Observe

The first step in understanding any work of art is to take the time to look closely. This study guide will help you do just that. Here is background information and questions to consider when looking at the exhibition of Martin Stupich’s photographs, Portrait of a Place: Wyoming’s Red Desert.

What the artist, Martin Stupich, says about his encounter with the Red Desert:

Genesis

In 1996, a mountain bike crash in the central Rockies gave me a titanium femur and a sudden intimate relationship with the southern Wyoming landscape. Within a year of ditching my crutches, I moved from Boston and using John McPhee’s ‘Rising from the Plains’ as my atlas, settled on the edge of the high windy Great Divide Basin in Wyoming Red Desert country.

The landscape seems stark, the horizon crisp and always a day away. The desert is populated by scores of herds of rare desert elk, wild horse, and antelope. It is home to exotic species of finch, eagle, hawk and owl. Humans live there, too, in tiny numbers in small settlements around the basin’s rim.

Recently discovered directly beneath the Red Desert is one of the world’s greatest gas reserves. In the last three years, the empty, and remote half-million acres has flipped, transformed in one historic flash from wilderness steppe to industrial landscape... British Petroleum, Halliburton and others have arrived.

Surveyors, blasting and grading crews, rig operators and geologists now sweep the basin from edge to edge. Caravans of heavy equipment barrel across pristine playa and mesa, leaving a dense crosshatching of new roads in their wake. What had always been a blank spot on the map is now frantic with activity. When the dust clears in a decade or two—after the place has been scraped clean and pumped dry—the boom will end. The gas rigs will move on to the next sweet spot. The poisoned water table will begin to recharge. But anyone keeping time using a clock where a second is a lifetime, will not see the desert heal.

--excerpt from Martin Stupich’s essay in FOTOFEST 2006 catalogue

History and Background

Wyoming’s Red Desert is a fifteen thousand square mile arid basin in the central Rocky Mountains. Consisting mainly of state and federal lands, it is the largest unfenced expanse in the continental United States; and historically it has been an unpopulated, almost unknown, wilderness. Recently discovered, directly beneath it, is one of the world’s largest untapped natural gas reserves. The desert’s open-pit and uranium operations are being revived in response to world pressures. Surveying, blasting, drilling, and mining accelerate now at a pace that is transforming into an industrial landscape.

This basin straddles the Continental Divide and stretches across what is known today as the I-80 corridor. Many who travel the route between Rawlins and Rock Springs view the barren, high-desert landscape as a featureless, “empty” place with little if any redeeming value. However, the Red Desert is a spectacularly complex place with...
delicate microclimates and fragile ecosystems, dramatic geology that offers evidence of its origins and life over eons of time, and a home to wild horses and desert elk, unique flora and fauna, and, for seven thousand years, human beings.

Throughout its life, the region has endured all that nature and man have given it: droughts and floods, the ebb and flow of energy booms, settlements, and a myriad of bisecting and transecting overland routes that include the earliest pioneer trails, and the first transcontinental railroad. Today, it is almost exclusively BLM lands with National Forests, National Wilderness Study Areas, and National Recreation Lands.

Beneath the Red Desert’s expansive and sparse landscape lie mineral reserves and one of the largest known natural gas reserves. In a time of increased energy demands and changes in U.S. energy policies makes for an uncommon time in the life of the desert. Over the last two decades, mineral extraction has accelerated dramatically, and more recently, the tapping of natural gas reserves is transforming the Red Desert from a place of wonder and wildness to one of commodity at an unprecedented pace.

Since 2000 Martin Stupich has photographed extensively in the Red Desert with an urgency to record it in the midst of its changing. Through his images, we see an expansive landscape, diverse geology, evidence of the earliest human occupation, boom and bust towns, and present day industry. Collectively, a portrait of this place emerges, revealing the human history of our connection to the landscape –this landscape. It is a complicated and fragmented portrait, one that tugs at the perception that this is a barren place of little value and one that encourages us to look again at the Red Desert in all its wonder and wildness.

**Question**

- What in the photographs do you want to know more about? Pick out 2-3 photographs to write or talk about with the museum class.
- What do you see in these photographs? (Pick your favorites, 3-5 photographs, since there are over 70 of them.) Make a list of all you see.
- When you read the text panel next to the photograph, how does it change your perceptions of the image?
- What looks new in the photographs?
- What looks old in the photographs?
- What objects in the photographs are manmade?
- What in these photos of landscapes looks or appears to be pristine or untouched by man?
- How does Nature and Human affect each other in the photos?
- What is appealing to you about the photographs - composition, forms: linear and circular; colors; textures; lines; perspective and symbols?

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**The Artist’s Revelation**

In 2005, after scores of trips crisscrossing the landscape – camping, photographing, documenting the geography of this wondrous raw place – it hit me like a skillet. They are not plundering the place. We are. I am. I look down to see that my tracks in the dust merge with theirs. They may be mining the coal and poisoning the groundwater, but they do it in our name. I am an accomplice and beneficiary. Now what? Do I turn myself in – and to whom?

--excerpt from Martin Stupich’s essay in FOTOFEST 2006 catalogue
• What makes these photographs works of art?
• How does the visual landscape affect our ideas of what art is?
• How does a close physical relationship with the land influence our ideas of art and the world?

Explore and Reflect

• Does this exhibition give you a complete portrait of the Red Desert?
• Does viewing and observing the photographs closely make you want to find out more about the Red Desert?
• Do you want to go to the Red Desert after seeing the photographs?
• If you have been to the Red Desert and you know it quite well, how do you feel about the perspective this artist takes in these photographs?
• What do these photographs make you think about?
• What do these photographs make you feel?
• Do you know about the cultural and historical areas in the Red Desert?
• Do you know about high desert culture and its evolutionary process?
• Do you want to know more about the Red Desert?
• What do you think Martin Stupich is saying to us through his photographs? Or, isn’t he saying anything?

Create

• Does this exhibition make you want to photograph a landscape or place dear to your own heart?
• Do you want to sketch or write about a special place?
• What other ways could you express the way you feel and think about a special place?