



tree - pittston, pennsylvania 2012



church - mcadoo, pennsylvania 2010



10 - schuylkill county, pennsylvania 2010



x - allentown, pennsylvania 2010



trees - eckley pennsylvania 2005



shopping cart - philadelphia, pennsylvania 2012



column - philadelphia, pennsylvania 2012



floor - wilkes-barre, pennsylvania 2012



tire - schuylkill county, pennsylvania 2007



plywood - strasburg, pennsylvania 2012



radio tower - whitehall, pennsylvania 2011



wall - leighton, pennsylvania 2010



road - hellertown, pennsylvania 2011



airport - allentown, pennsylvania 2011

THEO ANDERSON PENNSYLVANIA

January 6–February 10, 2013

DID YOU SEE *THAT*?

Inherent in the question is an event, or vision, that is extraordinary or miraculous or horrible, at least in context: an important political debate, a last-second, game-winning touchdown pass, a waterskiing squirrel, a double rainbow, a campus policeman pepper-spraying a group of peaceful student protestors.

But in many of Theo Anderson's photographs, especially in the group presented here, the emphasis is different and the question quieter: Did you *see* that?

Had you followed Anderson's route moments behind him, the answer would probably be, "No." But if you confront his prints and pay attention, luckily the answer would probably be, "Yes."

What Anderson often photographs, including these 18 images especially, fall under the rubric of the American social landscape. It is not the soaring beauty of the pristine natural landscape captured by Ansel Adams or the gritty street photographs of Robert Frank or Garry Winogrand, but if you take a pinch of the homespun, formal rigor of Walker Evans and a dash of the visual complexity of some of Lee Friedlander's early work and stir in a heaping spoonful of the subtle colorism of Joel Meyerowitz or William Eggleston, you can tease out some of the subtle flavors of Anderson's work, blended by a master visual chef into a new and heartily delicious visual dish.

This is not to imply that Anderson's work is in any way derivative. As photographers, we are influenced both positively and negatively by the imagemakers who have come before us. And to me, Theo Anderson is a rare original.

So, these pictures are clearly landscapes in the way we all understand the term—they have land, or, at least, sky, after all—but they are landscapes of human presence, human alteration, human neglect, and human degradation. We say this because of their content: human structures, signs, markings, buildings, waste.

Beyond their content is their form. These are two-dimensional pictures, images on a flat surface. They live on the picture plane. Anderson's strategy for treating his content in these pictures is threefold: In some, there is a familiar receding space, an illusion of three-dimensionality; in others, layers are stacked vertically, confounding the allusion to three-dimensionality; and, in others, everything is pressed forward onto the picture plane. Thus, they can also be seen as landscapes in their form, in the same way that the noted critic Leo Steinberg, in *Other Criteria* (1972), argued that the abstract expressionist painters were essentially nature painters:



vines - plymouth, pennsylvania 2011

"A picture that harks back to the natural world," Steinberg wrote, "evokes sense data [that] are experienced in the normal erect posture. Therefore the Renaissance picture plane affirms verticality as its essential condition. And the concept of the picture plane as an upright surface survives the most drastic changes of style. . . . It is in this sense I think, that the abstract expressionists were still nature painters. Pollock's drip paintings cannot escape being read as thickets; [Morris] Louis' *Veils* acknowledge the same gravitational force to which our being in nature is subject."

In *The Poetic Logic of Art and Aesthetics* (1972), Frederick Sommer wrote,

Position and occupier build structure and content.
Structure and content together constitute form.

Structure is a set of positions in space, and content is a corresponding set of elements which occupy the positions of that structure.

Our fundamental empathy is to the structure that content reveals.

The quality of content enhances its capacity to articulate structure.

Quality is adequate correspondence between structure and content.

Effectively positioned occupiers are images to which empathy can be given. As image, content and structure are one.

In other words, if one were to remove the content from the picture, the underlying structure of the image could be revealed. Yet, it is the quality of that content—the correct subject matter properly handled—that allows structure to be revealed clearly.

Formally, it is in the minute attention to detail that Anderson makes these pictures sing. In **x - allentown, pennsylvania, 2010**, the delicate tracery of telephone and electric wires are anchored to the ground by a leaning wooden telephone pole. These are counterbalanced by a much heavier metal truss holding railroad-crossing warning lights, but incongruously this seems ready to float away out of the top of the picture frame.

In **flowers - shenandoah, pennsylvania, 2008**, a cacophony of competing lines and shapes are collaged together and flattened—a sensation heightened by the dull beiges, tans, greens, and grays that predominate. All cohere around a vertical pole right in the center of the picture (a recurring motif in Anderson's images),

but right next to it a small, intensely cerise flower defiantly asserts itself.

That central pole also shows up in **shopping cart - philadelphia, pennsylvania, 2012**. Anderson is a gifted colorist, and the bright blue trim of the shopping cart, the red paint on the ground, the orange bumper sticker on the pole, and the bit of yellow of the traffic lights take up very little real estate, but animate the picture in a remarkably lively way. You might take this picture as simple narrative: The shopping cart lying on its side on top of a red splotch might be the victim of a mob hit—Anderson often shows a finely tuned but subtle sense of humor in his pictures, after all—but the complexity of the various shapes and forms could come out of a cubist collage by Braque. The shadow of the traffic light brings weight to the center of the frame, but in a bravura act of microcomposition (as the photographer Sam Abell has called it) Anderson stands in just the right place to maintain a sliver of light between the pole and its shadow, and that holds everything in just the proper tension.

Vines - plymouth, pennsylvania, 2011, is a disorienting conundrum. There's a bit of blue sky in the upper right that seems to tell us we're looking at a wall straight on, yet the sensation is one of looking down at some strange kind of basketball court, but we're not suspended. It's too late. We're falling headlong into it.

Despite the bit of asphalt leading to a wall that presents a logical illusion of some depth in **column - philadelphia, pennsylvania, 2012**, the stacking of several horizontal layers brings everything forward to the picture plane. Anderson releases his shutter just at the moment that Walker Evans would, as the raking light creates a rhythm of shadows across the corrugated façade and the shadow of that odd bit of turquoise material that is peeling away, like the representation of a turning page on an e-book reader, just about touches its own edge.

These are feats of bravura visual prestidigitation. From the most mundane of objects—a bit of chain-link fence, old tires, stacks of plywood, fragments of signs—Anderson creates compelling images that are at once satisfying but always leave us gladly willing to come back for more.

Stephen Perloff,

Editor
The Photo Review
January 2013



flowers - shenandoah, pennsylvania, 2008

Checklist

trees - eckley, pennsylvania 2005
 tree - pittston, pennsylvania 2005
 tire - schuylkill county, pennsylvania 2007
 flowers - shenandoah, pennsylvania 2008
 10 - schuylkill county, pennsylvania 2010
 church - mcadoo, pennsylvania 2010
 wall - leighton, pennsylvania 2010
 x - allentown, pennsylvania 2010
 airport - allentown, pennsylvania 2011
 radio tower - whitehall, pennsylvania 2011
 road - hellertown, pennsylvania 2011
 vines - plymouth, pennsylvania 2011
 column - philadelphia, pennsylvania 2012
 floor - wilkes-barre, pennsylvania 2012
 plywood - strasburg, pennsylvania 2012
 shopping cart - philadelphia, pennsylvania 2012

color pigment prints

These photographs are from Anderson's ongoing series, Cadillac, which depicts scenes from around the United States

Anderson has created a limited edition artist's book, Pennsylvania. The book includes 18 color pigment prints of the images selected for the exhibition, printed and hand bound by Anderson, with essay by Stephen Perloff, founder and editor of *The Photo Review*, a critical journal of international scope publishing since 1976 and editor of *The Photograph Collector*.

Additional information can be found at www.theoanderson.com.

On behalf of the Lafayette College Art Galleries, I wish to thank Allentown photographer Theo Anderson for his boundless and enthusiastic cooperation as we prepared for this exhibition.

Many of you may be familiar with Anderson's photographs of the abandoned Bethlehem Steel plant along with scenes of the American West, which were exhibited at Bethlehem's Banana Factory last year. Before I began to look through his study prints during a studio visit, I hadn't anticipated finding so many images of ordinary scenes—the kind we drive by daily. The result of that visit is this selection of photos, all captured in Pennsylvania.

Like the steel plant photos, careful attention is paid to color and shape, but here Anderson delivers views we might overlook: a beautiful blue sky slashed by a mundane yet delicate and lacy chain-link fence; an otherwise ordinary side yard with a surprise dash of color; telephone and utility lines crossing the sky. As Stephen Perloff notes, Anderson asks us to pay attention to the landscape we inhabit.

I am particularly grateful to Ken Endick and Stephen Perloff, who wrote the accompanying, insightful essay.

Michiko Okaya
 Director of Lafayette Art Galleries

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