

UC Berkeley

Places

Title

Cultivated Landscapes: Lyle Gomes [Portfolio]

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/8mw4k91x>

Journal

Places, 12(3)

ISSN

0731-0455

Author

Gomes, Lyle

Publication Date

1999-04-01

Peer reviewed

CULTIVATED LANDSCAPES: LYLE GOMES

Mankind's timeless struggle for harmonious coexistence with nature is the inspiration for my photography. My San Francisco Presidio photographs study a landscape completely redefined, during the last two decades of the nineteenth century, to accommodate the needs of the U.S. Army.

I was drawn to this pragmatic place for its beauty, curious arrangement of trees and strong human presence—a presence, although quite strange at times, that never seems to be at odds with its surroundings. Unlike the natural forests that we carve up, this city woodland is woven into an urban existence. Little within the Presidio is native. Designed with utility in mind, the human element within the Presidio is often awkward, occasionally delicate, sometimes mysterious, but always practical.

Photographing the Presidio, I became interested in how, when and why those trees appeared and by whom they were planted, and found an 1883 Army document, Plan for the Cultivation of Trees upon the Presidio Reservation. As a result, my artistic process has changed: I now engage in traditional research that examines both the cultural influences and individuals responsible for a particular altered landscape. Historically informed and sensitive, I combine my artistic vision with the intellectual roots of a place.

Following my work at the Presidio, I began to research and photograph English landscape parks and gardens—a major influence on the Presidio forests and American landscape architecture. As an American whose cultural bond with nature is through preservation, I am intrigued with the attitudes of a British culture whose relationship to the land is through its cultivation. A 1998 Fulbright Scholar Award has allowed me to expand my photographic investigation of this completely cultivated landscape.

SPECIAL PHOTOGRAPHS OF ORDINARY PLACES

Photographers who choose their own subjects can bring a passion to their work that sets it apart from the high craftsmanship of assigned work. They have something urgent to show us and take pictures that are skillful but whose point is not cleverness, pictures whose subjects are not exotic but ordinary, places that are often overlooked but well within our experience.

When we consider the task of photographing a place, we can easily conclude that doing so is impossible. There are things we want the camera to do that it is always proving itself incapable of doing. Photographers with a special passion for their subject, limited by the same envelope that constricts us all, know their medium well enough to use it simply and directly, without distractions.

The point of an exciting photograph is not the data that it provides, nor its ability to duplicate our experience, but the tension between what we know and what the photograph says. Neither the significance of the subject nor the artfulness of the picture can stand alone. The test of the medium is not whether photographers fill the demands we make of them, but whether their pictures make a strong claim on our attention—thereafter coloring our understanding and experience of its subject.

With this issue, Places publishes the second in a series of photo essays in which the subjects are chosen by photographers. Our purposes are pleasure and discovery: to give readers the pleasure of seeing the simple, articulate language of photographers who have a passion for their subjects, and to call attention to new aspects of ordinary or overlooked places, or even places that have already been photographed so often that we assume, perhaps wrongly, that they are already familiar.

—Cervin Robinson



Trail Fork, San Francisco Presidio, 1990



Double Arrow, San Francisco Presidio, 1990



Cypress Triad, San Francisco Presidio, 1993



Common Ground, San Francisco Presidio, 1993

... Man is a part of nature, and nature is always claiming what he does for herself. Landscape-art welcomes man as introducing the momentous human story into the spectacle which it is her function to interpret.

Josiah Gilbert

Landscape in Art before Claude and Salvator, 1885



Presidio Forest & Flag, 1993



Eternal Stand, San Francisco Presidio, 1993



Coast Live Oak and Ivy, 1992



Fallen Limb, San Francisco Presidio, 1992