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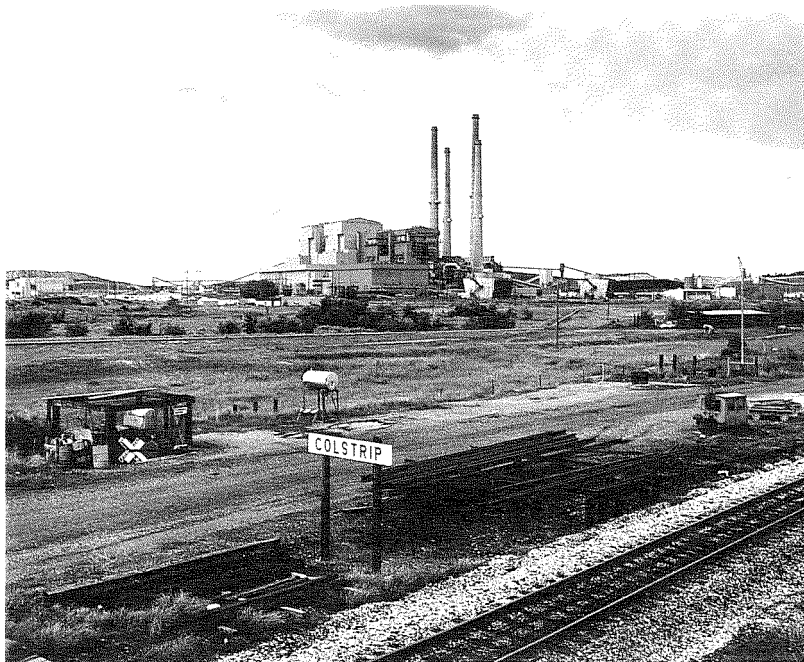
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**Selections
from
"Colstrip,
Montana"**



Photographs by

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Essay by

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Digging for Our Roots

Modern culture seems about to make a change in its interactions with the ties that bind humankind with the earth. What wisdom shall guide it?

Both science and religion may have been co-opted and subverted; they have become creatures of an exploitation mentality. In a secular society perhaps only art can deal with the problem of evil. But the art that can do this must exorcise its own cankers.

The 500-year tradition of the landscape arts would seem to have a redeeming potential, something that could be enhanced as part of a new ecology. But the sources of those arts are the same mathematics that made Lewis Mumford speak of “Galileo’s crime.” Christopher Hussey makes it clear that the painters took poetry as their source, geometry as their lever and gave us the picturesque.

The vendors of landscape, being censors and guides of the eye, narrowly defined the notion of “scenery.” The painters’

evocations of the old poets gave us what would become calendars, doing for the mind what Muzak would do for the ear. Marshall McLuhan associated this sty in the beholder’s eye with the invention of perspective and the picture frame itself—an insider’s view through a window in a wall, concealing more than it showed.

We still suffer from this legacy, for out of it came the sorting of the world into the beautiful and the unbeautiful according to a pastoral imagery that has stood for what is good in nature since the time of Theocritus and the authors of the Psalms, and an “enclave” mentality that leads us to preserve nature by partitioning it into parks or wilderness areas. Conversely, this perceptual lock on landscape aesthetics conditioned us to surrender willingly all that was unbeautiful to industrial ravagement.

Artists can rhapsodise and paint the debris of the miners and loggers, provided they stick with the language of limners’ manuals—the basic circle, line and triangle—or dallies with color complements. An educated elite can then admire, in the name of aesthetic abstraction, such abuses as waste, poison and death. The rest of us must make do with the picturesque, wherever scattered groves remain or sublimity

**Burlington Northern switching
yard and power plant.**



Coal strip mine and abandoned farm.

is not upstaged by ski lifts, towers and gondolas.

But the artist who would break from the stranglehold of scenery and yet avoid the various “traditions” that represent nature as colored retinal images is in a quandary. If one shows the “ugly” reality, “nature” vanishes and the patron turns away. If one opts for abstraction, disavowing mere “subject matter,” the risk is making evil attractive.

Evil? In *On Photography*, Susan Sontag protests that surrealism is a cruel abuse of real events. She asks whether we are free to enjoy old photographs of suffering people—however excellent the photographs may be technically—simply because we have forgotten the peoples’ names and circumstances. These photographs, she wryly remarks, “nourish aesthetic awareness and promote emotional detachment.”

Do time and distance make the anguish of people or the landscape acceptable? Should we admire such photographs solely as objects? No, Sontag insists. This “surrealistic enterprise” places the final distance between the observer and the occasion. Talk about form or balance or line if you wish, but there is no escaping the subject.

The abuse of nature in the name of aesthetics has not been limited to art. At

the same time open-pit mining began in earnest at Colstrip, Erhard Rostlund wrote in *Landscape* that clear-cutting forests produces a more beautiful prospect than selective logging or than not cutting the trees at all.¹ An Olin Chemical Co. advertisement in the *Saturday Review* read, “If You Think It’s Beautiful Now Wait ’Til We Chop It All Down.”² Today, at the Kennicott mine in Butte, signs along the highway say, “Historic Site Ahead,” and “Technological Marvel—Bring Your Camera.” Since humans purposively cut down the land, it follows that the result must be beautiful.

The visitor’s astonishment in places like this is an intoxicating distillation of our national power and will to dominate. Like the smoke from the Four Corners power plant, the open-pit mine is an entity that could be seen from the Moon. We associate the vertigo we experience at the pit’s edge with the exhilaration of our national and industrial success. The camera comes next, for it will turn that havoc into the two-dimensional replica that can awaken an echo of the almost obscene ambience or, for an audience, provide a concatenation of pure visual enjoyment.

The Morality of Hanson’s Colstrip, Montana

When David T. Hanson presents us with aesthetically pleasing photographs of earth at the Colstrip open-pit mine, Cézanne, Constable and the Hudson River School are far away. Claude, Virgil and Theocritus have vanished, as though landscape itself had disappeared.

There are various ways to consider photographs such as these. They could be, as Sontag says of images of Depression-worn families on the road, a reprehensible exploitation of this place purely for our visual pleasure.

But I do not think Hanson is trying to flush away an outworn romantic idea and replace it with visual abstractions or symbols of power. Indeed, there is a link between his photographs of these raw earth layers and the heart of Tennyson’s objections to the neo-classic logos of rationalism, capitalism and industrialism.

Somewhere under all the husk of Romanticism’s sentimental excess there lurked a deeper design. Linear thought has so dominated the Western world since the time of Copernicus that its rationality and mechanism deprived modern culture of the very terms of an alternative. Romanticism was an effort to recapture a lost paradigm, an organic view of creation, a sense of the earth as a living being.

If the land is an organism, what does it mean to cut down a forest or cut open the land? And how do Hanson’s photographs escape the moral outrage Sontag expressed against parading distant wounds for casual use in art?

The answers are not simple. First, it must be clear that this new paradigm or organic sensibility is not simply another ideology, but a new seeing. It addresses the problem of how humans perceive nature and their own identity.

Although the issue Colstrip raises is similar to that raised by the photographs Sontag criticized, its status is different. Her rage against the pictures of starving people as coffee table amusement was a critique of the whole of Renaissance and literary humanism. The very arrogance and pride of humane morality helped sustain a sympathy for downtrodden people, at the same time widening the gap between the human and the nonhuman. That hubris had never completely wilted before the cold hearts of the makers of the Industrial Revolution and its modern representatives.

Yet the wounds of the earth are a similar matter. During the classic phase of environmentalist ideology from about 1964 to 1976 (as distinct from the earlier natural resources conservation movement), Leo

Unreclaimed mine land from the 1930s.



Coal strip mine and railroad tipple along Armeil's Creek.

Marx's influential book *The Machine in the Garden* examined the ecological movement as a conflict between "pastoral" ideal and progress. If that were a complete analysis the issue would have become merely a choice between competing styles of consumerism. But the shift proposed by the ecological movement was more revolutionary. It addressed "mind and nature" and the preconscious assumptions of cultural style, the reawakening of a mythic understanding.

Both the Romantics and ecologists urge us to abandon the Enlightenment's logic and obsession with binary divisions, such as separating the beautiful from the useful or rescuing nature by preserving enclaves of it (as Leo Marx would put it, of understanding the world as a machine). Once we do that, the problem of surrealist irony may disappear. Art might recover the importance of content, locality and participation.

As we begin to accept the story of humans as part of the larger story of all life on earth, perhaps we need to search for obvious targets, as Mother Teresa does in working among the worst of the sick and dying, and as Hanson does in photographing Colstrip.

For the most part, Colstrip is not only a ravaged but also an invisible place. So that we do not

misunderstand, Hanson has virtually excluded people from his pictures. Like Cézanne at Mont Ste. Victoire, we are drawn to form and color, to the brink of the alienated mood Sontag chastised. Hanson starts with the degree of dislocation that an ambivalent culture finds aesthetically acceptable.

We seem at first invited to scrutinize a juxtaposition of mining and the human environment it creates. But do they truly have this apartness? The lack of people in the photographs prevents a certain kind of distancing: The absence of other "selves" makes our involvement as viewers that much more undeniable, just as the absence of a self in the animal dreams of young children makes the dreamer's presence more vivid.

What we see has neither the emblems of romantic technophilia nor romantic grandeur; it is not even a landscape in the customary sense. We are pulled up short by the estrangement caused by the objectification and abstract detachment of these photographs. Just who is the wounded and the wounder?

Compare these photographs to Alexander Hogue's painting of rural Oklahoma during the Dust Bowl era as *Mother Earth Laid Bare*. It was a primitive effort that must have

brought abusive chuckles from the avant garde enemies of subject matter and content. Hogue's evocation of prudery in redressing a land denuded by the plow was quaint, but one knows he had rape in mind.

Something horrible, an act we have committed upon ourselves, is at hand in this evisceration. We have begun to escape the metaphor of the earth-organism as poetic convenience and to recover its meaning in homology, in a common ground differing only in expression.

Healing the division of the world into what was pictorially aesthetic and what was not begins with the act of attention. Our eyes, educated in Anglo-Americanized Italianate escapist pastorality, still glide quickly past the "ugly." There are plenty of geographer-traveler-writers who tell how "interesting" it all is, providing relentless humane description. Such endless fascination with ourselves and our works also educates the eye, but its perception is that of linear analysis. Ostensibly value-free and demythologized, it actually is a perverse enchantment, its mythic core the body of stories of domination that define the West.

Waste pond.

Digging for Our Roots

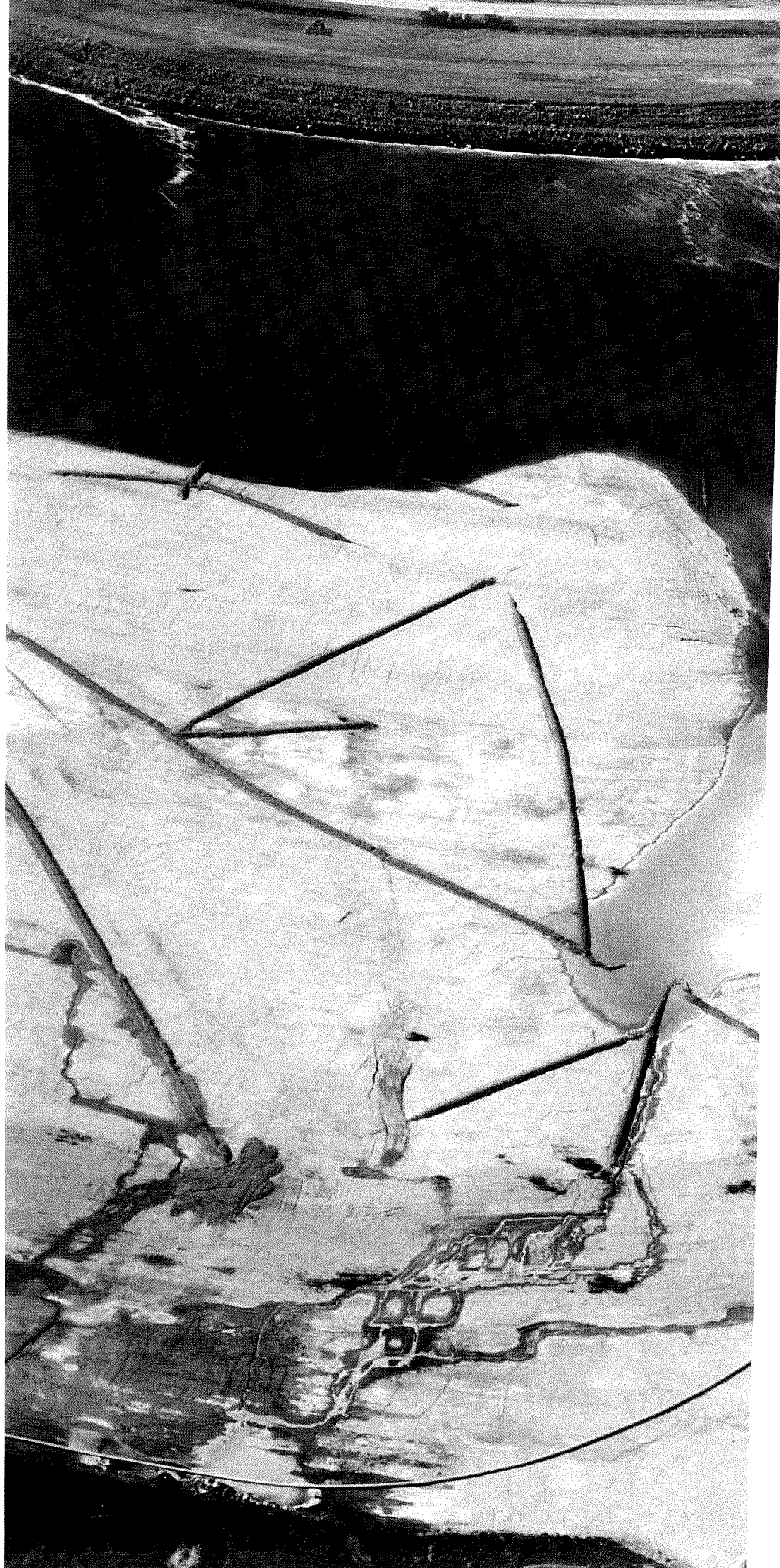
Hanson's *Colstrip, Montana* series is a worst-case scenario that alters our awareness and casts attention to a violence that shakes our complacency.

Nonhuman life—animals and plants—is difficult to perceive anew because its identity is clouded by Romantic humane individualizing and “Disneyfication.” Instead, the new reality emerges as a raw, elemental renewal, sensitive to air, water and earth.

There is a paradox in backing off from life to get close. It is a precursor of a new consciousness: a world of beings bound by infinite and mysterious acts of connection, created from the Earth, itself a being.

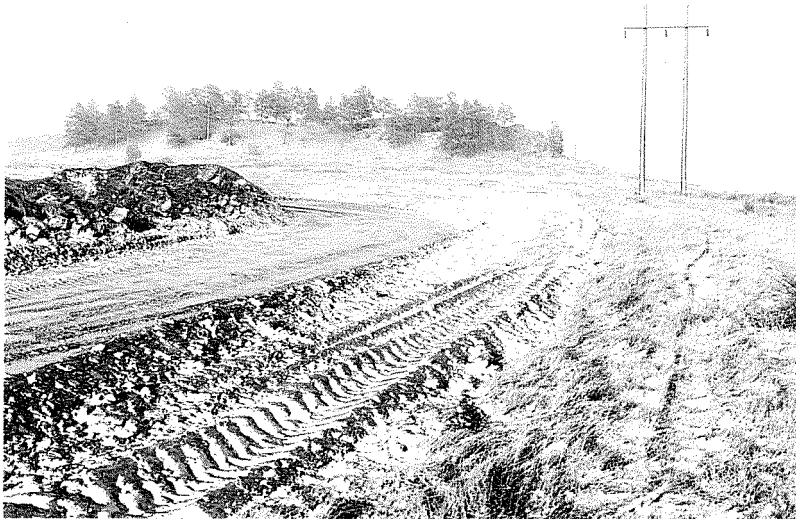
There is no dichotomy between the mineral and living. Such is the wisdom of all stories of creation. The Peabody Coal Co. made no acknowledgement of this when it removed coal from the earth, but the geology of its cut speaks of the Earth's anatomy. The Rosebud Formation, a 24-foot-thick seam of coal—the remains of an incalculable host of plants—is uncovered 100 feet below the surface.

That 100 feet, the “overburden,” is misnamed. The real overburden is three thousand years of human estrangement from nature, nurtured by bizarre fantasies of human identity. “Rosebud” could





Drilling and loading explosives for an overburden plant.



Mine road and power lines.

Coal storage area and railroad tipple.



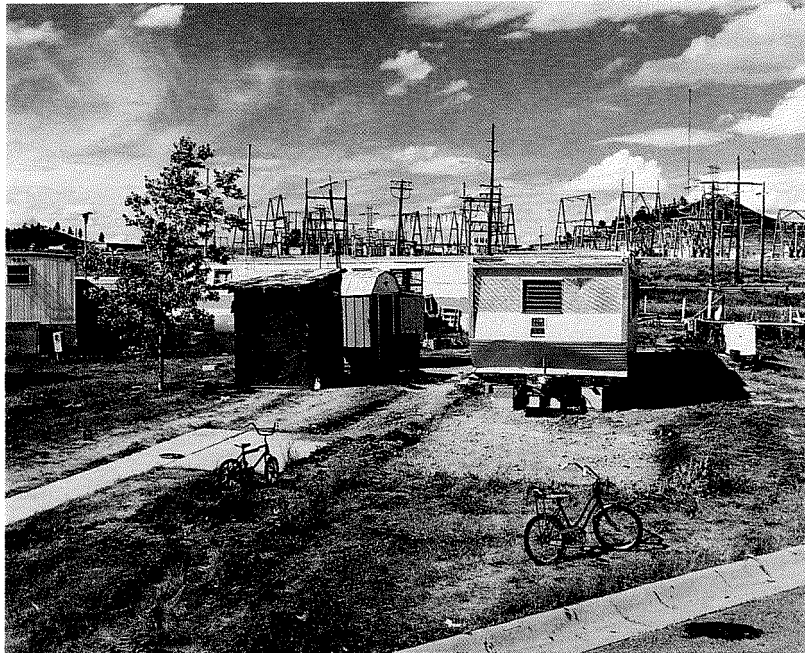
Abandoned strip mine and unreclaimed mine land.

Stockpiling topsoil and subsoil, new mine area.



Unreclaimed mine land.

Burtco RV Court and power switching yard.



Abandoned trailer space off State Highway 39.



In the pit, after a coal blast.

not be a more ironic name, for the whole black mass is mummified plants that once swayed in the surge of a tidewater sea covering the center of the continent.

More than any other understanding it offers the perspective of time. At this under-surface, sixty thousand times a thousand years ago, a swamp hid the last dinosaur bones, now visible again. Below this cadaverous mass, tan and gray sandstones and mudstones that give much so of the color to Hanson's photographs were accumulating when something monstrous struck the planet.

Hidden in these gray rocks is a thin layer of iridium dust, the remains of the impact that changed the history of life. Dust, blasted into the sky, surrounded the Earth for months. In this twilight the plants died, dragging their animal dependents into oblivion with them. A minor scavenger form survived, giving rise to the birds. And within the ecological vacuum, our furry quadruped ancestors rummaged in the ark, eking out their survival on the bodies of worms and bugs.

When the Rosebud was still a marsh of living sphagnum, the continents had not drifted apart and together were an island in a world ocean. On Pacific atolls, Margaret Mead once observed, an island is the symbol of limits. On

Pacific atolls islanders know about bounds and have a sense of scale in their affairs. Seen from space, Earth is an island. That view is surreal like Hanson's photographs and is less a staircase to new frontiers or a means of dismissing the Earth than an effort at insight, a prelude to recovery, a reminder of our limits.

Like space travel, the surrealist vision trods upon dangerous ground, for, as Sontag says, it is a callous denial of the passion of lives lived and a celebration of forms, postures and compositions. The visual allure of photographs like Hanson's is addictive, says Sontag, and can turn us into image junkies lusting after "an amorous relation, which is based on how something looks" instead of what it means.

But risk can have its rewards. If we can avoid translating Colstrip's awesome forms into admired geometry we may see beyond either forms or pictures. Hanson's lens is sharper than blades of bulldozers and giant shovels, for it enters our heads to open seams, to look for grounding. (Where has the acid rain from the 133 million tons of coal removed from Colstrip fallen? How many shabby ex-mining towns are there, and what living death haunts them?)

In inviting us to look in order to perceive truly,

Hanson traffics in the colors of poisonous effluents, like a shaman curing with the glands of toads. He asks us boldly to exercise a kind of hue-delight as a means rather than an end. At first we are reminded of the mineral brilliance of Roman Vishniac's microphotographs of translucent slices of minerals, at the other end of the size scale. But the conjunction of detailed captions and the series of images links Hanson's work with the narrative arts instead of painting. It is *Our Story*, a recovery of social and ecological sooth too long repressed by the industrial-technical era. We are awakened to patterns collecting us in a violent tale of time and place.

Notes

1. Erhard Rostlund, "The Changing Forest Landscape," *Landscape* 4:2, 1955.
2. *Saturday Review*, April 8, 1967.