

Emmet Gowin (b. 1941)

***Aeration Pond, Toxic Water Treatment Facility,
Pine Bluff, Arkansas, 1989***

Toned gelatin silver print on paper, 14 x 11", Copyright Emmet and Edith Gowin, Courtesy Pace/MacGill Gallery, New York, James A. Michener Art Museum. Museum purchase.



In the Words of the Artist

"Even when the landscape is greatly disfigured or brutalized, it is always deeply animated from within. When one really sees an awesome, vast, and terrible place, we tremble at the feeling we experience as our sense of wholeness is reorganized by what we see...This is the gift of a landscape photograph that the heart finds a place to stand." - Emmet Gowin, April 1994

"The one thing I learned from my experience is that it's not some stranger doing this [destruction of the physical environment]. When I look at the American landscape, I also feel with great sadness that we did this to ourselves." - Emmet Gowin, August 2004

Emmet Gowin took his first aerial photographs in 1980, when hired by the Seattle Arts Commission to document the devastation caused by the massive eruption of Mount St. Helens in Washington. He recorded the volcanic aftermath from an airplane, using a motorized Hasselblad camera, the model developed to record NASA space flights. These images helped cement his concern for and connection to the Northwestern United States. As a result of this project, Emmet Gowin became interested in documenting the contrast between beautiful global landscape and the destruction that has occurred as a result of human activity on earth. He has photographed military test sites, mining operations, golf courses, off-road vehicle courses, coal mines, power plants, and toxic waste treatment facilities. He records the contrast between the natural beauty of the landscape and the visible scars that are left by a seemingly relentless human footprint. He is recognized as one of America's leading photographers.

About this Artist

Arguably Bucks County's best-known living artist, Emmet Gowin is a distinguished photographer who is known for his poetic and evocative approach to the medium. He is a photographer well known for his aerial shots that show the effects of human activity on the landscape. Emmet Gowin once stated that he likes the view of "what the Gods see." Gowin attended the Richmond Professional Institute in Virginia and then received a Master of Fine Arts from the Rhode Island School of Design in 1967. His early work, begun while he was in graduate school, dealt with themes of family and community by exploring the lives of four generations of his wife's family in Danville, Virginia. While taking these photos, he began to experiment with shots from different angles, something he would later use in his work.

In 1980, Gowin became fascinated with the devastation caused by the eruption of Mount St. Helen's in Oregon. He began to make aerial photographs of the area, and then expanded the project to include aerial photography of such far-flung locations as Kuwait, Japan, and the Czech Republic. In 1982, Queen Noor of Jordan, a former student of Gowin's at Princeton University, invited him to photograph Petra, an ancient city in Jordan. Gowin was the subject of a major traveling retrospective in 1990 organized by the Philadelphia

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Museum of Art. In 2002 the Yale University Art Gallery organized another traveling exhibition of his aerial photographs, accompanied by the major publication *Emmet Gowin: Changing the Earth, Aerial Photographs*. His work is available in several books, including *Emmet Gowin: Photographs* (1976), *Emmet Gowin Photographs* (1966-1983), and the very famous *Changing the Earth: Aerial Photographs* (2002). His work is also in the collections of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Philadelphia Museum of Art, the Tokyo Museum of Art, and the James A. Michener Art Museum.

About this Artwork

Emmet Gowin took this photograph, *Aeration Pond, Toxic Water Treatment Facility, Pine Bluff, Arkansas*, from a small airplane. By looking down on the earth, he was able to see this aeration pond from a different point of view, similar to what a bird would see. Photographs like these can be taken from a small plane or a helicopter, and are called aerial photographs. One of the first pictures Emmet Gowin made from a high place was from a tree house that his nephews made. There was a hole through which he took a photograph. He liked the idea of the different view. It was not very high, but it gave him an idea for a different way to look at everything. Since 1980, Gowin has mostly taken aerial photographs.

Emmet Gowin realized he could see many things from the air that he would not see from the ground. From the ground, he would only see the wheat fields in the background of this photograph without the trace of the aeration pond. From the air, the scene takes on an abstract quality, and the pond appears to be filled with large white bubbles, fried eggs, or melting shapes. There are no people or animals in his environmental photographs, but Gowin's photographs are very clearly a record of the actions of human beings on the earth. He wants his audience to pay attention to how the actions of humans are impacting the earth, and to think about changing these actions to help the planet survive.

Aerial photography is typically done from a helicopter or small airplane. In either of these vehicles, an artist can fly with the door removed. The artist has almost complete freedom to use their camera as they would in any other situation. Helicopters are especially helpful when creating aerial photographs. They can legally be flown at any altitude, as long as there is an open area of some sort to which the helicopter could auto-rotate in the event of engine failure and not create a hazard to persons or property on the surface. In practice, this means that helicopters may be flown very low indeed. The most efficient speed for a helicopter is usually around 60 mph and, if necessary, the machine may be slowed down to a mid-air hover or even flown backwards over the ground.

Looking Questions

- Make a list of everything you can see in this work of art.
- Describe the foreground and background of this photograph.
- What specific objects do you recognize in the foreground and background?
- Describe the contrasts you see in this photograph. Consider color, texture, shape, line, and even subject matter.
- Is this work of art abstract or realistic? Defend your observations.
- How was this work of art created? What visual clues do you see that help you understand the artist's process?
- Why do you think Emmet Gowin uses aerial photography to create his images?
- What do you find appealing about this work of art? What do you find unappealing?
- Why is a photograph considered a work of art? Explain.
- Emmet Gowin is interested in showing us the impact humans have on the landscape and the environment.

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- Do you think that artists can influence how we think about our environment?
- Do you think works of art can help us change our actions?
- Why do you think the Michener Art Museum has this photograph in its collection?

Key Vocabulary

- | | |
|----------------------|----------------------------------|
| • Organic | • Aeration pond |
| • Geometric | • Abstract |
| • Background | • Realistic |
| • Foreground | • Contrast |
| • Photography | • Point of view |
| • Aerial photography | • Portraiture |
| • Environment | • Landscape |
| • Human Footprint | • Toxic water treatment facility |
| • Perspective | • Nuclear test site |

Themes

Aeration Pond, Toxic Water Treatment Facility, Pine Bluff, Arkansas, addresses a variety of themes for discussion and lesson planning. These include:

- Environmental art
- Aerial photography
- Human environmental footprint
- The Industrial Revolution
- History of environmental issues
- National parks
- Forces in art
- Environmental solutions
- Current events

Related Art Projects

Elementary

Aeration Pond, Toxic Water Treatment Facility, Pine Bluff, Arkansas, is an aerial photograph. It represents a view of a landscape that would look very different if depicted at ground level. Choose something in the landscape with which you are very familiar – your home, your school, or your neighborhood. Create an original work of art in any medium that depicts that landscape from an aerial view as you imagine it would be.

Middle School

In his photograph, *Aeration Pond, Toxic Water Treatment Facility, Pine Bluff, Arkansas*, Emmet Gowin has used a unique point of view to share a striking landscape with his audience. This point of view makes it difficult to determine the subject matter in his photograph. Is it realistic or abstract? Create an original painting or photograph of a landscape or object of your choosing. Use a point of view that will give your work of art an abstract quality when it is complete.

High School

Study the landscape images of Emmet Gowin. Create a relief sculpture that interprets his images in three dimensions. Use color, texture, form, and depth to emphasize key elements of the Gowin photographs to add

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power to your work.

Related Visual Arts / Art History Projects

Elementary

Create a visual timeline about landscapes that have been created throughout history. Choose at least ten different landscapes from different parts of the world and different time periods. How do the images of the landscape change with varying time periods and cultures? How have environmental concerns crept into the depiction of landscapes by landscape artists throughout the years?

Middle School

Many photographers use their art to capture powerful portrait images. Emmet Gowin also took many photographs of family members. In them, we see the impact of time on the human condition. Create a chronicle over time of how the human condition has been portrayed in works of art. Start in the 14th Century with Hieronymus Bosch, and end in the 21st Century with Emmet Gowin. Write an essay or create a visual display to share your findings. Include at least 20 artists and artworks in your chronicle.

High School

Concerns about the environment are not new in the 21st Century. Air pollution was common in ancient times. Ancient Rome was notorious for sewage-filled streets. Timbering stripped the forests of Babylon, Greece, Phoenicia and Italy with the rise of civilization. Research current environmental issues in magazines, newspapers, online, and create a visual display incorporating works of art that track your findings about the environment, from ancient to modern times. How do critical environmental concerns compare throughout history? How has the human reaction and consequent action heightened or lessened environmental problems? Present your findings to our class in a Power Point presentation, film, or other visual display.

Compare and Contrast

Elementary

Nineteenth century photographs of the Yellowstone Plateau taken by William Henry Jackson proved so evocative and powerful that in 1872 the United States Congress saw a need to declare Yellowstone a National Park. Twentieth century photographer Ansel Adams worked with the United States Department of the Interior to create photographs of national parks, Native American reservations, and other locations for use as mural-sized prints for decoration of the Department's building. Look at photographs by these two artists, and compare them to the landscape you see in *Aeration Pond*. What are the similarities? What are the differences? How has the environment impacted the landscape throughout the centuries?

Middle School

Brooklyn photographer and world traveler Paul Grand uses photography to capture bold details in landscape, architecture, portraiture, and abstraction. His work emphasizes texture, form, shape, line, and color. Compare his images to Gowin's work. How does Grand use the medium of photography to communicate important themes to his audience?

High School

Photographer, curator, historian and critic John Szarkowski said about photographer Diane Arbus, "The force of her portraits may be a measure of the degree to which the subject and the photographer agreed to risk trust and acceptance of each other." Curator Jock Reynolds states that Emmet Gowin's work forces the viewer to see that "...extreme beauty and extreme cruelty exist side by side..." Compare the portrait photography of

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Arbus with the portrait and environmental photography of Emmet Gowin. How do the forces of risk, trust, acceptance, beauty, and cruelty emerge in the work of both artists?

Interdisciplinary Connections

Language Arts

Elementary

Read *The Earth Is Painted Green: A Garden of Poems About Our Planet* by Barbara Brenner, *The Lorax* by Dr. Seuss, and *My House Has Stars* by Peter Catalanatto. Discuss how stories, passages, and poems from these books reflect environmental concerns that you may have. Write your own poem or story that shares your knowledge or feelings about the environment.

Middle School

Research one environmental issue that you feel is most significant in contemporary society. Create a newspaper front page featuring the topic you selected. Include photographs, insightful articles, editorials, interviews, and other features that will present your concerns from a journalistic viewpoint.

High School

Read Rachel Carson's *A Silent Spring*, Henry David Thoreau's *Walden*, or Michael Pollan's *The Omnivore's Dilemma: A Natural History of Four Meals*. Write an essay presenting key environmental issues discussed in the book you selected, discussing historical influences on environmental issues, and presenting research-based solutions for the problems you perceive to be most critical.

Social Studies

Elementary

The environment is a great concern today to people around the world. Find a newspaper or magazine article that addresses an environmental issue you feel is important. Using books, magazines, and the Internet, learn more about this issue. Create a poster, a power point, a short film, or a presentation to teach your class about the issue. Include measures that are being taken to address the problem for future generations.

Middle School

The scale of human impact on the environment has gradually increased since the Industrial Revolution. Choose the three technological developments you feel have had the greatest impact on environmental issues facing the world today. Research them in depth, and develop a presentation about solutions in place and additional ideas you have to counteract the environmental impact of these developments for future generations.

High School

Emmet Gowin also made many photographs of the Nevada Test Site, a United States Department of Energy reservation located northwest of the city of Las Vegas, Nevada. Nuclear testing at the 1,350 square mile Nevada Test Site began with a 1000 metric ton bomb dropped on January 27, 1951. The area was used until 1992 to test nuclear devices. It is now used for small scale testing, and as a radioactive waste storage facility. Study the Nevada Test Site in depth. Compare photographic images from the site taken over the last six decades. Research the history of the site, and the evolution of our national attitude toward nuclear testing. Engage in a debate, defending or attacking nuclear testing in the 21st century. How do issues of nuclear testing compare with environmental concerns posed by the need for water purification and pond aeration?

Environmental Science

Elementary

Create a small garden at home or at school using native plants, grass, moss, stones, soil, pieces of wood, seashells, and other natural materials. Look at the garden from above. Create a drawing or photograph of the garden. How does the impact of your garden on the environment differ from the impact created by the aeration pond depicted in Emmet Gowin's work?

Middle School

Water aeration is the process by which air is circulated through water to purify it. It is often required in ponds that suffer a lack of oxygen, usually caused by adjacent human activities. Research pond aeration in depth. Why do bodies of water need oxygen to survive? What activities would cause a body of water to lose oxygen? What steps are currently in place to successfully aerate affected bodies of water? What preventative steps could humans take to lessen the problem of impacting oxygen content in ponds, lakes, and streams around the world? Present your findings and the answers to these questions in an essay.

High School

Evaluate the effects of human activities and technology on one particular ecosystem. Include a description of the effects of population growth, demographic transitions, cultural differences, and emergent diseases on societal stability. Explain how human activities affect global and local sustainability. Describe the actual and potential effects of habitat destruction, erosion, and depletion of soil fertility associated with human activities. Discuss your findings with your class in a group presentation.

Community Connections

There are many things you can do to help the environment. Start by educating yourself about environmental concerns such as global warming, nuclear weapons, endangered species, destruction of the rain forest, pollution, and nonrenewable resources. Involve yourself your friends, your family, and your school in raising awareness of a local, national or global environmental concern. Ultimately you can be part of the solution.

Resources

To learn more about Emmet Gowin, read:

- "Emmet Gowin: *Changing the Earth*", Seattle: The Henry Art Gallery, 2004.
- Gowin, Emmet. *Photographs*. Philadelphia: Philadelphia Museum of Art; Boston: Bulfinch Press, 1990.
- Reynolds, Jock. *Emmet Gowin: Changing the Earth, Aerial Photographs*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Art Gallery, in association with The Corcoran Gallery of Art and Yale University Press, 2002.

Related environmental books include:

- Brenner, Barbara. *The Earth is Painted Green: A Garden of Poems About Our Planet*. New York: Scholastic, 2000.
- Carson, Rachel. *A Silent Spring*. Boston: First Mariner Books Edition, 2002.
- Catalanotto, Peter. *My House Has Stars*. New York: Orchard Books, 1996.
- Dr. Seuss. *The Lorax*. New York: Random House, 1971.
- Pollan, Michael. *The Omnivore's Dilemma: A Natural History of Four Meals*. New York: Penguin Press, 2007.
- Thoreau, Henry David. *Walden*. Boston: Beacon Press, 2008.

Web Resources

The following resources were retrieved July 1, 2010.

- Learn about water aeration and wastewater treatment at www.all-about-wastewater-treatment.com.

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- Learn about the Nevada Test Site at the Atomic Testing Museum at www.atomictestingmuseum.org.
- Learn about the Industrial Revolution at the Yale Teacher's Institute at www.yale.edu.
- Learn about Hieronymus Bosch at the Metropolitan museum of Art at www.metmuseum.org.
- Learn about American photographer Ansel Adams at the Public Broadcasting Service, www.pbs.org.
- Learn about American photographer Diane Arbus at diane-arbus-photography.com. (*Note: images may be considered graphic for some student viewers*).
- Learn about American photographer William Henry Jackson at The Getty Museum at www.getty.edu.
- Read about contemporary photography and the environmental debate at The Smithsonian Photography Initiative at www.click.si.edu.
- View landscapes and photographs in the collection of the James A. Michener Art Museum on their website at www.michenerartmuseum.org. In the Bucks County Database at www.michenerartmuseum.org/bucksartists, look for painters Daniel Garber, Edward Redfield, William Lathrop, and Diane Burko, and photographers Jack Rosen, Paul Grand, David Graham, Marjorie Content, and Richard Barros, among others.
- Learn about Emmet Gowin at Learn with the Michener at www.learnmichenerartmuseum.org.

Credits

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