

## About the Cover Art

# Cover Essay: The Buffalo Jump Called Chugwater

*O moment, Time's diamond—I am all trifles and wretched cares outside your gate.*

I was always baffled by those words, written by the French Symbolist poet Paul Valery, who died in 1945. A few times a year they echoed around in my head, apparently randomly, taunting me to make sense of them. But I never could, exactly. That is, until I sat down with Emmet Gowin's most recent book of photography, *Changing the Earth*, a collection of aerial images published in 2002 by the Yale University Art Gallery. The book is a series of photographs of places that have been changed by human activities; not just changed, but transformed on a scale that is nearly impossible to envision while we stand in our skin, so earthbound we might as well be covered in suits of lead.

The photograph appearing on the cover of this issue of *EcoHealth*, entitled *The Buffalo Jump Called Chugwater and an Irrigation Pivot Near Wheatland, Wyoming* (1991), depicts one of the more subtly disfigured landscapes in the book. Many of the other images are of bomb detonation sites, chemopetrol effluent holding ponds, power stations and the pollution that puffs from their smokestacks, and ongoing strip mining projects around the world. They do not, at first glance, appear to be recordings of longstanding violations of the earth, and without the captions one would have great difficulty telling what most of the images are "of." The subjects of the photographs are partially turned into abstractions, with their gorgeously rippled and striated surfaces, their bulges resembling body parts, and the streaks and wiggles that run through them and which are not revealed until after many minutes of looking to be the fluted edge of a toxic water treatment pond, or a stack of overburden from a chemopetrol mine. The pictures are also printed in a way that restores loveliness to them—with their lush pinkish and gold

tones, rich blacks and grays, and nearly distracting layers of detail revealed in the shadows—because, as Gowin says in the book's epigram, "Even when the landscape is greatly disfigured or brutalized, it is always deeply animated from within....This is the gift of a landscape photograph, that the heart finds a place to stand." For Gowin, I am guessing that beauty is always a place to stand, and thus it becomes a place of refuge for the viewer as well, refuge from the devastation that these images depict.

I believe one of the gifts these photographs give back to the viewer is the restoration of a different sense of time than the one we are accustomed to, and this is the reason that Valery's words sprung to mind when I first looked at *Changing the Earth*, because the source of the speaker's wretchedness suddenly became clear to me. To be outside of time's gate, to act outside of the constraints that time imposes—that is, to act as though no one will have to pay the piper later for what we do today is, indeed, a wretched state to be in, and we have done it to ourselves. We are able to wreak the devastation that we do upon the places that we and our offspring also must live in, in large part because the consequences of doing so are not immediately obvious. If, by the grace of some creator, some special sight or light, we could see always from the camera-eye view that Gowin's pictures present, would we continue to do what we do to the earth, sky, and water? One would hope not. Because when the camera's-eye view is restored to us, the word "immediate" becomes relative. On this scale, the consequences *are* immediately apparent, or nearly so: the huge gouges in the land are now inescapable; we see that those little dunes aren't little dunes at all but the enormous detritus from trenches dug out by military personnel (and, one is forced to wonder, what was there before that is no longer there?), and that those enormous craters stretching

for miles and miles, though admittedly beautiful in their moon-like pocketing of the desert's surface, were made by bombs going off.

The buffalo jump, and the irrigation pivot beneath it, also change our sense of what we are doing to the land by the implied comparison between the way that Indians historically used the land to get food, and the way we do things now. The bottom half of the picture shows a field (presumably of wheat since it is near Wheatland, Wyoming), the geometric shape of which is due entirely to the fact that this land is really too dry to grow wheat. Thus, it must be irrigated heavily, which requires the imposition of this circle upon the landscape, because a circle is a very efficient way to get water to where there isn't enough. Looking at this picture, one realizes that a perfect circle is almost never found in nature, particularly not in a land form, and this truth is reflected in the fact that, from above, the circle's perfection is marred by natural divagations and channels running through it, and by the shadows cast by clouds hovering over the circle—or perhaps marred only to an eye that finds perfection in rigidity, for the picture asks us to see that it is these same irregularities that restore beauty to the image by providing its exquisite detail, as well as the formal elements of the photograph that define its composition.

The buffalo jump, by contrast, is a land formation that Indians relied upon to drive buffalo to their deaths, by herding them over the edge of a ledge, then slaughtering the animals after they had fallen and broken their legs. A buffalo jump is made of shapes that are already on the land—a rounded ledge of sufficient size that a good number of buffalo can be herded there, but not so steep that they will balk and not go over it—to aid in food procurement. To be sure, this was not a pleasant way to go for the buffalo, and doubtless was dangerous work for those who waited below to spear and club animals that had survived the fall, but nevertheless it did not do lasting damage to the physical landscape by imposing a very large structure of human devisement upon it. Ironically, it is the natural land form and not the crop circle that bears the name Chugwater, an apt description of what the recently imposed land form is doing to the area's resources.

But when I am finished admiring all these aspects of the image—the juxtaposition of these two starkly different ways of using the landscape that would be clever (and therefore unpoignant) if it had been artificially created by the photographer, the aura of windswept desolation conveyed by those wispy cloud shadows that seem to be blowing across the photograph and that I remember from visits to Wyoming's high plains when the wind howled constantly and my ears

ached for days on end—it is still that sense of a different time scale that I come back to, and that haunts me most of all. The paradox that Gowin's aerial images provide is that our human timescale is, in fact, trifling compared with the timescale that the earth is running on, or was until we came along. Yet by living as though the only time frame that matters is the briefest one, we have managed to alter the planet's geography and resources in ways so massive that they may be understood only when we are able to rise above the earth's surface and see them from the air.

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## THE ARTIST

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Emmet Gowin was born in 1941 in Danville, Virginia. His early pictures were, for the most part, of his family and of his wife Edith and her family, who were also from Virginia, and the rural environment in which both of them had grown up. They have been married for 40 years, and their partnership has remained integral to Gowin's working life and maturation as an artist.

*Changing the Earth* was, in some ways, born out of Gowin's aerial photographs of the aftermath of the eruption of Mount St. Helens in 1980. As Jock Reynolds writes in an essay included in *Changing the Earth*, it was at that point that Gowin began “measuring for himself what the sheer and terrifying visual beauty of devastation meant to him, both visually and emotionally.” Watching Gowin struggle with these concerns and themes is a humbling experience, for the pictures manage to grapple with the questions they raise—even questions as large as “What will become of us as a species, and of other species that share our living space, if we continue on in this vein?”—without becoming polemics or choosing sides. As Gowin's mentor, Fredrick Sommer wrote, and Gowin clearly internalized, “I do not see a fundamental difference between art and science. They are both serving our feelings; they are both interested in respect for reality.”

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*The Buffalo Jump Called Chugwater and an Irrigation Pivot Near Wheatland, Wyoming*, by Emmet Gowin, 1991

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