

ARTILLERY



Empire Falling 4 (2013)

WHERE THE FOCUS FALLS (1) – MORE FROM FOTOFOCUS 2014 (4)

Elena Dorfman, David Benjamin Sherry, and visiting icons

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The parallel is obvious (and be assured there's nothing personal to it). Although I did not have an opportunity to interview [Kevin Moore](#) while in Cincinnati, it was clear both from his remarks in various gallery talks and conversations and the exhibitions themselves, that the variable, continuously shifting focus was itself a theme and preoccupation of this edition of the Biennial.



David Benjamin Sherry, "Crown of the Continent, Montana, 2011"

One such focus was land and landscape, in the most broadly encompassing sense, including the marks left upon it by both nature and human intervention. I mentioned earlier a conversation between **David Benjamin Sherry** and [Chicago's **Art Institute** curator] **Elizabeth Siegel** from which I took no more than a fragment. As that conversation was breaking up, I had the opportunity to meet **Elena Dorfman**, a Los Angeles-based artist who had just finished her own conversation with (wouldn't you know it?) **21c** curator **Alice Gray Stites**. Dorfman had already been in Ohio for some time (for among other things, as I understood it, the installation of some of her own work at Cincinnati's 21c, which she supervised). Dorfman was familiar with the entire tri-state Ohio-Kentucky-Indiana region, where she had shot most of the landscapes collected in a book for which Kevin Moore wrote the introduction, ***Empire Falling***. The scarification of Eastern and Midwestern landscapes by mining and industrial effluents is fairly well-documented; but the accompanying urban and built environments left their own marks beyond city limits and factory enclosures. Dorfman traveled extensively through the region, photographing abandoned quarries, their built and organic outcroppings and surrounding landscapes, interstitial foliage, and the graffiti and other marks left by fresh human hands—reflecting further cycles of abandonment and intervention.



Elena Dorfman, "Empire Falling 8," 2012



Elena Dorfman, "Empire Falling 6," 2012

Landscape is really only the beginning here. Dorfman's approach is almost narrative, meditative; reflecting multiple exposures, perspectives, the passage of time—as rendered both physically and atmospherically, and in her process itself. The exposures are fitted and layered, collaged and tapestried together into what amount to an almost elegiac reverie on the geophysical and biospheric metamorphosis wrought by human presence, exploitation and abandonment. Catching a second wind after a late evening, I had an opportunity to view some of her work (chromogenic prints mounted on aluminum) included in the 21c's own *Hybridity* show. There was an almost lenticular quality to the works on view. They seemed to morph subtly as you looked at them or walked past them. The earth does not give up its secrets any more easily than its riches. You sink into the evanescent pigments even as you lift your eyes away.



Edward Weston, "China Cove, Point Lobos," 1946



David Benjamin Sherry, "Does Anyone Know We Are Out Here On The Waves?"

David Benjamin Sherry's show, *Western Romance*, represented a different kind of narrative—consciously reconstructed and self-consciously iconic. The 'western' presents its own implicit assumptions and claims upon the land: simultaneously idealistic and proprietary; alternately picturesque and willfully abstracted. Moore thought to include some reference points in this odyssey, and he assembled some notable examples from local collections, including a number of **Edward Westons**, a couple of gorgeously abstract **Minor Whites** and a rare **Carleton Watkins** photograph, "The Yosemite Falls (1865-66). In short, these are monumental landscapes (or details of landscapes), (re-)appropriated by means similar to those used by Weston, Adams, et al. (large format, deep focus) and abstracted chromatically by traditional darkroom color filtration or chromagenic printing. A magnificent cranberry-magenta study of eddying waves and swirls of water at the Point Reyes shoreline ("Does Anyone Know We Are Out Here On The Waves?") is beautifully contrasted with Edward Weston's 1946 black-and-white photograph, "China Cove, Point Lobos." His dusty orange hued study of large rocks resembling a listing huddle of shrouds and prostrated forms under a pitiless sky is beautifully pitched between Weston's 1931 detail of an "Eroded Rock" and Minor White's 1957 "Metal Ornament, Pultneyville, NY."



David Benjamin Sherry, "All the Words Float in Sequence" (2014)

There are more distinctly personal abstractions (e.g., the photo with mixed media, "Untitled (Sand 2)" and "Jade Trails."). But the larger magenta and yellow-tinted rock and water studies make the point of our dubious 'claim' to the 'western romance' more effectively. A little idealism can be a dangerous thing.