

Points West and Weston

MICHAEL PAGLIA | MAY 18, 2006 | 4:00AM

At the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth, artists were attracted to the West by its majestic scenery. Then, in the late twentieth and early 21st centuries, artists began to notice how people were wrecking those formerly perfect views. A typical approach for many of these artists was to juxtapose disparate images that could be crudely explained by using the clichéd mankind-versus-nature idea. Boulder and Denver have become regional centers for this kind of thing.



"New American West II: Arizona," by Susan Goldstein, archival digital inkjet print.

Though Colorado artist Susan Goldstein has taken up a wide variety of subjects in her photos and photo-based pieces, ranging from 2000's questionable election results to an abandoned factory that made religious artifacts, she's also explored the fertile subject of civilization's affront to the Western landscape. That's the very thing happening in her latest show, *NEW AMERICAN WEST II*, now on display at Edge Gallery.

Goldstein was born in Indianapolis in 1950 and moved to Colorado in the late '60s to attend the University of Colorado at Boulder, from which she graduated in 1972. Though she studied art at CU, she was a hobbyist when it came to photography. Eventually, though, she became more serious and attended the Woodland School of Photography in West Virginia. Her training led her to become a freelance commercial photographer, with her work appearing in various publications, including *Westword*, and to eventually turn to fine-art photography. Nearly ten years ago, she became a member of the Edge co-op and has had an annual show there ever since.

I've seen most of these Edge shows, and as a result, I've learned something about Goldstein: She's never a disappointment. You can always count on her works to be well conceived and beautifully executed, and her latest showcase is no exception.

NEW AMERICAN WEST II is installed in the center space at Edge. On the wall to the left, the wall straight ahead and the wall to the right, Goldstein hung rows of photos from the series. On the last wall, the one along the front of the room, she put a selection of photos from *NEW AMERICAN WEST I*, the original series. These photos, most of which are only half the size of the newer ones, were done five years ago.

I think it makes sense to take in shows in some logical way, so I began with the older photos, because they lay out Goldstein's concepts, then moved on to the more recent pieces. All of the photos in the older group have essentially the same title, "New American West I," with the only variation being a subtitle that indicates the state where the photos were taken, either Colorado, California, Arizona, Utah or New Mexico. I loved these photos, including the one depicting a sign indicating the direction of Focus on the Family's headquarters, and one of a stallion made of chrome bumpers "running" through a meadow by a farmhouse.

The pieces in *NEW AMERICAN WEST II* have a lot in common with the earlier ones, like being titled in the same way, but there are some perceivable differences. The newer photos are more architectonic and feature the lavish use of strong linear elements. Though long a pro at creating balanced formal arrangements, Goldstein's gotten even better in *NEW AMERICAN WEST II*, coming up with one great composition after another. In several, she employs strong vertical elements placed off to one side, interrupting the overall horizontality inherent in the landscape. And she finds a lot of straight lines in such mundane things as fences and roads.

Every one of Goldstein's images is worthwhile, but I really liked the American flag flying upside down over a wet country highway in Colorado, the village of concrete tepees in Arizona, and the sign in California depicting an old farmer holding a head of lettuce.

Goldstein used an old-fashioned medium-format camera and standard black-and-white film for the photos in both series, then had them printed with an inkjet printer using carbon pigment inks. Master printer Ron Landucci "developed" the photos for Goldstein, and they are remarkably fine in quality. At first glance, they look for all the world like silver prints -- they're that good.

Susan Goldstein's wonderful *NEW AMERICAN WEST II* is rapidly approaching the end of its run. It closes on May 21, so if you haven't checked it out yet, you'll need to step on it.

In the field of photography in the West, California artists from the early- to mid-twentieth century are the tops. They were not interested in looking for views with ironic narratives, like so many contemporary artists, but instead searched for the inherent beauty in natural forms. You don't need to know much about photography to have heard of the greatest of the black-and-white knights from the West Coast, the late Edward Weston. His totemic position in history no doubt explains why Camera Obscura Gallery has had a steady flow of visitors since *Photographs by EDWARD WESTON* opened a few weeks ago. There are a bunch of red dots in sight, meaning that sales have been healthy, too. When I was there on a recent morning, the place was actually crowded. In truth, though, that's not so hard, because the gallery is intimate in scale. An old townhouse, it comprises a series of small rooms on two floors, nearly all of which are hung to the max with compelling photos.

The Weston show is installed in the small front room and in the main gallery beyond. It's very elegant and looks like a museum exhibition. Weston took the photos on display between the 1920s and the 1950s. His son, Cole Weston, did these specific prints in the 1980s. The elder Weston bequeathed the negatives to Cole with the intention that he would do limited printings of them. Since Cole's death, the negatives have been turned over to the University of Arizona, which will not print any more for sale. That means those at Camera Obscura Gallery are the last of their kind. "There are some that I've never seen before, and there are also some of his most famous pieces -- the pepper, the sand dunes and the doorway nude," gallery director Hal Gould says.

The photos are from a Weston family member who lives in Denver but wishes to remain anonymous. "The owner of the photos attended the opening reception, but no one knew that," Gould says with a laugh. Gould is a noted photographer in his own right, and he's run Camera Obscura for decades, making it a Denver treasure by showing important photographs such as these.



Weston was born in 1886 in Illinois and took up photography as a teenager after seeing a photo show at the Art Institute of Chicago. He moved to California in 1905 and opened his studio in the city of Glendale in 1911. Originally a pictorialist, Weston turned to sharp-focused modernist imagery in the 1920s. (Having found his "voice" in modern realism, Weston destroyed his earlier pictorialist negatives, which, in retrospect, is too bad.)

Though he soon achieved a national reputation and his work was shown in museums, his photographs were not sought out by collectors and could be purchased during his lifetime for as little as \$2 apiece. (Even adjusted for inflation, this is a ridiculously cheap price for photos that now sell for hundreds of thousands of dollars.) "Weston left few prints when he died in 1958. There was no demand for them, and materials were expensive, and he was poor," notes Gould, who knew him.

In "Shell I," "Double Shell" and "Pepper #30," Weston isolates the subjects in such a way that they look like abstractions, though all he's done is record shells or vegetables or whatever in soft light. The details are crisp and clean, and his approach favors a tremendous degree of clarity. For the female nude, Weston used

the same naturalism he applied to his other subjects. As with the shells and peppers, there is an abstract element to the nudes. The photos do have a pinup quality, but because parts of the body are cropped, they are clearly modernist works of art, and not simply cheesecake shots. (Later erotic photographers aped Weston's unblinking, in-your-face style, but few attained his refinements.) These nude photos are shocking for their date.

Many of the nudes have Tina Modotti playing the model, as she was Weston's lover at the time. There are many photos of Modotti in the show, but the real stunner is "Nude 23," taken in 1925. Though it's more than 75 years old, it looks very contemporary. Modotti would later go on to achieve her own fame in photography -- and in Marxist politics during the time she lived in exile in Mexico. In the '20s, Weston and Modotti, both from California, became involved with the art scene in Mexico and had close relationships with Diego Rivera and Frida Kahlo, among other cultural movers and shakers there.

Very different in character from his nudes are Weston's famous landscapes. Suburban sprawl had mostly not happened during Weston's lifetime, so these views are innocent and lyrical, and not political in the way that contemporary Western landscapes often are.

The prints in this show are spectacular; son Cole was able to orchestrate an astounding spectrum of gorgeous grays. The closer you look, the better they are, and it's clear that they fully realize Weston's original intentions. His choice to leave Cole in charge of the printing was a good one.

Photographs by EDWARD WESTON is only halfway through its run at Camera Obscura, so there's plenty of time left to see it before it closes in early June. I recommend it wholeheartedly to everyone.

Michael Paglia is an art historian and writer whose columns have appeared in *Westword* since 1995; his essays on the visual arts have also been published in national periodicals including *Art News*, *Architecture*, *Art Ltd.*, *Modernism*, *Art & Auction* and *Sculpture Magazine*. He taught art history at the University of Colorado Denver.