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P O R T F O L I O

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PICTURING YOSEMITE



Carleton E. Watkins,
Piwyac, Vernal Fall, 300 Ft.
Courtesy of the Fraenkel
Gallery, San Francisco.

Perhaps an artist's biggest challenge is to picture a place of overpowering beauty.

At Yosemite's panoramic Inspiration Point, one's outstretched arms seemingly can embrace the entire Valley. Measuring one mile wide, one mile deep and seven miles long, the Valley is buttressed on one side by El Capitan, adorned on the other by Bridalveil Fall, threaded down the middle by the Merced River and capped on the end by the magnificence of Half Dome. Yet, given these familiar landmarks and understandable dimensions, Yosemite Valley has consistently dominated its artists.

Nevertheless, photography has proven the most important creative medium to Yosemite, both in its preservation as well as its interpretation.

Bringing Yosemite to the Rest of the World

Nineteenth-century arm-chair travelers were a large and lucrative audience for photographers. Everyone wanted to see what America really looked like. Each new discovery added to the excitement and the belief that America, with such splendid natural wonders, was surely the future of the world.

No greater glory was revealed than the Valley. Dr. Lafayette Bunnell, a

member of a 1851 exploration party, wrote:

"None but those who have visited this most wonderful Valley, can even imagine the feelings with which I looked upon the view that was there presented. The grandeur of the scene was but softened by the haze that hung over the Valley—light as gossamer—and by the clouds which partially dimmed the higher cliffs and mountains. This obscurity of vision but increased the awe with which I beheld it, and, as I looked a peculiarly exalted sensation seemed to fill my whole being."¹

Writers such as Bunnell weren't speechless, yet they told us little of Yosemite. Clearly, a great religious experience awaited the visitor, an event that could not be described. Words could only relate the gut reaction of exultation.

With serendipitous coincidence, exploration of the American West began at the same time photographers were discovering the great possibilities of the medium. Photographs poured back east and to Europe. New settlers made their way to California, no longer with the nightmare of the unknown, but with visions of real places.

Carleton Watkins, who arrived in 1861, was Yosemite's first visual poet. Not only was he aesthetically able for the severe challenge of Yosemite, but

he had great technical courage. His equipment included a mammoth plate camera, 30 inches square and a yard deep, that produced negatives (and therefore prints) as large as 18 by 22 inches. With these grand photographs the monumental character of Yosemite was displayed with the impressive dignity and size formerly the province of painters.

Photographers' expeditions to remote sites such as Yosemite were gambles because they made negatives on very breakable glass and had to travel over rough trails, ascending and descending boulders and cliffs to obtain the transcendent view.

Watkins was not afraid to let light describe the scene. Anonymous mountains that melt one into another in the work of a lesser artist acquire distinct personalities, separated by light and shadow.

His photographs speak of the object cleanly seen and then embellished with richly embroidered detail. Everything within the frame has been considered: the sharp silhouettes of trees, the reflections on the Merced River, the scoop of the Valley floor, the sharp tilt of ridgelines. He purposefully layers his compositions with contrasting textures: pine needles massed before smooth rock, hard granite cliffs against the smoky-hued



George Fiske,
*Jack Frost's Visit to
Yosemite*, c. 1885.
Courtesy of the
Center for Creative
Photography,
University of Arizona.

Eadweard Muybridge,
*Valley of the Yosemite from
Mosquito Camp, No. 22, 1872.*
Courtesy of the Department
of Special Collections,
University Research Library,
University of California,
Los Angeles.

Valley floor, topped by a
featureless, pale sky. On
rare occasions, Watkins
could be lushly romantic,
as shown in "Piwyac,
Vernal Falls, 300 ft."

A selection of Watkins' photographs was used to convince Congress of Yosemite's importance.² In a landmark 1864 decision, President Lincoln signed the Yosemite Act, granting

the Valley and the Mariposa Grove of Big Trees to the California "to be held for public use, resort and recreation."

Eadweard Muybridge arrived in the Valley in 1867, worked hard, and returned to his San Francisco studio with 260 glass plates.³ Many were stereographs, which are nearly twin photographs



mounted on a card and observed through a viewer to create a three-dimensional effect.

Most photographers of the day, including Watkins, made at least two exposures of each scene, one by large view camera and one with a stereo camera. The stereograph, not the fine photograph, was the photographer's bread and butter. Even today, stereographs by Muybridge or Watkins are still inexpensive while their mammoth plate prints are worth many thousands of dollars.

Muybridge, also using the mammoth plates, exhibited his work in San Francisco and became the next Yosemite sensation. He was a perfectionist, notorious for cutting down trees if they cluttered his proposed image. His Yosemite was always a thing of beauty, ornamented with detail. He did not take the scene whole and capture it on his glass plate; rather, he distilled an essential mood or object.

Just 20 years later, George Fiske photographed a familiar Yosemite, burgeoning with people and business. In 1880 he became the first photographer to live there year-round.

Perhaps because he was not as young as Watkins or Muybridge when they first encountered the Valley, Fiske rested his tripod on flat ground. He produced

pictures on the same trails where tourists hiked, and sold them what they had seen. Watkins and Muybridge had scrambled like mountain goats, obtaining views most mortals could never personally experience. Fiske made the first extensive study of Yosemite in winter, including lovely images of snow-laden branches ("Jack Frost's Visit to Yosemite").

Painters were slow to arrive in Yosemite; surely this was the first time photographers had co-opted such a great, new subject. Albert Bierstadt, Thomas Hill, William Keith and Thomas Moran, the last of the great American romantic landscapists, painted Yosemite with vigor. But theirs was a dying vision: The new way of seeing was sharp, real and true. They painted sharply, but ignored the latter qualities.

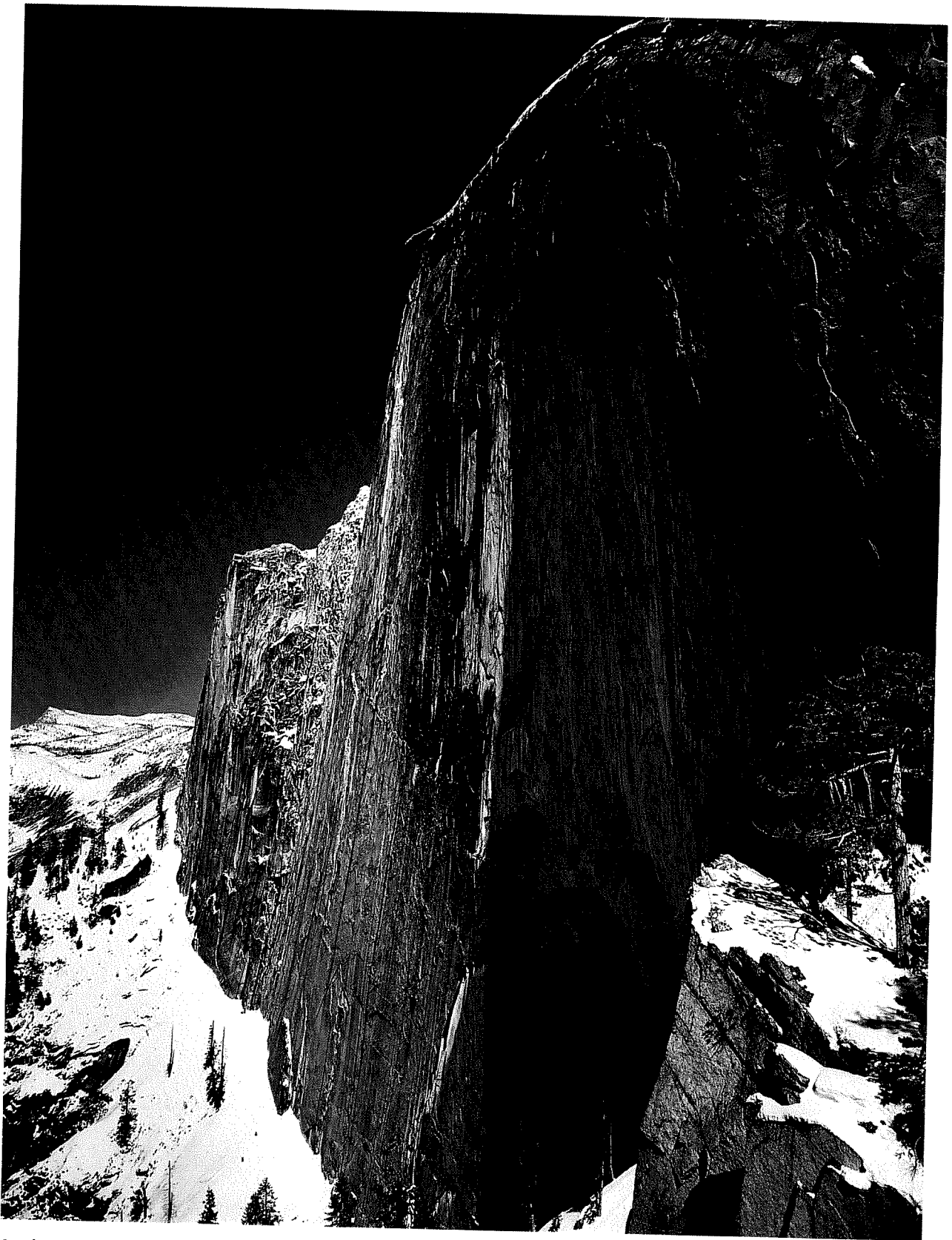
All who have followed have paled next to those early, energetic, though largely unsuccessful efforts. When Georgia O'Keeffe visited Yosemite in 1938, she refused to paint or even sketch.⁴

Ansel Adams: Seeing through the Soul

Ansel Adams is known as the consummate artist who gave Yosemite full expression. Baptized by voluntary immersion in the natural scene, Adams matured at the knee of Half Dome. Upon arrival in Yosemite with his parents for a vacation in 1916, he was a high-strung and sickly 14 year old. Within the Valley and its surrounding Sierra, he found mental and physical health.

To record their vacation, his parents gave him his first camera, a simple Kodak Box Brownie. The rapport between Adams, camera and Yosemite was immediate. He returned to Yosemite every summer, soon spending as much of the year there as in his hometown, San Francisco. Photography and Yosemite, always together and never apart, evolved from hobby to job to becoming the point upon which he centered. Photography made sense of life.

Over many years of dedicated work, Adams learned as complete a technical mastery of the medium as possible. Combining superb technique with a natural eye for composition and a soul devoted to beauty and the American landscape, on April 17, 1927, Adams took that one huge step from craftsman to artist. On that day he made "Monolith, the Face of Half Dome."



Ansel Adams,
*Monolith, The Face of
Half Dome, 1927.*

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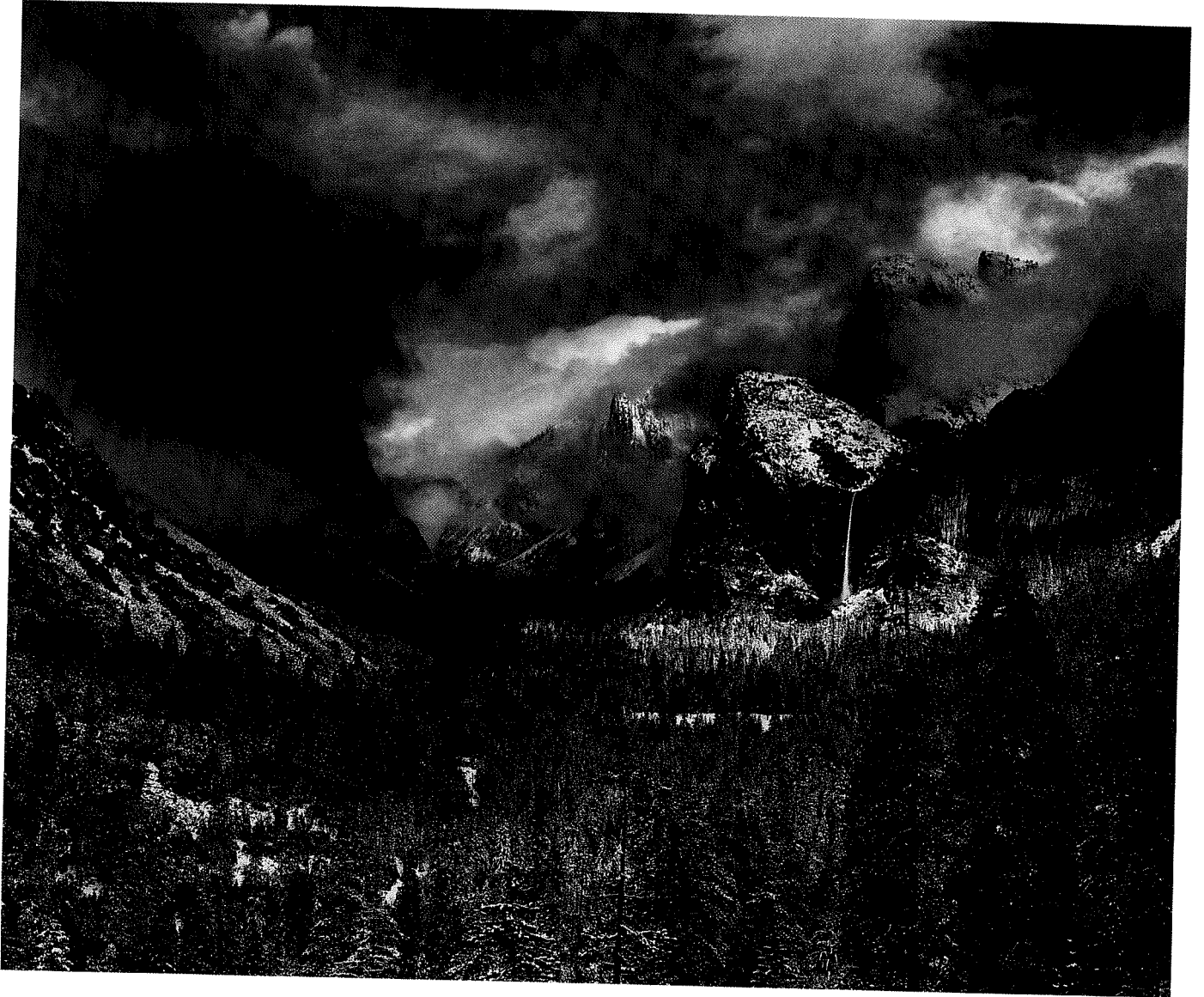
With “Monolith,” Adams stepped beyond traditional photographic boundaries, for his finished print is a lie. Just as those who first gazed on Yosemite were at a loss to truly describe it, so was Adams. His early efforts yielded photographs straightly seen and predictably composed. But he knew these fell far short of the great feelings he had for this landscape.

So, instead of the authentic Half Dome, he creates for us his equivalent emotional response. This could only be achieved by manipulating the negative itself, in this case by the use of a red filter. The sky was no longer light and bright but a black-velvet background for the smooth outline of the shattered, flat-planed face of Half Dome, rising with great energy from the snowy shoulders of its surroundings. “Visualization” is the term Adams used to describe the act of determining how the final print will look before the exposure is made. Now we see not with our eyes, but with his soul.

Adams’ vision of Yosemite expanded. He first photographed objects—a mountain, a waterfall—then became increasingly interested in the larger landscape. With technical mastery, his images were abundantly detailed, urging the viewer to draw closer,

look into shadows and study the sun’s revelations across granite and water. Though he preferred “cropping” images in the camera, it was often necessary to trim the edges of prints to achieve the clean borders that he demanded.

Adams traveled to the East and to Europe, but he photographed best in the land he knew intimately. He never betrayed the beauty and love he found in Yosemite.



Ansel Adams,

Clearing Winter Storm,

Yosemite National Park,

c. 1937.

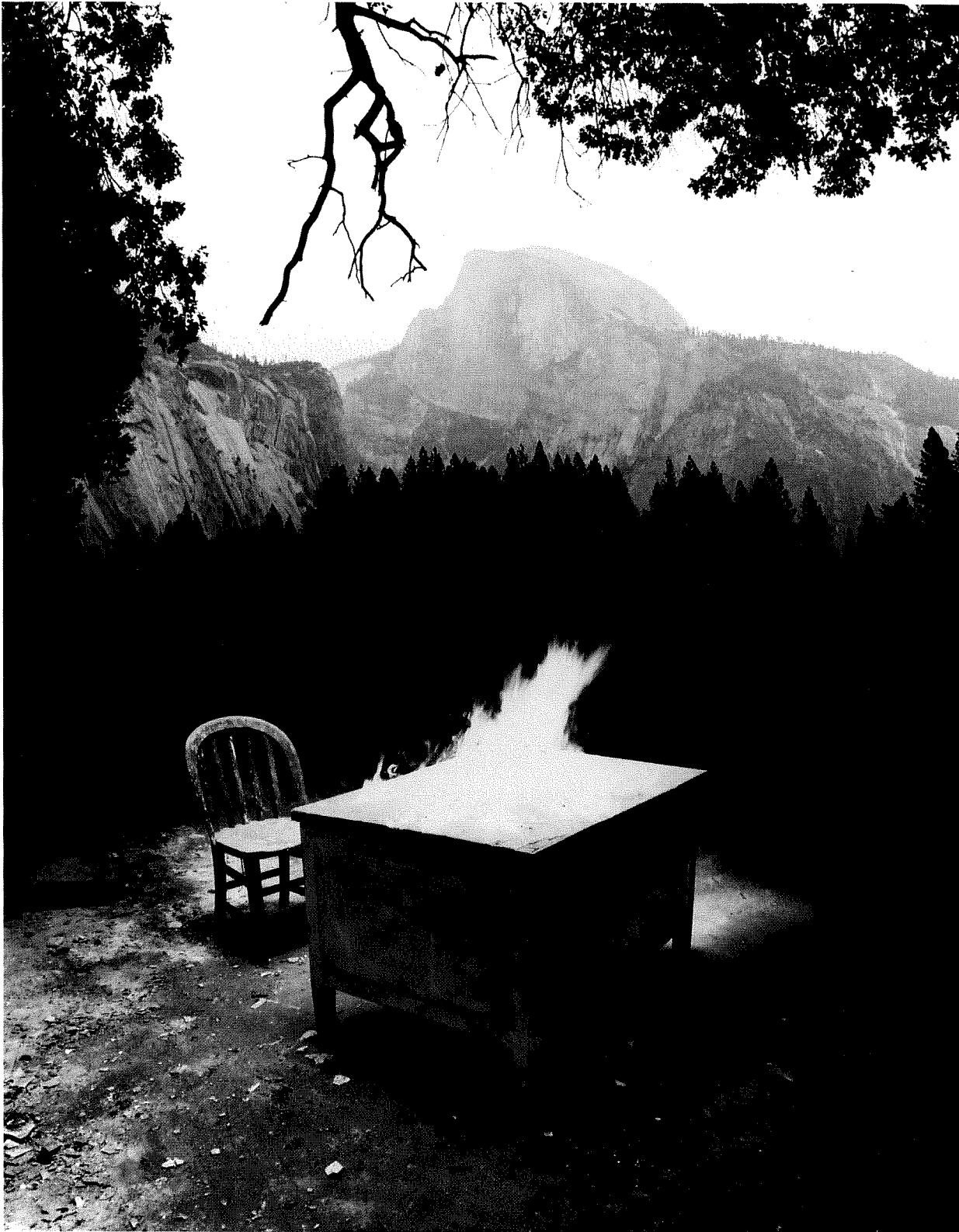
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Jerry N. Uelsmann,

Untitled.

© 1989.



The Search for New Forms and Emphasis

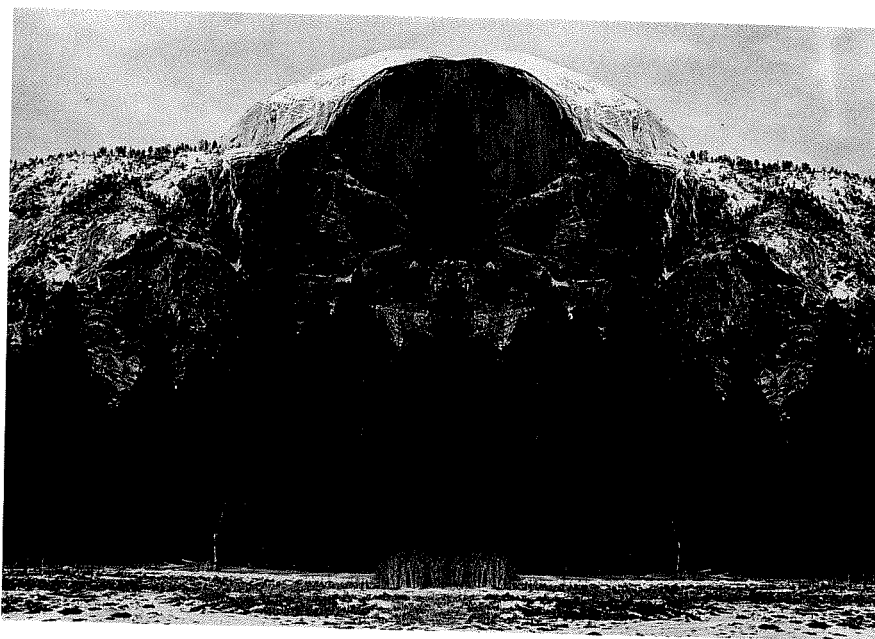
Today, Adams' vision continues to dominate Yosemite photography. "New" work is often made in Adams' tripod holes. While many noted photographers have worked in Yosemite, most minds are overwhelmed with a rerun of famous images, paralyzing a new way of seeing. The best of Yosemite's contemporary photographers acknowledge the challenges of Adams' work, yet find the subject matter of such compelling interest they can't leave it alone.

The following selected photographers, though they represent a visual diversity, have much in common: Most studied or worked with Adams, all share a commitment to fine print quality, and each has worked over many years in Yosemite, though it is only one aspect of their work. While this group works in black-and-white, color is the current choice of many other photographers, although color brings with it difficulties. Yosemite is only quietly colorful; it looks best in black and white and shades of gray.

Several of these photographers show us a Yosemite quite different from Adams' version. Jerry Uelsmann's photographs are fantasies fabricated from reality, the product of his quirky and humorous mind. He is well known for his photographic con-

structions printed seamlessly from a number of negatives. With "Full Dome" he gives us what nature took away thousands of years ago.

Uelsmann's playfulness continues with his image of the ultimate ivory tower, "Untitled." A chair and desk are framed by the archetypical Yosemite



Jerry N. Uelsmann,
Full Dome.
© 1973.

scene: an underexposed Half Dome and trees. In contrast, the central scene of desk and chair glow with light from above. The chair is empty and pushed back from the desk, as if someone has just departed. Mystical vapors float upward from the desk's empty surface. This is a place of high energy, the source of which may be nature, itself, as portrayed by the lightning-shaped branch above the desk. What a place to work!

Bruce Davidson, in "Yosemite," lowers our gaze from the broad cliffs and waterfalls to the Valley floor, more specifically, the campgrounds of Yosemite. We focus upon man coming to dwell with nature unnaturally. The scene is littered with folding chairs, boxes, campers, cars and odd people—odd, because they appear tired and bored. The only hint that this could be a place of beauty are the trunks of

trees, cut off at the top by the photographer and spoiled at the bottom by the subjects and their stuff.

Ted Orland is not interested in pursuing the literal landscape. His "Campground Shadows," a scene of tents shadowed in a leafy bower, is glowing and tranquil. This camp is of another world than the campers in Davidson's "Yosemite." Here, peace can still be found.

Orland has fun with Yosemite. He brings to our attention the crazy juxtapositions we often miss, such as "One and a Half Domes" (page 3). A bear-proof garbage can becomes a manmade foil to nature's great Half Dome, suggesting the redundancy of one. We see what humans hath wrought. Orland hand-colors with garish hues the panoramic map in the foreground, teasing, "Can this be real?"

Bruce Davidson,
Yosemite, 1966.
© Magnum Photos, Inc.





Ted Orland,
Campground Shadows.
© 1978.

Tom Millea,
Yosemite.
© 1989.



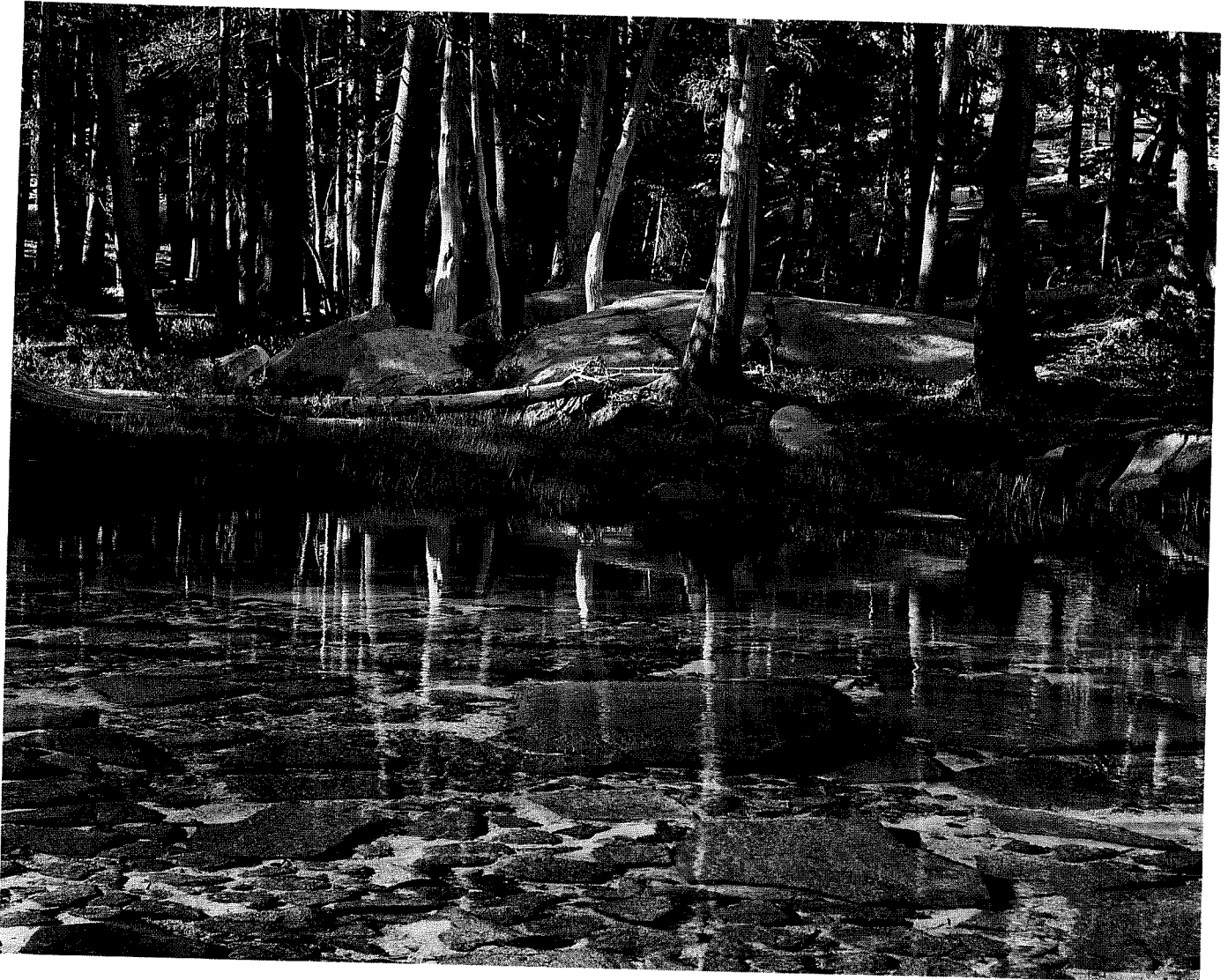
Tom Millea's work is intentionally precious. He uses an eight-by-ten-inch view camera, making only contact-size, platinum prints. Using a matte-surfaced, textured printing paper, Millea discards the importance of detail, instead emphasizing form and light.

Devil's Elbow is the popular swimming hole along the Merced River in Yosemite. In "Yosemite" a swimmer's head is radiantly centered in the purest of beams, body floating weightless, engulfed in the natural world. From Muybridge to Millea (and before and beyond), it is our dream to merge with light.

Many contemporary artists photograph Yosemite in a more conservative landscape tradition. Deep in the heart of Yosemite, near Mt. Ansel Adams, Jeff Nixon photographs where the water is still pure and the air is still crisp, just as when Adams first arrived

there in 1921. "Trees, Reflections, Lyell Fork of the Merced" is a hidden place of amazing tranquility, undisturbed by man or wind. Light and its many forms are masters of this scene: reflection, revelation, highlight and shadow.

Jeff Nixon,
Trees, Reflections, Lyell
Fork of the Merced.
© 1985.



John Sexton's Yosemite is serene, solitary, frozen at the moment of first or last light. He photographs before sunrise and after sunset, times most others ignore, calling these moments "the quiet light."⁵

Sexton's prints are exquisitely subtle. He is a master of Adams' zone system, but while Adams employed the full range of zones (from white to black and many grays in between), Sexton concen-

trates on the middle zones. His prints sing in the key of silver, with countless octaves of gray. Maximum visual disclosure is the result of Sexton's choice of low light and very long exposures.

In his photographs, Yosemite is a private retreat, a place of growth and renewal ("Pine Forest Detail"), a place where there is beauty in a simple, directly seen fern ("Fern and Log," page 23).

Alan Ross, one of the few undeterred in the post-Adams' era, responds to the grand landscape. His exultant photograph of sunrise in the Valley reveals a Yosemite finally dominated by outside forces—a magnificent cloudscape, as patterned and detailed as any granite rock face or cascading waterfall. But this is Yosemite, so perhaps this sky can only occur there in celebration with the land.

John Sexton,
Pine Forest Detail.
© 1980.



Alan Ross,
Light Storm.
© 1975.



Yosemite National Park's deepest meaning is as representative of all wilderness: the earth in its natural state, constant before and after humans. Yosemite reminds us that the world is beyond time as humans experience it, and that to be part of the infinite, even in some small way, is most reassuring.

Great works of art can serve as an archive of what was and bridge the space between each of us and the eternal. Artists visualize the essential qualities of this life and the world, leaving signposts for the way forward.

Notes

1. J. M. Hutchings, *In the Heart of the Sierras*. (Boston: W. H. Thompson and Co., 1887).

2. Shirley Sargent, *Yosemite: The First One Hundred Years, 1890-1990*. (Yosemite National Park: Yosemite Park and Curry Co., 1988).

3. Ted Orland, *Man and Yosemite*. (Santa Cruz: The Image Continuum Press).

4. Ansel Adams with Mary Street Alinder, *Ansel Adams: An Autobiography*. (Boston: New York Graphic Society).

5. John Sexton, *Quiet Light*. (Boston: Bulfinch Press, 1990).