

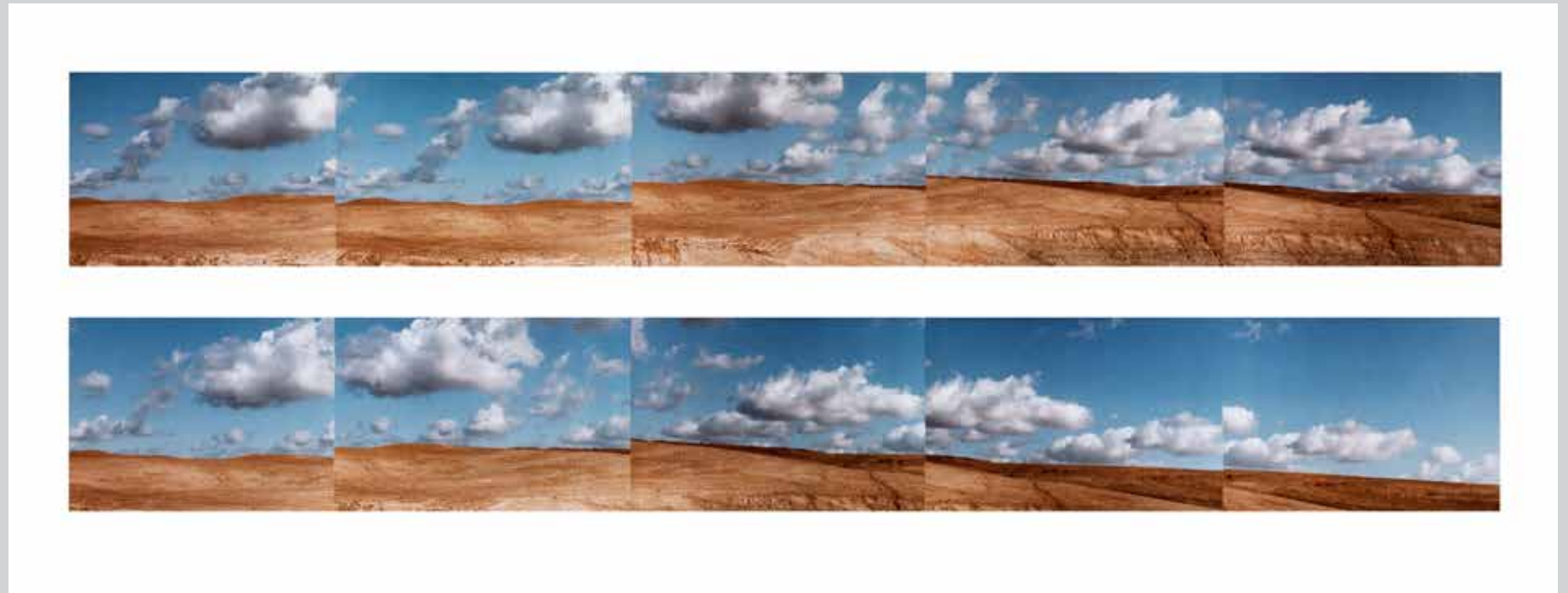
## THE EDGE

Delphine Sims

Laurie Brown has long stood at the edge. Looking towards barren horizons or generic construction sites, she has dedicated her career to photographing the edges of our civilization. These landscapes, which we often overlook during society's efforts to masterfully develop, are memorialized in Brown's photographs. For several years in the 1980s, Brown trekked to the edge of a number of Southern California cities to capture panoramic views of the before and after. After most plant and animal life had been expelled, Brown captured the remains: geometric tracks left by heavy equipment. Vehicles of terraforming cultivated the land for a new future, a new purpose—to sustain suburban life, with its own root-like piping and habitats of luxury. The sites pictured in *Earth Edges* (1982-84) convey the quiet, mundane moments before construction begins. Over decades these massive projects have colonized the Southern California region. Brown photographed the transformed and now prepared nature on which new homes and new lives would be built.

In photographs taken in Orange County, California, Brown documented an immense shift in American life, aptly known as the "edge city." Defined by journalist and author Joel Garreau in the early 1990s, the edge city was a new urban center with all the functions of a city, but sprawling and far removed from the iconic downtowns of typical metropolitan cities.<sup>1</sup> The edge city restructured the United States, allowing new generations of pioneers the opportunity to achieve the American Dream—to buy a home; only now these houses line the fringes of society. Garreau believes these developments were modeled after the exponential rise of suburban life in and around Los Angeles. Irvine, a city that Garreau found to be a prescient example of these booming new communities,<sup>2</sup> is nestled amongst the Orange County cities featured in Brown's photographs: Mission Viejo, Dana Point, and Newport Beach.

As Garreau conducted his research on the edge city, Brown was meticulously capturing similar locations. Her panoramic photographs formally demonstrate the extreme changes. Critics of the edge city chastised developers for destroying the once-beautiful landscape of Southern California; nostalgia for citrus groves dominated their critiques. But the uniform crops and irrigation systems of the farmland were the original terraformed environments. The massive agricultural equipment mangled and destroyed the indigenous chaparral landscape; rows of non-native orange trees replaced the patterned hillsides of buckwheat and Manzanita. Brown's photographs of meandering tire marks and bulldozed hillsides are not documents of early terraforming but of later generations of redeveloped earth. The edges are now human made.



Laurie Brown, *Expeditionary Edges, Dana Point, California*, 1983. Collection of the California Museum of Photography at UCR ARTSblock, gift of the artist, 2015.0006.0001.01

The desolation of Brown's photographs challenge perceptions of beauty, questioning the celebration of traditional landscape environments such as lush agriculture or untouched native countryside. Brown's work is that of a subjective photographer, granting viewers their own perspective. In each vibrant yet deserted scene, *Earth Edges* promotes analyses from a range of resident audiences: the newest beneficiaries of the American Dream; the older, rural residents who long for the disappearing farmland; and the local scholars and Native Americans who note the history of the region and the long-lost native flora and fauna. This is the genius of Brown's artistry; she methodically presents the landscapes, with a detachment that allows the delicate, quotidian subject matter to resonate with a wide audience.

Brown's ability to separate herself from the politics of urbanity is a key element to the genre of her photography, known as New Topographics. This transformative style of photography documented the unremarkable and commonplace in contemporary life, but without critique. A seismic shift in the history of landscape photography, the exhibition *New Topographics: Photographs of a Man-Altered Landscape* highlighted the innovation of master photographers who captured this changing American landscape: the suburban.<sup>3</sup> Organized in 1975 by William Jenkins for the George Eastman House in New York, the exhibition featured influential photographers such as Robert Adams, Joe Deal, Lewis Baltz, and Nicholas Nixon. Brown studied with Baltz just a few years

earlier, in 1972.<sup>4</sup> Limited in size and scope, the exhibition was unable to feature the remarkable number of artists, particularly female photographers, commenting on the new altered landscape. Still, the astutely titled *New Topographics* set a precedent for the long lasting investigation and celebration of the changing style of landscape photography not only amongst scholars but also in the work of artists.

Expanding on the influence of Baltz, Brown photographed urban growth, but with a distinctive typology: markings of human activity, panoramic views, dynamic titles, long horizontal lines dividing the plane, and vibrant colors. Akin to fellow photographers of the movement, the remnants of human presence—rather than depictions of individuals—are quintessential to Brown's work. To experience the effects of human intervention in the land, such as terraforming, was a necessary part of understanding the new topography. *Earth Edges* is a stark reminder of the scarred earth mankind leaves behind in its march toward the future.

Brown's distinctive titles hint at her awareness of the subject and the magnitude of its symbolism. *Expeditionary Edges* (1983) might reference the history of 19th-century American frontier imagery and then-pioneers of these unknown terrains: the first homesteaders. While engaging with this evolution of landscape photography, Brown may also allude to those now at the forefront of the late 20th-century tract housing, the first homeowners. *Transitory*

*Quietude* (1982) suggests the tranquility of a once wild and natural landscape but also a fleeting moment in an active construction site. The complexity of Brown's work consistently asks the question: What does it mean to engage with an altered landscape in the same manner you might with the natural landscape?

Brown's photographs are a cultural commentary on the generational shifts of lifestyle. Each print is embedded with layered meanings: the past, present, and future not only of photography, but the entirety of humankind. Through her use of color photography and repetition, the typically mundane landscapes become dynamic topographies of an Earth of possibility, growth, and life. Striking blue skies and billowing clouds emerge from the edges of each landscape and wash the photographs with a sense of hope and pride in the timeless beauty of an ever-evolving future.

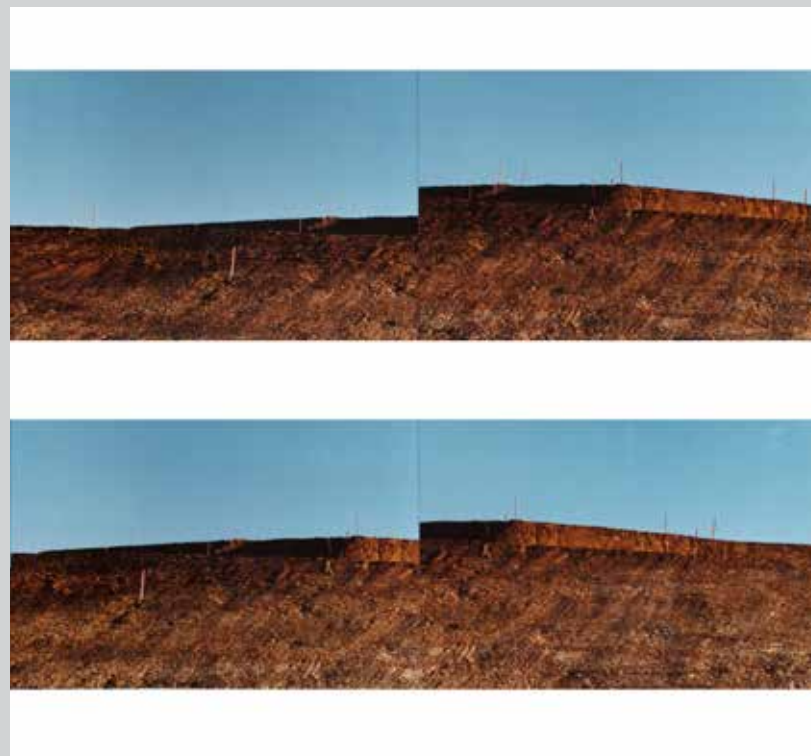
#### Notes

1. Joel Garreau, *Edge City: Life on the New Frontier*, Doubleday, New York, 1991, 13-14.
2. *ibid.*, 269-270.
3. Britt Salvesen, "New Topographics," *New Topographics*, Center for Creative Photography, University of Arizona, Tucson, 2009, 55-58.
4. *ibid.*, 247-261.

**Laurie Brown** (born in Austin, Texas in 1937) is an Orange County-based photographer who was raised in Los Angeles. Her work has been featured in solo and group exhibitions at the California Museum of Photography; Los Angeles County Museum of Art; San Francisco Museum of Modern Art; Museum of Fine Arts, Houston; Philadelphia Museum of Art; and Sezon Museum of Modern Art, Tokyo, among elsewhere. Her works reside in the collections of numerous institutions, including the California Museum of Photography; Santa Barbara Museum of Art; Museum of Contemporary Art, San Diego; Nevada Museum of Art, Reno; Orange County Museum of Art, Newport Beach; Laguna Art Museum, Laguna Beach; Huntington Library, San Marino; and Center for Creative Photography, Tucson. Brown was awarded the National Endowment for the Arts Fellowship Grant in 1978, and the Outstanding Individual Artist award by ARTS Orange County in 2002. She earned her MFA at California State University, Fullerton, and her BA in International Relations at Scripps College in Claremont.

**Delphine Sims** is a graduate student in the History of Art program at UC Berkeley. Her research focuses on the history of landscape photography in California and the evolving urban landscape. She previously worked as Curatorial Assistant in the Department of Photography at the Santa Barbara Museum of Art, and held positions at the California African American Museum, and the USC Fisher Museum of Art. She earned a double BA in African American Studies and Art History at the University of Southern California, Los Angeles.

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Top: *Temporal Layering, Newport Beach, California, 1982* (detail), 2015.0006.0001.04  
Bottom: *Sculptured Time, Newport Beach, California, 1982* (detail), 2015.0006.0001.07  
Cover: *Journey Foretold, Laguna Niguel, California, 1984* (detail), 2015.0006.0001.06  
All collection of the California Museum of Photography at UCR ARTSblock, gift of the artist.

## LAURIE BROWN EARTH EDGES



Selections from the Permanent Collection of the  
California Museum of Photography at UCR ARTSblock

September 17, 2016–July 1, 2017