



John Ganis: *Earthmover, Texarkana, Texas, 1984*

A CONVERSATION WITH JOHN GANIS

by MARY McNICHOLS

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Having described himself as “...a photographic artist committed to issues of environmental concern...”, Detroit-based photographer John Ganis documents the all too frequently ruinous convergence of nature and culture in his images of a land despoiled of its beauty by unbridled expansion. Ganis’s photographs of oil spills, strip mining sites, toxic-waste dumps, and threatened coastal regions are, yet, richly-rendered images whose aesthetic quality seemingly belies their disturbing theme. The sumptuous color of the artist’s panoramic pictures provides an effective and ironic counterpoint to the disquieting nature of the subject matter; his adroit approach to composition (that which he describes as a “well-structured photograph”) heightens the viewer’s perception of their content.

Despite the scars visited upon it by humanity, Ganis celebrates the

land. He speaks of an “empathy” and a “reverence” for all of nature, and hopes that his photographs will inspire his audience to appreciate its fragile beauty and, ultimately, to replace a legacy of consumption with one of sustainability.

John Ganis was the recipient of the Harold Jones Distinguished Alumni Award, University of Arizona, in 2008 and the Honored Educator Award, Society for Photographic Education, Midwest Region in 2007. Having joined the faculty of the Photography Department at the College for Creative Studies in 1980, he has served the school as Department Chair as well as in his present position as Professor of Photography.

His work was included in the exhibition “Paradise Paved,” curated by *Photo Review* editor Stephen Perloff at the Painted Bride Art Center in Philadelphia in 2005 and in the accompanying catalogue that also served as Volume 27, Number 3 of *The Photo Review*. His new book, *America’s Endangered Coasts: Photographs from Texas to Maine*, with essays by Liz Wells and Dr. James Hansen, is forthcoming from George F. Thompson Publishing (GFT Books) in Fall of 2016.

Mary McNichols: Your work seems, at first glance, to fall within the rich tradition of American landscape photography. Yet, you’ve indicated to me that you, “...came to photograph the land from the perspective of a contemporary, urban-oriented photographer rather than that of a traditional nature or landscape photographer.”²

John Ganis: I make this distinction because traditional landscape photography presents an idealized notion of nature while I am interested in the landscape as it has been changed by human activity. My interest is in how our cultural values affect the way we see and use the land.

MM: Would you discuss the evolution of your work?

JG: I began doing black-and-white photographs in the streets of New York

in the early 1970s. In 1974, I started photographing swimmers at Coney Island. I’ve always been fascinated with how people interact with the water, not only in terms of the visual possibilities but in terms of something more profound. I’ve had some life-changing experiences around water. Even now, my photographs of land use often include water — rivers, the Atlantic and Gulf of Mexico coastlines. I continued the *Swimmer* series when I left New York to attend graduate school and as late as the early 1980s when I arrived in Detroit to teach at the College for Creative Studies.

By the early 1980s, I was thinking about urban landscape, which I think encompasses a broader view than street photography, often involving human activity within an environment. For example, I was doing photographs of construction sites, as well as hydroplane races on the Detroit River.

That new interest, coupled with my move to medium-format equipment (I was now using 6 x 9 cm film), made possible what I consider to be a pivotal image, taken in 1984, of an Earthmover kicking up a large cloud of red soil in Texarkana. Two isolated trees still remained in the midst of this land-clearing project. This was another life-changing experience. I was returning from a meditation retreat in Texas when I saw the site, and felt a pro-

found sense of empathy for the land. After driving past the site, I couldn’t get the image out of my mind; I turned around and took the photograph, which was the first of the series that has occupied me for over 25 years.

MM: How has your approach to this subject changed over the years?

JG: I tend to work on a particular subject for long spans of time. The *Swimmer* series occupied me for over ten years and, as I said, I’ve been photographing land use for over 25 years. Of course when you work on something that long, your ideas about it inevitably evolve — although, there must be a stylistic connection. New images must be linked to the entire body of work. When I first began this series in the mid-1980s, I was interested in how the character of the land was being changed by human activity. I was responding with a sense of empathy to the clearing of the land, to how the land would be flattened out in preparation for a subdivision or strip-mall. While, of course, I was aware of the impact of technology and industry on the land during these years, the documentation of industrial-scale resource development was not initially my subject matter.

In the mid-1990s, I did a series on the site of the Reichhold Chemical



Nickel Smelter, historically one of the largest single causes of acid rain in North America, Copper Cliff, Greater Sudbury, Ontario, 2008

Plant in Ferndale, Michigan, which was exhibited at the Cranbrook Art Museum in a 1996 show entitled, “Danger Zone: Corrective Actions at Michigan’s Reichhold Chemical Plant.” I then returned to landscape work, photographing mining, logging, and over-development throughout the West. As a result of these experiences, I began to regard myself as a witness to the problems of land use and as a photographer committed to issues of environmental concern.

The most recent development in my work has been to address the issue of climate change. But the problem was how to photograph global warming given that it occurs over a long period of time, and that the effects will largely be in the future. My solution is to photograph the coastal areas that will be significantly affected by the rise in sea levels. I started in 2009 along the Atlantic coast and have continued into Florida and the Gulf of Mexico. More recently I have photographed the aftereffects of hurricanes Irene and Sandy, which give us direct examples of the devastating effects of sea rise that I believe will be widespread in the future.

MM: Who have been your mentors?

JG: I’ve had the opportunity to study with some of the greats, and they have all been very generous and supportive of my work. As an undergraduate at Ohio Wesleyan University, I went on a New York internship program through the Great Lakes Colleges Art Association to assist Irving Penn. After graduation, I returned to New York and eventually began assisting Larry Fink, renting a loft next to his. Larry is currently on the faculty at Bard College. I consider him to be one of the greatest living photographers and a great teacher. Larry has published a number of books of his photographs, including *Social Graces* in which he documents human emotions as a common thread transcending diverse social strata — from New York society to the working class in Martins Creek, Pennsylvania. He was just beginning the *Social Graces* series when I worked with him. Larry has a masterful under-



“Ocean Front Paradise” Rental, State Highway 87, Bolivar Peninsula, Texas, 2014. N 29.53893 W 94.41699. Elevation Three Feet.

standing of light and is an incredible printer; he taught me so much, from how to print black-and-white to how to listen to jazz, and he taught me how to teach photography. I’m still in contact with him. In New York, I also had the opportunity to study with Lisette Model, having enrolled in one of her private classes. Lisette had been Larry’s teacher as well as Diane Arbus’s.

MM: Given that you were working then as a street photographer, doing candid photographs of people in New York, I would think that Model’s and Fink’s work, with its emphasis on the complexity and commonality of human emotion, would have been of interest to you.

JG: Yes. Let me add that I think that there are two essential characteristics for my approach to street photography: empathy with the subject and the element of time. What Cartier-Bresson termed the “decisive moment” was more of a purely formalist approach, while Model and Fink taught me that the subject revealed itself through the insight of the photographer in the moment, making empathy possible. While not the basis of my work, these two characteristics are common to all of it. And clearly, the aesthetic/formal qualities of a work largely determine

its relative degree of success. These elements continue to be important in my approach to photographing the land.

MM: After your tenure in New York and the completion of your undergraduate degree, you enrolled in the MFA program at the University of Arizona in Tucson. Which photographers there influenced you?

JG: I decided to do my MFA at Arizona because the Center for Creative Photography was there, directed at that time by Harold Jones. Harold had been the founding director of Light Gallery in New York, then the founding director of the Center and, subsequently, the director of the graduate program at the U of A. Todd Walker was also an important influence on me at the U of A. I returned to the *Swimmer* series at that point, having begun it in black-and-white at Coney Island while still in New York. Given the properties of water, color was becoming important in my work. Todd taught me photo-silkscreen, alternative processes and the dye-transfer color process. Later, I taught the process at the College for Creative Studies.

Also at the U of A, I had the good fortune to work with W. Eugene Smith, the renowned photojournalist for *Life Magazine* who had accepted a professorship at the U of A and

spent the last year of his life in Tucson. He was a great inspiration to me. His book of photographs *Minamata* documents with shocking honesty the devastating results of the discharge of heavy metals by the Chisso Corporation into the waters surrounding the Japanese island of the same name. A debilitating nervous condition and horrific birth defects were the result of people eating fish from the mercury-contaminated waters.

MM: Please describe the techniques which you use when you photograph land use.

JG: Generally, I use medium format cameras, wide-angle lenses and roll film. Now, I am also using a full-frame digital camera. As I'm very interested in panoramic formats, I've used stitching in a number of photographs, sometimes stitching as many as 20 individual frames to produce a seven-foot-long print. As I have transitioned to digital technology, I still photograph

all the sites with my 6 x 9 film cameras as well as digital cameras.

MM: In 2003 your book *Consuming the American Landscape* was published by Dewi Lewis Publishing. Would you please discuss the inception of this book as well as your collaboration with noted anthropologist and poet Dr. Stanley Diamond?

JG: I began working on the book in the late 1980s, and made several versions of book dummies that were updated as the project continued, from that point until the final editing and publication of the book. By the way, having a good book dummy is essential to finding a publisher. Prior to my collaboration with Stanley Diamond, I had shown my book maquette to the late Robert Sobieszek who was in transition from the George Eastman House to his new position as Curator of Photography at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art. He agreed to write an introductory essay for the

book. The book also includes an Afterword by George F. Thompson, then the Director of The Center for American Places. George had seen my book maquettes and had been very supportive of my project over the years, so I wanted him to contribute to the book. He graciously agreed.

I originally met Dewi Lewis at the photography festival Les Rencontres de la Photographie d'Arles in 2001. Arles, by the way, is a very fruitful place for photography. Les Rencontres is a remarkable event held every year in early July with many exhibitions of photographs; large-scale, outdoor photo presentations every night; and opportunities to meet many leading photographers, publishers, and curators from around the world. I met Dewi again at the FotoFest in Houston in 2002, where I showed him my work. Subsequently, he agreed to publish the book, in part, perhaps, because of a well-edited book dummy which included Stanley's poems and Robert Sobieszek's introductory essay.



Beach Houses after Hurricane Sandy, 959 East Avenue, Mantoloking, New Jersey, March 2013. N 40.05418 W 74.04623. Elevation Nine Feet.



New Seawall after Hurricane Sandy and Damaged House, 136 B144 Street, Rockaways, New York, 2014. N 40.56934 W 73.85868. Elevation Nine Feet.

Dewi Lewis Publishing, by the way, has published many important photographers, including Martin Parr and Bruce Gildea, and supports the European Publishers Award. Edition Braus worked with Dewi Lewis to print the book and publish a German co-edition, entitled *American Landscapes*.

As you say, Stanley Diamond was a noted anthropologist and poet, a member of the faculty at the New School for Social Research. In one of his most important books, *In Search of the Primitive: a Critique of Civilization*, he maintained that conquest is inherent to “civilization.” I contacted him after he spoke at the Cranbrook Academy of Art. Previously, I had read some of his books of poetry, notably *Going West*. As I was looking for someone to make a literary contribution to the book, I sent him the photographs that I proposed for inclusion. As a result he wrote poems in response to my photographs. Each poem precedes a specific suite of pho-

tographs; for example, Stanley’s poem on mining precedes my photographs of that subject. Unfortunately, Stanley died before my book was released. I met with his widow, Josephine Diamond, and she agreed to the final selection of the poems and their inclusion in the work.

MM: You’ve stated that Suzi Gablik’s book *The Reenchantment of Art* has been “...the most significant theoretical influence on my landscape work...” and have described her premise as the emergence of, “... a new direction in which art serves a healing and even spiritual role.”³³ Would you please elaborate?

JG: By way of answering your question, let me first observe that my work is as it is because of my interest in social issues. I regard my photographs of land use as an exploration of human values, as a map of human follies. That’s the background with which I

came to read Gablik and other authors who have influenced me, such as Henryk Skolimowski and Arne Naess.

Gablik postulates a moral and social dimension to art-practice and suggests that a new social paradigm of the cooperative and, even, the spiritual must replace old patriarchal traditions of mastery and autonomy. That is how she uses the term “reenchantment.” I believe that art can function as a healing activity, and that the first step in healing is awareness. An aesthetic experience can transmute something negative into something positive. There are countless examples in the history of art in which the perception of the “tragic” can result in an uplifting experience. Thus, while the subject matter of my work is, in some cases, the scars that have resulted from irresponsible land use, I would hope that the viewer will experience the same sense of empathy with the land that I have and, ultimately, be drawn to ecological awareness.

In her book, Gablik mentions Henryk Skolimowski, an eco-philosopher who has published a number of books, including *A Sacred Place to Dwell*. I was fortunate to meet Dr. Skolimowski when he was a professor at the University of Michigan. The workshop that I took with him in Michigan was a great inspiration. Skolimowski describes the world as “an exquisite sanctuary” rather than “a machine,” and contends that when you treat it with reverence, the world becomes your sanctuary. Central to his ecological perspective is the concept that humanity is, essentially, spiritual and shares that spirituality with all living things. Skolimowski, along with thinkers such as Arne Naess who was the founder of “deep ecology,” challenge us to question the underlying paradigms surrounding our relationship to nature, such as the necessity for continuous growth and consumption. This assumption is also questioned in a new book, *Eaarth*, by Bill McKibben. He contends that, given global warming, we need a new model for how we look at the earth.

MM: Over the years, you’ve developed an interest in Eastern philosophy which is, of course, inherently concerned with the interconnectedness of all phenomena, described by the authors whose work you’ve just men-

tioned. Would you discuss this interest and how it has influenced your work?

JG: I’ve been involved with Eastern meditative practices since the early 1970s, also practicing Tai Chi and related forms of Chinese internal arts. These activities have profoundly influenced my world view as well as my health and well-being. One of my teachers stated that we are not physical beings with a spirit, but rather spiritual beings with a body. We share our energy, termed “Ch’i” by the Chinese, with all living things.

MM: You’ve mentioned your involvement with the Pleasant Ridge and Ferndale Community Action Group which was instrumental in closing the Reichhold Chemical Plant. Has your documentation of the effects of land use led you to any other forms of environmental social activism?

JG: As I mentioned earlier, my most recent work deals with the issue of global warming. Although global warming wasn’t really on most people’s radar fifteen years ago, it’s now reached a crisis stage. James Hansen, one of the leading climatologists in the USA, has given a dire warning in his book, *Storms of My Grandchildren*. I think that everyone should read this book.

The situation is, indeed, dire. The most recent scientific estimates for sea levels 100 years in the future indicate that a 1.6 meter rise (five feet) would be well within the realm of possibility. To put this in perspective, a five-foot sea level rise would submerge 22,000 square miles of the U.S. coastline on the Atlantic and Gulf coasts and displace more than 100 million people worldwide.

Returning to your question, I regard my work as a form of social commentary, but I am not really an environmental activist. As you know, photography has a great tradition of socially concerned imagery — the Farm Security Administration photographers of the 1930s, those of the Magnum Photo Agency, and W. Eugene Smith are only a few examples. I believe that my responsibility as an artist-photographer is to make my audience more aware of the current ecological crisis within the larger context of the human-altered environment. We all have to find ways to live more responsibly with that knowledge.

NOTES

1. (Artist Statement: *Sea Rise and the Endangered Coast*, 2010).
2. E-mail to author 6/23/11.
3. E-mail to author, 6/23/11.

Mary McNichols is Professor of Art History at the College for Creative Studies in Detroit. She earned her Ph.D. in art history, women’s studies, and higher education administration. She has also held several administrative positions at the College, including Associate Academic Dean. Her work has been published in Mixed Media Magazine, The Photo Review, The International Review of African American Art, Jung Journal: Culture and Psyche, and Religion and the Arts. Her most recent article is forthcoming in Detroit Research. In addition, Dr. McNichols has juried and curated a number of exhibitions, including "The Art of the Sleeping Bear Dunes: Transforming Nature into Art," installed at the Dennis Museum in Traverse City, MI, from October 2013 to January 2014. ■



Bridge Constructed over New Inlet, a Breach Caused by Hurricane Irene, NC 12, Outer Banks, North Carolina, 2014. N 35.68362 W 75.48393. Elevation Four Feet.