

distractions

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Ted Orland set out across country in his red bus intent on capturing a series of portraits of the American persona. Instead, he wound up with a series of "20th century landscapes": America seen from the freeway. His show is currently on exhibit at the Photography at Oregon Gallery in the University Museum of Art.

For Orland, in his first year as a photography professor at the University, it is first showing here.

The beginnings of this group of related images evolved out of his journey to do a workshop in North Carolina. Planning to drive cross-country, Orland thought that "getting there ought to be half the fun." Since he had done very little portraiture in the past, Orland purchased a camera suitable for close-ups and loaded up his bus, "Photon".

Orland was intent on capturing American faces and bodies, but through a serendipity of sorts he found a new subject to focus on. "The few extra feet of height in the bus gave me a perspective that made all the difference in the world," he said. Instead of portraits, he found the environs of interstate highways provided a perfectly shallow field of vision for his new camera — a view that was enhanced by the layering effect of his 127mm lens.

Admittedly a "closet romantic," Orland went against the grain and chose not to do the obligatory "rape of the land" photos. He looked instead for those points where an unconscious equilibrium had been reached between humanity and nature.

"The guard rail, the cut and fill, the fences, a frontage road, or telephone wires and railroad tracks receding into fields and woods appealed to a sense of neatness and order. . . . but it's not these specific things that the artist or photographer is really thinking about. It's what they

photo by mark pynes

T E D ORLAND AND THE QUEST FOR THE 20TH CENTURY LANDSCAPE

represent that's interesting: the intangibles that live in the spaces between objects — things like love, or silence, or awe."

Capturing these scenes, however,

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posed some problems. Highway patrolmen stopped Orland more than once. "In most states it's illegal to stop on the freeway unless it's an emergency, so I had to work fast," he said. "Most of the photographs were taken during only two or three minutes of stopping time."

Because the photos had to be taken from a tripod, shots had to be set up quickly. "My main problem was in avoiding getting rear-ended,

since I only drove 50 miles an hour . . . and even that's a little too fast when you're translating what you see in color into subtler tones of black and white."

Precise in composition, the photos are the result of this ability to transpose reality into a black and white world with discrimination and agility. They are subtle gauze-like images that reverse the traditional process of blackness decorated with white and gray. Orland conceptualizes a field of whiteness and embellishes it with details of dark tone. His image of a sun's last rays touching cloud wisps in Wyoming is an example of this minimalism. At first glance, one is not sure if there is any image at all.

Each image is an impression of formalized static beauty, composed of elegant lace gray. From a casual perspective they possess no disturbing elements, no sense of dissonance. They are so clean as to seem foreign, almost alien, as with the photo of Orland atop his bus: Death Valley in the distance, shadows in the foreground, the scene resembles a post-card from another planet.

Aside from this surreal quality, there is an underlying content that is captivating. It is a probing questioning of our constipated American vision. Orland removes the plain and ordinary from our brainmills and gives us a fresh look at the world become invisible.

In this new series Orland creates wordless telegrams of dispassionate views. While he emphasizes that he's "not out to educate the world," he *does* teach us something with this enigmatic embroidery of light and paper. He gives us the opportunity to touch reality with someone else's fingers, to be connected formally only in seeing, leaving our imaginations unbound and free for a flight of fancy.

by tony budd

Fantasy games