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Landscape as Cultural Solution

Topographies at Fuller-Gross Gallery, San Francisco

By Rebecca Solnit

On my way to see the landscape show *Topographies* at Fuller-Gross Gallery, I stopped to read the headlines. The lead story in the *New York Times* was "Science Academy Says Chemicals Do Not Necessarily Increase Crops/Policy Shift on Aid Urged to Discourage Pesticides." If there's a simple parallel between postmodernism and science, it has something to do with both of them disgorging their faith in progress in the past decade or so. Art about landscape has hitherto been considered retrogressive, because it yearned toward the past; the photographer Frank Gohlke put it about as well as can be when he said, "Eden becomes the object of our desire only after we are cast out. The best landscape images, whatever their medium and whatever other emotions they may evoke, are predicated on that loss." The sudden surge of interest in landscape art and art about the natural world reflects a larger state of affairs in which we are destroying the natural at an ever-increasing rate and realizing that in many ways backward is the best direction in which to head; modern solutions have become postmodern problems.

Topographies is firstly a celebration of the diversity of landscape-related work being made these days, and it includes photographs, paintings and sculptures by British, east coast and local artists. The works one sees upon entering, and the largest in the main space, are by British artist Richard Long, whose work elegantly eludes traditional classifications.

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Topographies is secondly, at least for me, an exploration of strategies of representing and connecting, for which Long's works serve as a kind of touchstone. The most obvious pairing/contrast is between **Dennis Leon's** simulated rock sculptures and Long's real one. Leon's piece muddies the distinction between the actual and the represented (his rocks are wood and clay, their markings are the artist's), and makes the straightforward materials deceptive; the work seems to be more about culture than nature, about issues of representation and simulation unconnected to experience in the natural world. This exploration of formal issues is also central to the paintings by Joan Nelson, Diane Andrews Hall and Ellen Phelan. Thomas Joshua Cooper's dark, toned photographs are, conversely intensely about place, not spectacular, majestic places, but intimate, almost claustrophobic ones. Hamish Fulton's work has always seemed to me like a less ferociously sure version of Long's, and his triptych-panorama here is no exception.

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