Place Above All Else: Laura McPhee's *River of No Return*

JOANNE LUKITSH

Irrigator's Tarp Directing Water, Fourth of July Creek Ranch, Custer County, Idaho, 2004

The azure cloth is an irrigator's tarp laid on the ground to direct water flowing from an irrigation ditch into the pasture. The water soaks the earth, nurturing the abundant white flowers and yellow grasses growing along a rail fence. The intense color draws a viewer's eye to the tarp, then to the angled lines of high mountains in the distance, and, finally, to a foreboding crease of darkening clouds. In the middle ground the rain falls, evaporating before it reaches the valley floor. The tarp, the wooden rails, and the fence posts are diminished in scale by the imposing mountain range and sky. This contrast of small but insistent signs of human activity against a backdrop of snowcapped mountains, great vaulted skies, and long plateaus invokes a chronicle of images of the American West, images drawn from painting and photography, Westerns and Western literature.

On the day in 2004 when Laura McPhee made this photograph, rain did not reach earth, and it hadn't for some time. Sagebrush, visible behind the fence, encroaches on the pasture. Sage prefers dry ground but does not nourish cattle. The irrigator's tarp, placed to fan water into this field to discourage sage and encourage grass, is a tiny, apparently benign gesture in the house of cards that McPhee suggests as a model to describe our relationship to the natural world. In this photograph, the first in the visual narrative of *River of No Return*, everything depends on a blue tarp.

In McPhee's photograph *Cyanide Evaporation Pool by the River of No Return Wilderness, Grouse Creek Lead, Silver and Gold Mine, Yankee Fork, Idaho, 2005* (page 19) the subject is the cleanup after a mining operation—in this case disposing of cyanide by evaporation. In the image, white jets of mist drawn from the pool make fountains of chemicals and water. The dispersed vapors may move as widely in the atmosphere as the lead, silver, and gold extracted from the Grouse Creek Mine travel to manufacturing plants, and then to consumers, across the surface of the globe.

The frail jets ceaselessly filling the air with a haze of cyanide solution diluted by rain and snowfall are works of human design, recent additions to a long history of mining in the region. This human endeavor, though more technical than placing a tarp, appears equally inadequate to the task at hand and as dependent for success on the vagaries of wind and weather.

Landscapes, as environmental theorist and historian John Brinckerhoff Jackson long argued, are never natural, because they depict human meanings in the environment.[1] At the beginning of the twenty-first century, the scale of human transformations of the global environment is so great that these changes exceed any single mode of knowledge, or unique visionary insight. Yet the need for imaginatively understanding the interdependence of human and natural forces has concomitantly never been greater. One way of encouraging this understanding has been to recognize the importance of place, to learn how the network of history, property, culture, and personalities meshes with local material conditions and ecosystems.[2] McPhee's *River of No Return* is a photographic narrative of people and nature in a remote region of central Idaho, a place she describes as a version of America in microcosm, an area she explored for more than five years. *River of*

No Return is not, however, a report from the field, nor do her photographs make any pretense to neutrality or objectivity. Instead, through attention to structure and the accretion of telling detail, McPhee weaves a finely observed story. Her work requires the viewer to draw upon his or her own knowledge and imagination to understand the layered and intricate relations of people and nature in this environment.

Linking the landscape images in *River of No Return* are photographs of people. Most often appearing is a young girl named Mattie, repeatedly photographed standing in the doorway of the barn near her house (*Mattie with a Bourbon Red Turkey, Laverty Ranch, Custer County, Idaho, November 2004* [page 9] and *Mattie in Her Eighth Grade Graduation Dress Holding a Robin's Nest, Laverty Ranch, Custer County, Idaho, 2004* [page 59]). In the story told in *River of No Return*, Mattie is the central character, a native of Idaho during a specific time, and also an iconic figure, a twenty-first-century alternative to the cowboy of Western myth. The full-length format of these images invokes the formality of vernacular studio portraiture, except for the dust and hay on the floor and the implied presence of animals and farm implements in the cavernous space of the barn behind her (*Mattie with a Plymouth Barred Rock Hen, Laverty Ranch, Custer County, Idaho, June 2004* [page 5]). Mattie's clothes—jeans and flip-flops, a hunting jacket, a graduation dress—refer to her activities at home and at school, while she holds birds (a laying hen, a dead turkey destined for Thanksgiving dinner, a species of a woodpecker), and a nest with robin eggs, in gestures of offering to a viewer. The birds become metaphors for human relations to nature, and the photographs remind the viewer that beside such metaphors exist tangible experiences of birds as pets, as food, and as sources of feathers for adornment. *Mattie in Her Grandmother's Wedding Dress, Laverty Ranch, Custer County, Idaho, May, 2005* (page 71) directly invokes the history of her family's past and the prospects of her own future. Mattie's outlook, as our own, is bound up in environmental politics and processes—many of which are implied in the landscape she considers as she looks through the barn doors to the valley around her.

The environmental writer and theorist Rebecca Solnit observed that American landscape photography "went from the pre-historic to the a-historic," or, in other words, from the purely practical to the romantic.[3] Photography in the nineteenth-century American West typically used large-scale plates, with their extraordinary precision of detail, to describe the potential for social and commercial developments, while modernist photographers envisioned a virgin wilderness far from contemporary life. In the 1970s a number of photographers—several of them affiliated with the landmark "New Topographics" exhibition in 1975, and others with the Rephotographic Survey—made the American West the subject of their revisionist and self-reflective practice of image making. Challenging modernist visions and reflecting upon the procedures of earlier survey photographers, this generation of photographers of the West labored to evaluate the nature of photographic documentation and also the capacities for landscape images to represent the intensified development and suburbanization of the West at the end of the twentieth century. Artists such as Robert Adams, Mark Klett, Richard Misrach, Linda Connor, Barbara Bosworth, and Frank Gohlke have now worked in the region for decades, and their images have reframed expectations of how landscapes represent the actions of people.[4]

McPhee's photographs in *River of No Return* are connected to these precedents, but she also extends them. In *River of No Return*, McPhee photographed across genres, including portrait, interior, and still life, to tell a story that coalesces not only in landscape and its links to the world at large, but also in intimate descriptions of lives lived in this specific place. While her photographs compel attention through their use of light, color, form, and detail, the narrative of the book is her own invention. Without irony, McPhee acknowledges that a comprehensive documentation of the conditions in the Sawtooth Valley (and by implication anywhere) is impossible to relate. Instead, she uses photography to provoke the viewer into considering larger truths, by questioning what it is that they see in her narrative. Reading her photographs against historical precedent for photographic images of the West shows how her approach is related to these, but also how her estimation of contemporary environmental politics in the valley led to an alternate understanding of the genre and the medium.

In 1867, Carleton E. Watkins made the photograph *Cape Horn near Celilo* using a mammoth plate view camera, resulting in an image

larger than 15 × 20 in. Watkins earlier devised this format to produce images of the unique sequoia trees and rock formations of Yosemite as well as photographs of the enormous gold mining settlements north of San Francisco. He made *Cape Horn near Celilo* while following the routes of ships owned by the Oregon Steam Navigation Company as they plied the Columbia River. *Cape Horn* may well have been made on commission from the company and possibly was destined for exhibition in Watkins's San Francisco gallery.[5] The fact that *Cape Horn near Celilo* could be displayed either as an artistic view or as promotional imagery for a business speaks to the manner in which Watkins's sublime landscapes convey the power of nature as aesthetic experience and simultaneously celebrate its development as a resource. In spare, solid forms of rock, sky, river, and the converging orthogonal lines of the tracks, Watkins set the railroad's quick transit through space to the horizon against the unhurried movement of the Columbia River and its imperceptible erosion of the surrounding valley.

McPhee's *One Car Passing, Valley Road, Sawtooth Valley, Idaho, 2003* (page 3), taken on her first stay in Idaho in 2003, is amusing in its manner of measuring historical change: nineteenth-century railroads and rivers have been succeeded by cars and trucks (and unseen airplanes) as the road—rather than the river—curves around property lines delineated by fence posts. Neither dirt track nor vehicle is clearly discernible in McPhee's photograph, only their essence as traces in the dust clouds, which bisect swaths of sage, warmed by the late day sun. The car on the Valley Road is passing through, an echo of McPhee's own relationship to the Sawtooth Valley, where she began this work as artist-in-residence for the Alturas Foundation in 2003. By 2008 McPhee had made nine trips to the Sawtooth Valley. The Salmon River runs near the Fourth of July Creek Ranch, where McPhee often stayed, and numerous creeks run from the mountains to the river through ranches in Custer and Blaine Counties.

With little previous experience photographing the American West, McPhee drew on family stories about her great-grandmother, an intrepid woman who had left her husband and taken her children to live in a succession of western mining towns in the early years of the twentieth century. Imagining her grandmother, who had often recounted tales of childhood in the West, McPhee invented her own path to the area. A road sign, "Headwaters: The River of No Return,"

Carleton Watkins, *Cape Horn near Celilo*, 1867. Albumen silver print from glass negative, 15 3/4 × 20 5/8 in. (40 × 52.4 cm). The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Gilman Collection, Purchase, The Horace W. Goldsmith Foundation Gift through Joyce and Robert Menschel, 2005. Image © The Metropolitan Museum of Art

GRAVEDIGGERS CAME INTO THE VALLEY.
THEY DISINTERRED BODIES FROM THE FAMILY PLOTS
AND CARRIED THEM DOWN THE ROAD, GRAVESTONES AND ALL,
TOWARD NEW PLOTS THAT HAD BEEN PREPARED ON HIGHER GROUND.

THE BIG OAKS WERE CUT DOWN
CATTLE HAD RESTED IN THEIR SHADE FOR GENERATIONS.
ON OLD MAPS AND DEEDS THEY HAD SERVED AS LANDMARKS.

Dorothea Lange and Pirkle Jones, *Open Graves, Berryessa Valley, CA*, 1956.
Taken from *Aperture* 8:3 (1960)

marking the point where the Salmon River emerges, inspired the title. Historically, the stream's alternate name, "River of No Return," is said to refer to the fact that people in boats cannot travel back up the river once they have gone down.

Research provided clues for photographs, too: McPhee studied the social history and ecology of the region, information that shaped her curiosity about life in the valley. Through conversations with biologists, conservation professionals, mining engineers, and ranch hands, she pieced together an intricate understanding of the pressures and dilemmas facing this sparsely populated, widespread community of a few hundred individuals. Most crucially, she met a pair of scientists whose research on threatened and endangered Pacific salmon kept them in the valley, where they chose to raise their daughter, Mattie, on an isolated ranch.

In 1956 and 1957 the American social documentary photographers Dorothea Lange and Pirkle Jones visited the northern California agricultural town of Monticello and the surrounding Berryessa Valley. The United States Bureau of Reclamation had identified Berryessa as the site for a new dam, displacing its residents, and ending generations of building, farming, and community. Titled *Death of a Valley*, Lange and Jones's photo story appeared in 1960 in an issue of *Aperture* magazine, a publication dedicated to the exploration of photography as an art. Lange and Jones made their photographs to tell the story of the government's deliberate displacement of a community in order to flood the area behind a dam, and they identified with the people displaced by the project. Lange and Jones's dramatic and tersely captioned photographs of unearthed graves and felled trees were partisan images, recording a way of life literally in the process of being swept away.[6] Twenty-first-century conditions in the Sawtooth Valley in Idaho are different; the region is one of the least populated in the lower forty-eight states, and there is no pending government decision to uproot its comparatively few residents. Many of McPhee's photographs are concerned with the impact of dams on the wildlife of the region (and thus on humanity), attesting to the pervasiveness in the American West of damming rivers as, in large part, a strategy for organizing water into energy and, by implication, capital.

McPhee's photographs participate in Lange and Jones's tradition of artistic reportage, but without their advocacy for the powerless against the government. Instead, the multifaceted undertakings of scientists to mitigate the impact of dams on fish and animals are a contemporary outcome of policy that has allowed for the damming of every major river system in the lower forty-eight states. McPhee's images of the effects of dams range across artistic genres: from landscape (*Breached Dam at Sunbeam on the Salmon River, Custer County, Idaho, 2003* [page 67]) to close views of the salmon whose habitat has been disrupted (*Air Bladder of an Endangered Sockeye Salmon, Pettit Lake, Blaine County, Idaho, 2005* [page 64]), to studies of efforts to cope with deteriorating conditions for the fish (*Rob Trahant, Shoshone-Bannock Tribal Member, Counting Fish for Juvenile Chinook Salmon Survey, Valley Creek, Custer County, Idaho, 2004* [page 65]), to fantastic images—with disconcerting qualities of scale, color, and light—evoking the otherness of animals subjected to human scrutiny (*Endangered Sockeye Salmon Fry, Main Vat Room, Sawtooth Fish Hatchery, Custer County, Idaho, 2004* [page 60] and *Winter Sampling to Study Growth and Diet of Endangered Snake River Sockeye Salmon, Pettit Lake, Blaine County, Idaho, 2004* [page 63]). McPhee does not present in a heroic light these various and unlikely undertakings to preserve the salmon species; nor does she seek to engage the viewer in sympathizing with the plight of the fish. The unanticipated effects of the dam are now part of an accepted reality, and McPhee's images show the efforts of humans, in all their improbable dimensions, to deal with the consequences.

McPhee is an admirer of the photographs of Frederick Sommer, whose images and ideas had a decisive impact on the work of Emmet Gowin, her teacher and greatest influence. Raised in Brazil and educated in the United States, Sommer began making photographs as well as watercolors and drawings while recovering from tuberculosis in Europe, but his sustained work in photography began following a move to Arizona in 1931. Sommer was intellectually and emotionally aligned with metaphysical, symbolist, and surrealist ideas, and his approach to photography was intriguingly varied in genre and technique; at points in his long career he extended work in photography to other artistic disciplines, including assemblage sculpture and music. For Sommer,

Frederick Sommer, *Coyotes*, 1945 © Frederick & Frances Sommer Foundation

photography was a medium that engaged the world: "you don't invent what you photograph. You much more yield to what there is."[7] Sommer's exacting use of photographic tone and detail rival the attention his friend and admirer Edward Weston gave to images of shells and peppers.

Unlike Weston, Sommer—in his deliberate, finely calibrated attention to the ways that things of the world could give life to ideas—took photographs of raw, conventionally ugly objects, such as a severed human leg, or chicken viscera, or, in *Coyotes* (1945), dead animals decomposing in the desert. Though the animals are dead, in their decay they seem to be merging with the dirt. Through camera angle and framing, the sharp slant of bones and smiling lines of teeth also convey animation in death.[8] In McPhee's photograph of a single dead animal, *Fox Confiscated from a Leghold Trap at Rough Creek, Custer County, Idaho, 2005* (page 84), the events leading up to the strangely tidy package of a dead fox—whose jaw distends the plastic wrapping—invokes an intricate succession of ideas about the plight of the fox, the activities of people, and judicial and economic systems as they relate to both. The fox, left too long on a trapline, was shot and confiscated by a game warden. Within a translucent bag, its warm-hued fur and tiny spots of frozen blood are visible through the plastic, as is one cloudy, unseeing eye. Unlike the elk in other images, the fox was not killed to be eaten. It is a furbearer, and its demise is determined by hunting tradition and the fur market for the fashion industry. Like the silver, gold, and lead from the Grouse Creek mine, the fox fur is a commodity from this pristine region. The miner and the jeweler, like the trapper and the fur wearer, continue traditions long practiced by humans. The photograph does not judge, but sets off concentric ripples of meaning, and the viewer must examine his or her own fascination, assumptions, and prejudices.

Sommer gave the title *I Adore You* to his photograph of a collage of images from the *Saturday Evening Post* he found attached to the wall of a miner's abandoned cabin. One of several photographs of found objects Sommer made in the 1940s, *I Adore You* is reminiscent of the Dada and surrealist collages of commercial images made by Max Ernst, Sommer's friend and fellow Arizona resident. The title *I Adore You*, borrowed from a novel by the late nineteenth-century metaphysi-

No Return narrates a story of a specific place in the twenty-first-century American West. While her images resonate with the myths and icons of this region, they make new demands on the imagination of the viewer. Photographs are inscribed with the lost moment of their making, but McPhee understands the desire photographs generate as the necessary condition for their creation. In her approach to photographing place, McPhee deliberately calls upon the capacities of photographic images to describe, organize, conceal, and evoke the processes of nature and the activities of people. McPhee's photographs in *River of No Return* do not magically turn the human meanings of this environment into new forms of landscape. Instead, her photographs set forth the necessary conditions for creation in the response of the viewer, who needs to take the measure of one place to better imagine a different experience of his or her own.

NOTES

My thanks to Patricia Johnston, Martha Buskirk, and David Harris for their comments on this essay.

1 John Brinckerhoff Jackson, *A Sense of Place, a Sense of Time* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994), vii.

2 Lawrence Buell, *Writing for an Endangered World: Literature, Culture, and Environment in the U.S. and Beyond* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap, 2001). See also *Aperture* 150 (Winter 1998); this issue is titled "Moments of Grace: Spirit in the American Landscape."

3 Rebecca Solnit, *As Eve Said to the Serpent: On Landscape, Gender, and Art* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 2001), 91.

4 Peter E. Pool, ed., *The Altered Landscape* (Reno and Las Vegas: Nevada Museum of Art, with the University of Nevada Press, 1999). See also Whitney Museum of American Art, *Perpetual Mirage: Photographic Narratives of the Desert West*, organized by May Castleberry (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1996); and Mark Klett (chief photographer), Ellen Manchester (project director), JoAnn Verberg (project coordinator), and Gordon Bunshaw and Rick Dingus (project photographers), *Second View: The Rephotographic Survey Project* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1984).

5 Mary Warner Marien, "Imagining the Corporate Sublime," in *Carleton Watkins: Selected Texts and Bibliography*, ed. Amy Rule (Boston: G. K. Hall, 1993), 9–13.

6 Linda A. Morris, "A Woman of Our Generation," in *Dorothea Lange—A Visual Life*, ed. Elizabeth Partridge (Washington and London: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1994), 26–28. See also Pirkle Jones, *California Photographs* (New York: Aperture, 2001), 26–43.

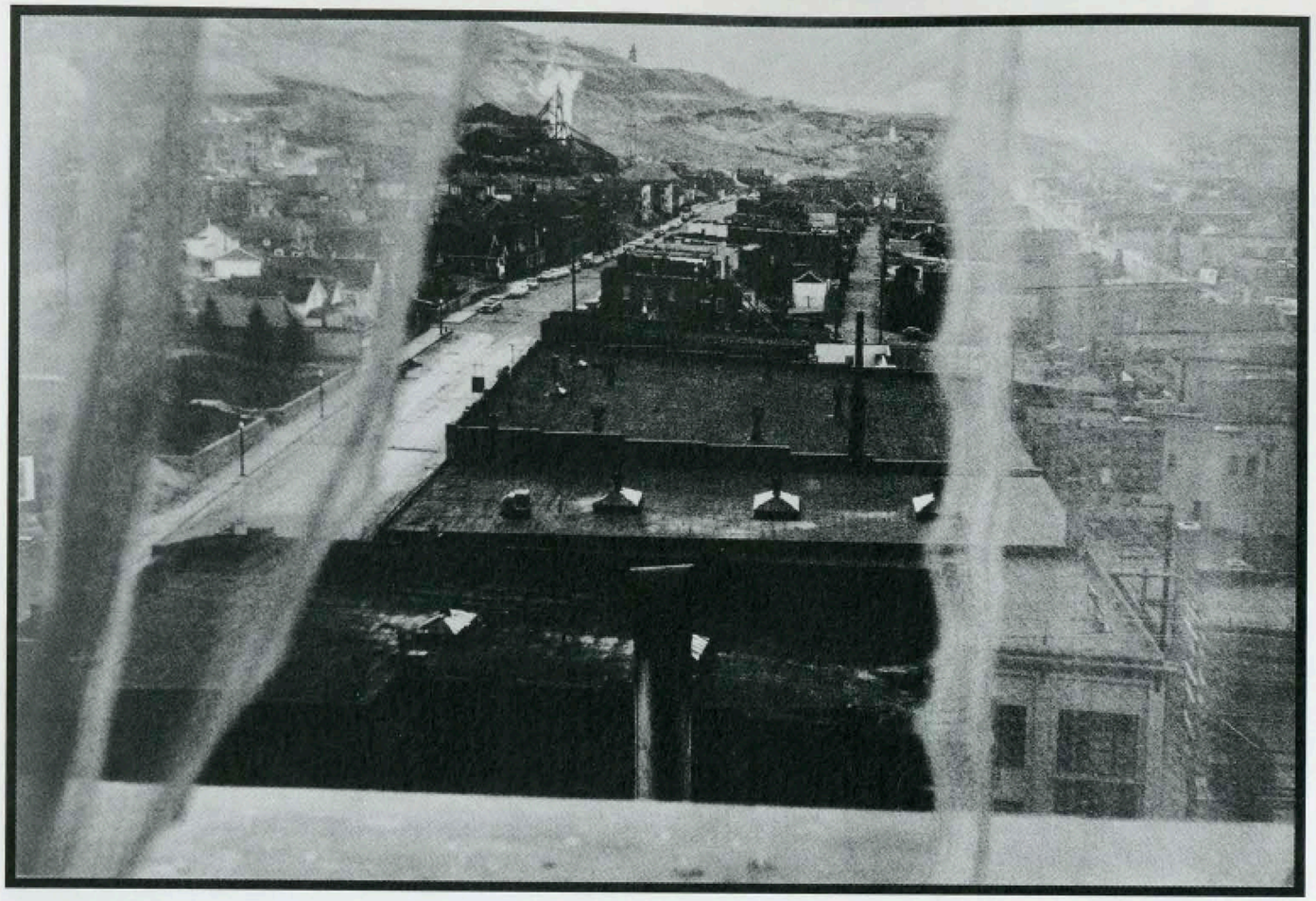
7 *The Art of Frederick Sommer: Photography, Drawing, Collage* (Prescott, AZ: The Frederick and Frances Sommer Foundation, and New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005), 210.

8 Keith F. Davis, "Living Art: The Sources of Frederick Sommer's Work," in *The Art of Frederick Sommer*, 18.

9 April Watson, "Sommer Chronology: 1905–2005," in *The Art of Frederick Sommer*, 224.

10 Robert Frank, *The Americans: Photographs* (New York: Grove Press, 1959; rpt. New York: Pantheon, 1986). See also W. J. T. Mitchell, *What Do Pictures Want? The Lives and Loves of Images* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 272–93.

11 Lorenz Eitner, "The Open Window and the Storm-Tossed Boat: An Essay on the Iconography of Romanticism," *Art Bulletin* 37 (December 1955): 281–90.



Robert Frank, *View from hotel window, Butte, Montana,* 1956. Copyright Robert Frank from *The Americans*

photograph of Frank's wife and children in their car in the final image of *The Americans*. Mattie's solitude distinguishes her from the children in Frank's image as she sets out on her journey alone. Frank's photographs reflect upon his experiences and his process of discovery on a journey. His photograph *View from Hotel Window, Butte, Montana* draws upon a trope of romantic art, the window at once a threshold and a barrier, an invitation to participate in the world and a reminder of the comforts of remaining inside.[11] The bleak streets of the town in Montana are an unappealing prospect, and while the delicate pattern of the curtains promises some solace, Frank, of course, did not remain indoors.

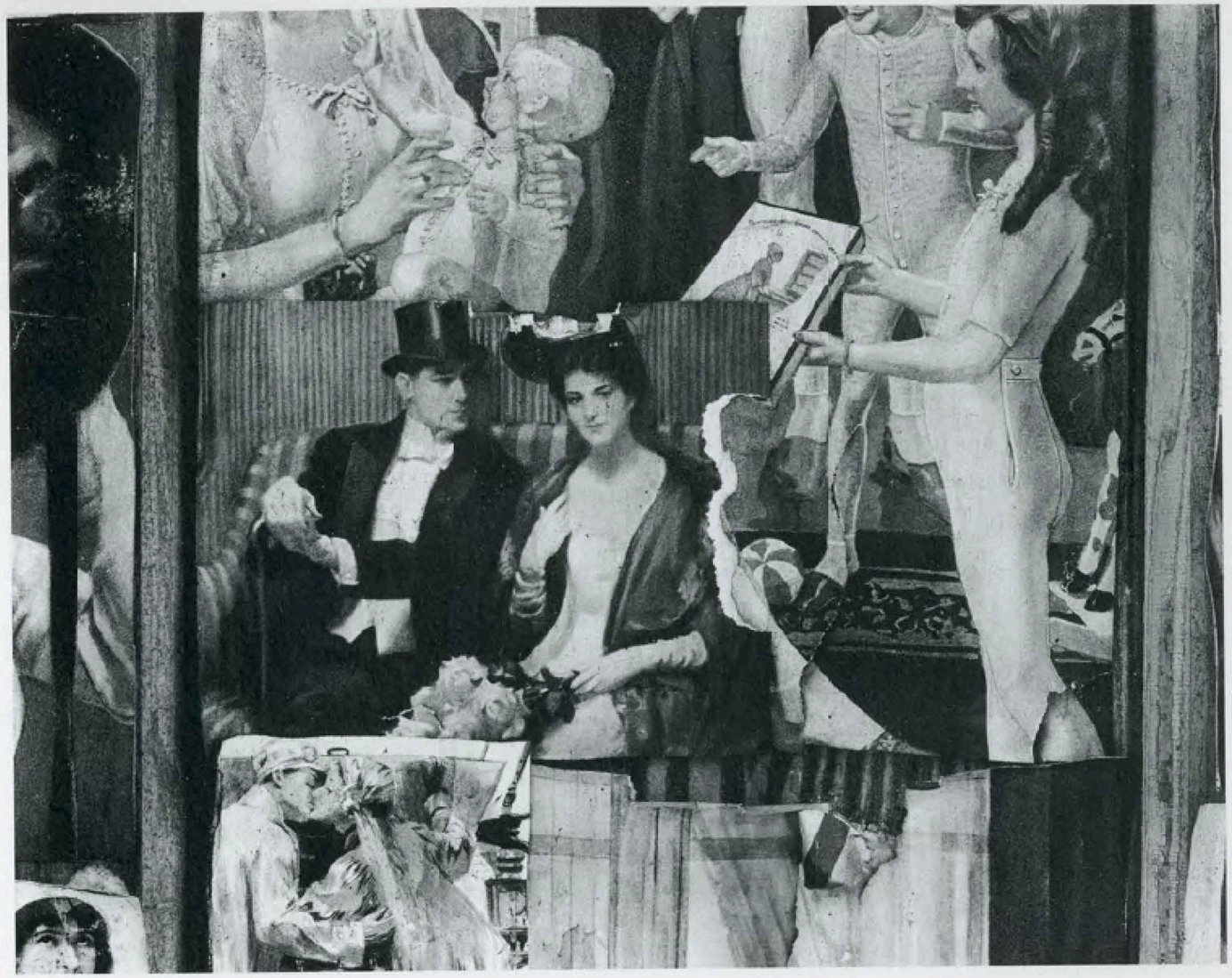
McPhee's six photographs of the Fourth of July Ranch, taken over five years (pages 39, 40, 41, 42, 43, and 45), the view from the porch on the ranch where she stayed most often during her residency, are most like traditional landscape views of the region, with their changing effects of weather measured in photographs of distant mountains, vast skies, and the great expanse of land. Within *River of No Return* we learn that this land is the site of irrigation activity, that the traditional fence in the foreground is one of many—fences separating private and public lands, cattle and wolves, cattle and humans, sagebrush and grass. In the center of the book, this sequence of images emphatically depicts cycles of natural change, while also making inescapable the deep inscription of human use on this place. Unlike Frank, whose project took him around the United States, McPhee repeatedly returned to the Sawtooth Valley. Her six photographs of the view from the porch narrate her developing relationship to the area. While her photographs, like romantic landscapes, invite the viewer's emotional identification, the evidence everywhere in her photographs of the politics of place draws the viewer into the here and now. McPhee resists an ideological voice for *River of No Return*. Her photographs of people in the valley are consistently sympathetic, yet we see that the effects of human actions on the environment are complex and subject to multiple interpretations. Even in the aftermath of a devastating fire, set off by human accident, nature's capacity to renew itself is asserted in the book's closing images, while the stands of black, burnt trees suggest human figures, whose return will soon be registered on these spaces.

In McPhee's descriptions of the relations between individual and collective, science and belief, industry and imagination, *River of*

cal writer Alfred Jarry, draws attention to the experience of desire latent in the content of the images arranged by an unknown miner.[9] Sommer's intentions are emphasized in the title of the image, and also in the framing of the subject. Framing makes the man at the lower left corner a surrogate for the photographer, who coolly observes the meditation on romance and domesticity constructed by the miner. In McPhee's two photographs of images from 1940s women's magazines found in a miner's house (both titled *Nineteen-forties Women's Magazines at the Manager's House at Bayhorse Lead-Silver Mine, Custer County, Idaho, 2004* [pages 25 and 82]), the possibilities of chance juxtapositions of found content are inseparable from signs of the workings of time: moisture rolls the papers' edges, heat warps the surfaces, while bright sunlight throws some details into impenetrable shadow. By framing the contents at a pronounced angle, McPhee imposes an order on the collages, but her understanding of the operations of chance builds on Sommer's work with the metaphysical and marvelous. Desire is still at play: women subscribed to these magazines to bring information and entertainment from the outside world into their lives as homemakers in this isolated region. McPhee's rendition of these pages speaks to their owners' longing for experiences outside the confines of place.

As the title of Sommer's photograph, Jarry's phrase "I Adore You" became another piece of the collage, suggesting directions for looking at the contents of the magazine illustrations and their juxtapositions of imagery. In contrast, McPhee's titles are factual, but their contents are not straightforward: the pool contains cyanide, the igloo is made from plans downloaded from the Internet, gigantic rocks are destined for landscaping in Sun Valley, a hunter in camouflage is tranquilizing, not shooting, wolves, and dark russet pine trees are infested with beetles. McPhee's titles are often startling as descriptions of the familiar iconography of natural resources and human activities long associated with the American West.

Robert Frank's unique combination of social commentary and art in his 1959 photographic book *The Americans* has become a touchstone for generations of photographers.[10] The final image of Mattie, alone on a bus (*Mattie, Fisher Creek Turnout, Challis School District, Idaho, 2004* [page 97]), in *River of No Return* is McPhee's homage to the



Frederick Sommer, *I Adore You*, 1947 © Frederick & Frances Sommer Foundation