

Robin Lasser's photo-installations have been featured in publications from A to Z—the *American Journal of Roentgenology* to *Zzyzyva*. Characteristic touches of humor in her work have helped to make it accessible to a broader public even as she grapples with serious issues such as environmental degradation. "Everything we do is part of the problem," she says. "I have to approach the issue with humor and humanity because I'm out there using photo chemicals and driving a car myself."

Lasser, who received her MFA from Mills College in 1988, currently is a lecturer on photography and new genres at San Jose State University and the California College of Arts and Crafts.

Artweek For this installation, you built knives, forks and spoons up to thirty feet high in order to photograph them outdoors at landscape scale. What role do those utensils play in your photographs?

Robin Lasser

These utensils are a metaphor for compulsive consumption in our culture, framing the way our culture consumes itself. The photographs are place settings, both literally and figuratively. They are about a sense of place, a sense of time, a cultural moment. And they also are literally place mats.

The utensils are made out of the same material that's being ravaged from the landscape, so if I'm working on a mountain of coal, they're made out of coal. In Santa Barbara, where the oil derricks are, they're made out of oil and they're ablaze. They're always in relationship to a particular landscape. There's the conceptual relationship, and also a visual relationship, the photographic illusion that things are appearing and disappearing, in and out of the landscape.

AW You constructed both the giant utensils and a table for Consuming

A conversation with Robin Lasser

BY MEREDITH TROMBLE

Landscapes/Clearing the Table. Why were the utensils presented photographically and the table sculpturally, as opposed to having the utensils in the gallery or the table in the photographs?

RL The photographs depict an act of being, even if they're speaking to an act of destruction, whereas the table is the remnant of that activity. Also, I'm interested in illusionary worlds within worlds, and the view I like is the view you catch

out of the corner of your eye when you walk in, as the table slips into your vision. It's like the C. S. Lewis books, where you walk into a closet and it opens up into another world. My earlier work always referred to that. For example, I used large photographic murals that "open up any space and give it that outdoor feeling." I took them out of a hunting catalog and put them out in the landscape in a series of walls, like an

Alice in Wonderland mirror within a mirror.

AW I understand that the next step for the Consuming Landscape photographs is to return them to their environment.

RL I've been invited by the San Jose Institute of Contemporary Art to do a series of billboards. You'll be driving down the freeway and while you're in the midst of all that consumption, you'll look up—let's say you're driving to Santa Barbara—and you'll see the large knife fork and spoon on fire overlooking the oil derricks off the coast of Santa Barbara.

In addition to speaking to environmental issues, I consider these pieces a commentary on representation and the way we consume and commodify with our vision. For example, about a year and a half ago I was asked to make a piece in response to Ansel Adams's *Moonrise Hernandez*. I could only see that photograph in terms of its monetary connection to the world. Adams's photographs are selling for \$50,000 to \$75,000.

AW How would you compare your work to Andy Goldsworthy's,

who also photographs work he makes in the environment?

RL Goldsworthy's work is about his personal relationship to nature, whereas my work is about a cultural condition. Also my pieces aren't about the sculpture itself but about how that sculpture will be transformed in a photograph. And finally, the way Goldsworthy frames the world, you don't see human interruption in the landscape, with the exception of his own sculpture. But that's getting harder and harder to do. It takes a smaller and smaller frame. I do think Goldsworthy and I share an interest in a certain spirituality, although I hesitate to use that word. Maybe energy level is a more appropriate term.

AW What would you say are the most important questions for landscape photographers right now?

RL Landscape photographs are always a record of human values and thoughts imposed on the land. If you look at the history of landscape photography, in the beginning the photographs were based on a couple of things. They focused on awe and majesty, wilderness, something beyond the human dimension. On the other hand, they're sort of mercenary. I look back at some of those early landscape photographers and feel a great connection to them. They were lugging these four-by-fives with a darkroom on wheels, and I'm out on my feet with tons of materials. But those photographers ended up being the tour guides for the colonization of the West.

If you look at how photographers deal with landscape now, they can't help but address environmental issues because they're right in your face. We're all working with those issues, but I don't like to spend too much time talking about that because I think it pigeonholes the pieces and the work is much more complex in the end. These landscapes reflect a cultural condition which is much larger than the obvious toxins in the landscape. Toxic landscape mirrors a toxic psyche. ❖

Meredith Tromble, a contributing editor to *Artweek*, is a painter who also does art commentary for KQED-FM.



Robin Lasser, (above) *Salt, Stone and Sand/Tufa Place Setting*, and (below) *Coal/Oil Place Setting*, 1992, color prints, 30" x 40", in *Consuming Landscapes: Clearing the Table*, at the Ansel Adams Center, San Francisco.

