



ARTIST

Robert Hirsch

TITLE

Untitled (From Series, Architecture of Landscape)

DATE

1999

DIMENSIONS

20 in H x 16 in W

MEDIUM

Gelatin Silver Print

IMAGE NOTES

Toned Gelatin Silver Print

CATALOGUE NUMBER

2000.004

CURRENT LOCATION

Small Framed

ROBERT HIRSCH

BORN

1949

BIRTHPLACE

Ann Arbor, MI

GENDER

Male

CITIZENSHIP

United States

CULTURAL HERITAGE

European-American

LIGHT WORK RELATIONSHIP

Artist-in-Residence, 1999

Light Work Gallery, 2005

LIGHT WORK PUBLICATIONS

Contact Sheet 107

Contact Sheet 131

BIOGRAPHY

Hirsch Biography

Robert Hirsch lives in Buffalo, NY, and is a photographer, writer, and the Director of Light Research. His books include *Seizing the Light: A Social & Aesthetic History of Photography*, *Light and Lens: Photography in the Digital Age*, *Photographic Possibilities: The Expressive Use of Concepts, Ideas, Materials, and Processes*, and *Exploring Color Photography: From Film to Pixels*. Chinese and German editions of *Light and Lens* have been published. Hirsch is a former Associate Editor for *Digital Camera* (UK) and *Photovision Magazine*, and a contributor to *Afterimage*, *exposure*, *Buffalo Spree*, *Digital Camera*, *The Encyclopedia of 19th Photography*, *The Focal Encyclopedia of Photography*, *Fotophile*, *History of Photography*, *Photo Techniques*, *The Photo Review*, and *World Book Encyclopedia* among others. Also, he is the former Executive Director of CEPA Gallery founder of Southern Light Gallery, and co-founder of North Light Gallery. He has curated numerous exhibitions. His own images have been internationally exhibited in over 200 solo and group shows. He participated in Light Work's Artist-in-Residence program in May 1999.

circa 2018

ESSAYS

In photographs from the series *The Architecture of Landscape*, Robert Hirsch presents minute images of the populated landscape that appear to be half-glimpsed visions seen through a haze of memories and emotions. In a statement about this series Hirsch writes, 'Despite the critique of representation and originality that has been central to art-making and criticism for the last generation, the condition of looking for something to commemorate remains the essence of photographic practice. How this act of looking is organized—its particular routines, uncertainties, astonishments, and quixotic complexities—is what makes a photograph unique.' <http://www.negativepositive.com/> The images in the series often seem comfortable and familiar to the point of appearing mundane—like odd landmarks recognized out of the corner of the eye while speeding along a well-traveled route. Others are icons we may never have seen in person but still know well from movies, television, and books, Niagara Falls, the Western landscape of the Marlboro Man, and the Sphinx and the Great Pyramids—the latter looking as though they were transplanted to some tourist attraction nowhere near the Nile River. The series currently consists of 60 images that would be difficult to classify using conventional criteria in regard to subject matter; yet they all appear to be ambiguously related. The selection of the images reproduced here express that ambiguity and range from the heroic to the prosaic, a towering statue of Paul Bunyon, cattle grazing beside half-buried cars at the infamous Cadillac Ranch, a Christmas tree, a storm damaged building, and a scene from a state fair. When presented in their original form each image measures a mere 1 3/4 x 2 3/4' floating in a black background on a 20 x 16' sheet of paper. The edges of the image are blurred and irregular, and combined with the scale and dark background each image appears as if it were being viewed in a darkened theater from way back in the aisle. In a gallery setting the images must be viewed at a very close distance establishing an intimate relationship between viewer and photograph that heightens the sense of memory and emotion that each image conveys. In the process of looking for something to commemorate, Hirsch is drawn to the romantic ideals of modernism. He recently published a comprehensive book on the history of photography, and that history informs his most recent practice. As if paying homage to many of the masters he has studied in detail, the influence of Atget, Robert Adams, Lee Friedlander, and others is clearly in evidence throughout this work. In part, the commemoration that Hirsch chases down is the memory of celebrated photographs and photographers that have endured to enrich our senses and our minds generation after generation. By tipping his hat to the makers of notable images Hirsch also pursues a personal interest in the rift between human society and nature. But even the most revealing images in the series are far from harsh critiques of environmental chaos, falling back instead to a more contemplative look at the relationship between pristine and populated spaces. In this series Hirsch gives the viewer a variety of issues, concerns, and techniques to think about and digest. He massages meaning out of every nuance in the series from the choice of subject to the scale of the images, and each decision that he has made seems to open up opportunities for further investigation. Rejecting the current trend toward making ever larger prints, his choice of scale is intrinsically meaningful. The small size of the images creates an instant intimacy with the viewer, and can also be thought of as a way of diminishing the individual importance of each single picture as it appears to recede into the void of the black background. Or perhaps what Hirsch sees disappearing in contemporary photography is the act of looking for something to commemorate—the very condition that this series attempts to celebrate. Jeffrey Hoone ©2000 All images are unutilized from the series *Architecture of Landscape*, selenium-toned Gelatin Silver Prints, 20 x 16'. Each print is unique and has been made from a single negative that is interpreted by unconventional uses of light that include fiber optics, light painting, and masking. Artist Work: CEPA Gallery at Thirty This exhibition and catalogue pay tribute to a group of artists who have made the Center for Exploratory and Perceptual Arts (CEPA Gallery) in Buffalo, NY, a respected venue for artists, and run by artists, for over thirty years. During that time CEPA has been a consistent example of what alternative art spaces were meant to be—innovative, energetic, fast on their feet, and always on the edge. Like many other alternative art spaces across the country, CEPA was formed in the early 1970s by a small group of artists with common goals. By combining activism with an entrepreneurial spirit, similar groups of like-

minded artists sprang up all over the country to create an alternative to existing cultural institutions by placing the entire decision-making structure of the group in the hands of artists. Fueled by the civil rights movement, the women's movement, and the anti-war movement, the alternative space movement was one of self-determination where artists decided that they understood best the needs of other artists and were best equipped to respond to those needs. The alternative space or artist space movement cut across all mediums. In the process unused storefronts, empty factories, and abandoned classrooms were turned into galleries, performance spaces, and workshops through the force of sheer will and youthful enthusiasm. Incredibly, the government became a willing partner with these organizations whose aim was to question the very status quo the government sought to uphold. By the mid 1970s the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) had several grant programs to specifically support alternative spaces, and the New York State Council on the Arts (NYSCA) was actively encouraging proposals from similar organizations especially in Upstate New York. The federal Comprehensive Employment and Training Act (CETA program) probably played the biggest role in sustaining alternative spaces by providing salaries for artists to work directly for, or under the auspices of, a specific organization. Although the CETA program is long gone, the NEA and NYSCA still support alternative spaces, albeit with a bit more caution and regulation. Those spaces active today typically receive less than 10% of their total support from government sources. By the end of the 1970s hundreds of artist-run organizations across the country had received tax-exempt status from the federal government. Driven by the desire to respond to the needs of artists, these organizations provided a myriad of services including exhibitions, publications, access to work space facilities, performance venues, educational programming, and public art projects. Concentrating primarily on serving emerging and under-recognized mature artists, these organizations helped foster and support a generation of artists and usher in significant cultural shifts that continue to influence mainstream institutions. Alternative spaces included women and artists of color in their programs and set an early example for many other institutions. Educational programs and practices pioneered by alternative spaces, especially in the area of media arts, have been adopted and embraced by colleges and universities. The entire genre of performance art was nurtured by the alternative space movement, and most artists who have risen to prominence since the 1970s received their first exhibition or performance opportunity at an alternative space. The many contributions that alternative spaces have made to the cultural richness of the country are surpassed only by the unheralded accomplishments of the many who made it all possible—the individual artist wearing the hats of cultural worker, curator, administrator, fundraiser, janitor, chauffeur, gofer, accountant, writer, designer, and publicist, all at once and all of a sudden. There were no training programs or MBAs for these artists turned administrators. They learned by doing and invented their jobs as they went along, dashing the stereotype that artists could only function using one side of their brains. There is perhaps nothing harder to sustain than an organization built on idealism and enthusiasm. Sooner or later the energy needed to stay up all night painting gallery walls, cleaning glass, mopping the floor, running to the hardware store, raising the money, buying the food and wine, setting the table, and turning on the lights so everything will be ready for the opening—that you hope people will show up for—takes its toll. No matter how optimistic you are, you can still get burnt-out, and many alternative spaces did not survive these daily challenges. In order to endure for thirty years as a small non-profit organization, CEPA has managed to avoid burn-out with creative survival strategies without losing their desire to take risks and to support artists at all costs. This energy has not only survived but has been successfully transferred and maintained by twelve different directors over four decades. CEPA is one of the few alternative spaces that has always had a working artist as its director. The dedication of those individuals as well as the many other artists who have helped the organization as curators, assistants, instructors, interns, volunteers, friends, and board members is what makes it unique and a cause for celebration. I first became aware of CEPA in 1980 just after I was hired as the assistant director at Light Work. Light Work and CEPA are both photography organizations influenced to a large extent by the Visual Studies Workshop in Rochester whose founder and first director Nathan Lyons was one of the pioneers of the alternative space movement. At that time there was also an amazing explosion of photography organizations across the country that fueled CEPA's enthusiasm and sense of shared mission including Light Work in Syracuse, New York; the Midtown Y Gallery and En Foco, New York City; the Catskill Center for Photography (now the Center for Photography at Woodstock), Woodstock, New York; the Houston Center for Photography; Light Factory, Charlotte, North Carolina; the Photographic Resource Center, Boston, Massachusetts; the Los Angeles Center for Photographic Studies; San Francisco Camerawork; Blue Sky Gallery, Portland, Oregon; and Aperion Workshops, Millerton, New York. Out of all these organizations I formed an easy bond with Biff Henrich, CEPA's director at the time, and Bob Collignon who was curating some of CEPA's exhibitions. Right from the beginning I always felt that the three of us were on the same page about what it meant to be in a position to support other artists (although we often disagreed on which ones), and we freely exchanged ideas about artists, exhibitions, and publications as well as other mundane topics like screw guns, drywall, writing grant proposals, and creative ways to complete final government grant reports. I have worked with all subsequent directors at CEPA in a variety of different capacities and have always admired how each one has managed to keep the organization prospering and pushing the limits against daunting odds. For thirty years and counting CEPA has been out on its own renting, sharing, or borrowing space to accomplish their goals, and they have never given in or compromised their ideals in the process. They have remained on the edge supporting artists, championing causes, beating the bushes for new work, and taking risks because that is what they do best. As a culture, the artists we have come to respect and admire are the ones who can interpret and describe with clarity their particular moment in history no matter where those questions lead or how far out of our comfort zone they take us. For the past thirty years CEPA has been led by artists with that same commitment and resolve. They have been visionaries, cultural workers, role models, rule breakers, deal makers, and agents of change—confirming that artists will always find innovative ways to work, and when artists run an organization, they truly do make a difference. Jeffrey Hoone ©2005 Robert Hirsch lives in Buffalo, NY, and participated in Light Work's Artist-in-Residence program in May 1999. In photographs from the series *The Architecture of Landscape*, Robert Hirsch presents minute images of the populated landscape that appear to be half-glimpsed visions seen through a haze of memories and emotions. 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