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Contemporary Photographers Remix Modern Masters

by **Chloe Pantazi** on November 12, 2012



“Aperture Remix,” installation view (all images courtesy the Aperture Foundation)

The Aperture Foundation, created in 1952, did much to alter photography’s reputation at a time when it was not yet considered art. Sixty years later, for the current anniversary exhibition, *Aperture Remix*, the foundation commissioned ten photographers — Rinko Kawauchi, Vik Muniz, Taiyo Onorato and Nico Krebs, Martin Parr, Doug Rickard, Viviane Sassen, Alec Soth, Penelope Umbrico, and James Welling — to revisit and respond to one of its publications, an issue of *Aperture* magazine or a photography book, that inspired their own work. Exhibited alongside the earlier pieces, the new works, which aren’t limited to photography but also include film and sculpture, raise questions about the nature of beauty and place that are as pertinent as those elicited by the works they pay homage to, drawing on these themes in current, culturally relevant ways. The

masters of photography — Edward Weston, Paul Strand, and Robert Adams, among others — have spoken to these contemporary photographers, and now the younger generation is talking back, in terms we can all understand. Penelope Umbrico’s “Moving Mountains,” a magnificent tableau of eighty-seven photographs of mountains responding to those in Aperture’s *Masters of Photography* series, were taken on her iPhone and manipulated using apps. In an age when anyone can take pictures with her iPhone and, within seconds, upload them to a myriad of virtual galleries, “Mountains” represents a return to nature mediated through technology. Technology’s propagation of nature, however, doesn’t simplify Umbrico’s work; on the contrary, this is what makes it art.



Penelope Umbrico, Mock-up for exhibition installation of “Moving Mountains (1850–2012)” (2012) (© Penelope Umbrico, courtesy of the artist, from Aperture Remix)

Umbrico’s photos reproduce a panorama of nature we’ve encountered in old movies: mammoth mountains set against a slab of blue sky, melting into the sea. She uses a ubiquitous object (her iPhone is no different than mine or the one you probably own) to capture the scene. And yet, she elevates it to a spectacular realm. Repudiating the traditional beauty, Umbrico pushes it through the filters of app technology to produce fragmented, distorted versions. In each frame are the same mountains, but they’re plunged — and so are we — into different aesthetic worlds where color comes in gorgeous, Instagrammy hues; mountains are dipped in gauzy pinks and oranges, blues and greens. In others, Umbrico has spliced

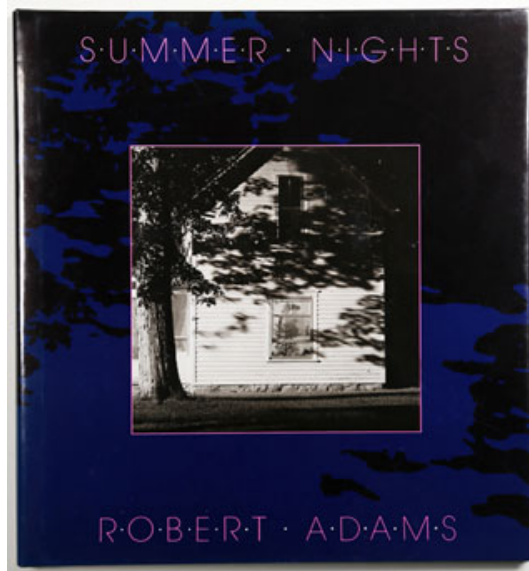
and rejiggered the mountains to compose a new landscape, reminiscent of British artist John Stezaker's photomontage works. Elsewhere, form is done away with altogether: mountains reduced to lines and squiggles, drifting, abstract shapes.

When I saw "Moving Mountains," the mountains moved me. For a moment, I almost forgot I was in a gallery in Chelsea and felt as though I were really there, taking in the view. Umbrico induces from the viewer a response as visceral and sensual as her own. At once, she puts us in her place and posits many others, inviting us to look from multiple angles, through various lenses. Returning to the same scene visited by her predecessors but with a different technology in hand, the artist undoes not only the nature in the frame, but also the nature she's inherited. And as nature loses its conventional meaning in "Mountains," it acquires a new aesthetic currency: its big, dumb beauty becomes more complex — spellbinding, even. By showing us technology's art, Umbrico restores the wonderment with technology that we're losing, and through that technology she reconciles us to a environment we assume it destroys, with which we don't seem to much connect anymore. "Mountains" thus demonstrates an extraordinary function of technology — to unlock an authentic experience of nature — and in challenging what nature means and where it fits in a world dominated by technology, an even better practice of art.



Alec Soth, video still from "Summer Nights at the Dollar Tree" (2012) (courtesy and © Alec Soth / Magnum, photos from "Aperture Remix")

Alec Soth's "Summer Nights at the Dollar Tree," in response to Robert Adams's "Summer Nights," similarly ponders the question of technology and how it can be used to assimilate and reevaluate our surroundings, but through a different medium: film. Soth's scenes of drab America — cars streaming down a highway, a look through the window of a burger-joint, an elderly woman slumped over her Target trolley in the parking lot — simmer with a peculiar beauty akin to that of Adams's night shots. Where Adams's photos transform picket-fenced, manicured-lawn suburbia into a shimmering wonderland by night, Soth uses the daytime ordinariness of people and places to reveal their inadvertent beauty. In a way, Soth one-ups Adams, showing us the beauty of something far more repulsive in its phoniness than the suburbs: superstore, commercial America, home to Walmart and Wendy's, Dairy Queen and Dollar Tree, the fantastical consumerist paradises.



Robert Adams, "Summer Nights" (Aperture 1985)

Soth also challenges Adams's preference for still images by using film, and in doing so plays Adams's game by breaking the rules, more successfully evoking the texture and noise of American life. Watching Soth's film, I remembered the oddball character of Ricky Fitts in *American Beauty*. Perhaps Ricky could speak on Soth's behalf, to respond to Adams, when he says, "Video's a poor excuse, I know. But it helps me remember. ... Sometimes there's so much beauty in the world, I feel like I can't take it, and my heart is just going to cave in." With "Dollar

Tree,” Soth stirs in the viewer the same sense of this all-encompassing, heart-swelling beauty, nearly as moving as Umbrico’s mountains.

On the flip side of Soth and Adams’s America is the perky Americana of Doug Rickard’s photographs of collected postcards in *Ordinary Places*, which responds to — and seeks to emulate — the shots of Stephen Shore’s *Uncommon Places*: shrimp-pink motels, badly parked cars in a parking lot, a dusty drive-in movie theater somewhere in Texas. Like Adams and Soth, Rickard and Shore both take transient spaces as their subject, fixing, in their respective frames, places designed not for lingering over but for passing through. Rickard’s work pays homage to his predecessor in a more direct and less creative way than Umbrico’s and Soth’s; however, by photographing postcards without using the cards themselves, Rickard captures the semblance of a fragmented America, repeating pictures the nation has taken of itself — although not without comment. By exposing the rust that accumulates beneath the postcard surface, Rickard’s photos take on their own tacky, American beauty. The ordinary places here are alive and dazzling in their decay and thus become, like Shore’s pictures, innately uncommon.



Doug Rickard, "Mallard Cove Resort, Lake Sutherland, Port Angeles, Washington, August 27, 1973" (2012) (© Doug Rickard, courtesy Yossi Milo Gallery, New York, and Stephen Wirtz Gallery, San Francisco, from "Aperture Remix")

Aperture Remix might have been a haughty, self-pronounced *bonne anniversaire*: a vain retrospective touting sixty years of the foundation's own achievements in photography. But the art on the walls doesn't resemble a hall of fame; rather, it charts a constantly evolving body of work by contemporary photographers responding to contemporary topics. Their work shouldn't be measured by the influence of the Aperture alums before them, but by the higher standards they're setting today.

[Aperture Remix](#) is on view at the Aperture Foundation (547 West 27th Street, 4th floor, Chelsea, Manhattan) through November 17.