape charged with memory.

Landscape photography has a history which extends back centuries before the invention of the photograph. Sylvie Readman addresses this tradition with *Manèges* (Schemes). In these three large colour prints, she superimposes engravings and paintings of pastoral landscapes onto contemporary photographs, playfully combining them. The historical baggage of landscape is foregrounded, the meadows and shepherds of the idealised pastoral brought into focus.

Fear and fascination shape the Canadian attitude to the wilderness. Sandra Semchuk views the bear as an emblem of the land's power over the national psyche. *Signs of Bear* is a large canvas printed with text and 33 colour photos. No bear appears in the photographs; it makes its presence felt through the text.

Patricia Deadman's manipula-

tion of her photos at the printing stage and her use of colour is a reaction against the precepts of "straight" photography as espoused by Adams and his school. She strives for an impressionistic, soft look in which details are lost.

Experiencing transcendence in the natural world is a theme which runs through much romantically inspired landscape art. "I want to have sublime feelings" shows an idyllic forest scene, but with the photographer clearly visible. Ernie Kroeger satirises the desire for sublimation expressed in the text by showing the artist unable to escape his presence, even within the frame of the photograph.

The introduction to Ansel Adams: Three Portfolios describes Adams work as conveying "majesty, monumentality, immutability." A consummate technician, Adams's prints are remarkable for their detail and tonal range. And while Adams's signature subjects, like Yosemite and the Maroon Bells are represented, so too is his less familiar work. *Pipes and Gauges*, West Virginia, is a study of an industrial, not natural, scene. His portrait of friend and colleague Edward Weston, looking slightly bedraggled, sitting under a massive tree, includes the human subject in his wilderness art.

One of the most intriguing photos in the exhibit is *Graduation Dress*, Yosemite Valley. A young woman stands stiffly next to a massive tree trunk, the tree and woman leaning towards each other. On the surface it is the stereotypical snapshot of the posed tourist. Yet the formal dress and wild setting, the joyful occasion suggested by the title and the woman's somber expression convey mixed messages. Here is a complex and challenging Adams, creating an effect beyond sheer beauty.

What makes the two exhibitions fascinating is the interplay between them. Curator Susan Gibson Garvey says the artists in *Rephotographing the land* are "not just debunking Adams." The relationship is complex, as shown in the dialogue between Adams and Lorraine Gilbert.

No contemporary landscape artist can be oblivious to the predations humans have wrought on their environment. Both Adams's — a pioneer in the conservation movement — and Lorraine Gilbert's work are highly engaged with environmental concerns, but express them in opposing ways. In the show's catalog Gilbert writes, "The undisturbed wilderness that Ansel Adams brought so powerfully before the public is a lie. That doesn't really exist anymore." Gibson photographs what she sees as the truth: the destruction of the wilderness for economic gain.

Adams was an idealist; his photographs show the landscape as we wish it to be. Gilbert shows it as we hope it will not all become. Neither vision disproves the other, since we need ideals to strive for, and depictions of the real to strive against.

TRAVEL ADAMS SCAPET