



Ansel Adams in Our Time Educator Guide

Spring/Summer 2021

Introduction

[*Ansel Adams in Our Time*](#) celebrates the remarkable artistry and visual legacy of the acclaimed American landscape photographer and educator. More than 100 photographs by Adams, from his earliest marketed prints to his world-renowned Western vistas, trace the artist's development and maturation over five decades while pointing to his continuing influence on landscape photography today. Eighty images by artists working before, during, and after Adams are presented in dialogue with his vintage prints and provide a deeper perspective on themes central to his practice. Works by contemporary artists, such as Wendy Red Star, Will Wilson, Binh Danh, Abelardo Morrell, and Catherine Opie, invite critical conversations on land, identity, and belonging; the meanings of wilderness and the wild; and photography's role in documenting both the environmental promise and the crises facing the American West today.

Below, you'll find prompts, activities, and resources to develop these themes and support integrating the exhibition into your teaching. Images from the exhibition are available to educators as a Google slideshow under the resources tab on the [Portland Art Museum webpage](#).

This exhibition is organized by the Museum Fine Arts, Boston, and curated for Portland by Julia Dolan, Ph.D., The Minor White Curator of Photography.

Prompts and Activities

What is a landscape? What is the effect of the presence or absence of human figures in a landscape artwork? What are the variety of scenes that "landscape art" can encompass? Can it portray urban as well as natural scenes, oceans as well as mountains? How does the use of black-and-white or color affect a landscape work?

- Ask students to explore these questions and develop a definition of landscape through inquiry and dialogue.
- If you'd like to reference art historical definitions, visit the [Tate Glossary of Art Terms](#):
 - [Landscape](#)
 - [Sublime](#)
- See also [A Brief History of Landscape Photography](#), *The Independent Photographer*
- Reflective writing and dialogue: When you hear the word *landscape*, what is a place from your life that you think of? What makes that place meaningful to you? What visual elements of that place would be important for you to share with someone who doesn't know that space? (Present as a pair activity by asking the students to describe their landscapes to each other.)
- Artmaking: Create an imaginary landscape that you "picture in your head." What is the significance of that landscape to you? There are many different kinds of materials you could use, including creating a still life with objects--a miniature landscape--that you draw or photograph.

For close looking and analysis:

- [Visual Thinking Strategies](#) questions are a great place to start.
 1. What's going on in this picture?
 2. What do you see that makes you say that?
 3. What more can we find?
- Ask students to generate questions: How many different questions can you ask about this photograph?
 - Explore subject matter, formal composition, artistic process and more.
- Ask students how they relate to the image: Is this a landscape we might see around us today? What makes the landscape familiar or strange?
- Recommended resource: [Learning to Look](#) by the Center for Creative Photography

Where was this photograph taken? Whose ancestral lands are these? What is the history of the people of this place? How does the photograph suggest or conceal evidence of that history?¹

- Ask students to select a photograph from the exhibition and research Indigenous and other histories of the place represented.
- Students may create a map, annotate the image, or write a historical or geographic essay based on their research.
- Artmaking: Create a work of art in response to the photograph that you have researched. How will your artwork visually represent this place across time,

¹ Adapted from lessons by NAYA Many Nations Academy teachers Renea Menchaca, Ben Taylor, and Ezra Whitman.

conveying what you've learned both about its history and about its present-day condition?

- Reflective writing response: Ask students to write a story or poem describing a place that is meaningful to their families. It could be a place where their families lived for many generations or a place that has become meaningful only recently. What makes this place meaningful to you and your family? What can you learn about the history of this place beyond your family's experience?
- Recommended resource: Native-Land.ca

What are the meanings of *the wild* and *the wilderness*? How do we relate to nature? How does our understanding of the natural world connect to our sense of identity? How do culture and history shape the ways we understand and respond to nature?²

- Compare different artists' portrayals of the same or similar places, for example, in Yosemite and Grand Teton National Parks. What different feelings are evoked by different presentations of the same place?
- Adams's "photographs popularized the notion that the American West was a pristine, and largely uninhabited, wilderness."³ How have contemporary artists interrogated that understanding of the West as outside of human history? How have they challenged the erasure or misrepresentation of Native American people, specifically, in this idea of the West?
- Suggested works:
 - Ansel Adams, *Clearing Winter Storm, Yosemite National Park*, about 1937
 - Ansel Adams, *The Tetons and Snake River, Grand Teton National Park, Wyoming*, 1942
 - Jonathan Calm, *Double Vision (Record)*, 2018
 - Abelardo Morell, *Tent-Camera Image on Ground: View of Mount Moran and the Snake River from Oxbow Bend, Grand Teton National Park, Wyoming*, 2011
 - Catherine Opie, *Untitled #1 (Yosemite Valley)*, 2015
 - David Benjamin Sherry, *Moon Over Rocks, Monument Valley, Arizona*, 2013
 - Wendy Red Star, *Indian Summer, from the series Four Seasons*, 2006
 - Will Wilson, *Auto Immune Response No. 2*, 2005
 - Will Wilson, *How the West Is One*, 2014
- Recommended reading: [William Cronon, "The Trouble with Wilderness; or, Getting Back to the Wrong Nature,"](#) in William Cronon, ed., *Uncommon Ground: Rethinking the Human Place in Nature*, New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1995, 69-90.
- Video: [Abelardo Morell on Ansel Adams in Our Time at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston](#)

² Adapted from Carolyn Hazel Drake, PPS Visual Arts TOSA, Heart of Portland Thematic Statement 2021: Internal and External Landscapes.

³ [Ansel Adams in Our Time, Museum of Fine Arts Boston](#)

What creates a sense of belonging to a place? How do artists in the exhibition explore belonging and displacement in the American West? How do artists use portraiture (including self-portraiture) in relation to landscape to complicate our understanding of the American West?

- In 1943, Ansel Adams photographed the Manzanar War Relocation Center in Inyo County, California, where Japanese American people were forcibly detained during World War II. He later wrote, "The purpose of my work was to show how these people, suffering under a great injustice, and loss of property, businesses and professions, had overcome the sense of defeat and despair [sic] by building for themselves a vital community in an arid (but magnificent) environment."⁴ How do these photographs compare to Adams's other photography? How do they create a different understanding of the American West? What are the tensions or conflicts that you see between the experiences of Japanese Americans in Manzanar and the ideas of the West suggested by the landscape photography?
- Suggested works:
 - Ansel Adams, *Entrance to Manzanar and Potato Field, North Farm, Manzanar*, 1943
 - Jonathan Calm, *Green Book: Crater Lake Lodge*, 2019
 - Binh Danh, *Badwater Basin (Sea Level), Death Valley National Park, April 30, 2017*, 2017
 - Zig Jackson, *Indian Man on Ocean Beach*, 1994 and *Indian Man on the Bus*, 1994
 - Melodie McDaniel, *Compton, CA (Kenny with Ebony)*, 2016
 - Abelardo Morell, *Tent-Camera Image on Ground: View of Mount Moran and the Snake River from Oxbow Bend, Grand Teton National Park, Wyoming*, 2011
 - Wendy Red Star, *Indian Summer, from the series Four Seasons*, 2006
 - Will Wilson, *How the West Is One*, 2014
- Suggested resource:
 - [Ansel Adams's Photographs of Japanese-American Internment at Manzanar](#), Library of Congress

How do landscape photographers portray human impacts on the environment? How do we visualize climate change, pollution, and other environmental crises?

Suggested works:

- Ansel Adams, *Grass and Burned Stump, Sierra Nevada, California*, 1935
- Ansel Adams, *Cemetery Statue and Oil Derricks, Long Beach, California*, 1939
- Mitch Epstein, *Altamont Pass Wind Farm, California*, 2007
- Laura McPhee, *Midsummer (Lupine and Fireweed)*, 2008
- Will Wilson, *Auto Immune Response No. 2*, 2005

⁴ [Ansel Adams's Photographs of Japanese-American Internment at Manzanar](#), Library of Congress.

The practice of photography: Explore artists' accounts of their photographic process through the artist websites listed below as well as these resources.

- Video: [Wet Plate Photography by Will Wilson](#)
- [Abelardo Morell on his use of the tent camera](#)
- [Intimate Nature: Ansel Adams and the Close View](#), Center for Creative Photography

Additional Resources

[Ansel Adams in Our Time, Portland Art Museum](#)

- We will continue to add resources and program information over the coming months.

[Ansel Adams in Our Time, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston](#)

Art Unbound Podcast Episode: [Ansel Adams: In Our Time](#) with Karen Haas, MFA Boston's Lane Senior Curator of Photographs, and Julia Dolan, PhD, The Minor White Curator of Photography, Portland Art Museum

[The Poster Project](#)

- [Wendy Red Star](#)
- [Will Wilson](#)

Senf, Rebecca A. ***Making a Photographer: The Early Work of Ansel Adams.*** Yale University Press: New Haven, 2020.

- Conversation about *Making a Photographer* between Rebecca Senf and Julia Dolan, March 25, 2021: [Rebecca Senf and Julia Dolan in conversation](#)

Artist websites

- [Jonathan Calm](#)
- [Binh Danh](#)
- [Mitch Epstein](#)
- [Zig Jackson](#)
- [Melodie McDaniel](#)
- [Laura McPhee](#)
- [Abelardo Morell](#)
- [Wendy Red Star](#)
- [David Benjamin Sherry](#)
- [Will Wilson](#)

Thank you to members of the Teacher Advisory Council for advice and suggestions on this resource!

