Exhibition Catalogue//

Or Gallery//

Exhibition//5 June - 10 July 2010
Curated by Michaela Rife

Dust on the Lens

Jeremy Everett
Simone Jones
Richard T. Walker
Will Wilson

Dust on the Lens
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My most enthusiastic thanks are reserved for the artists of Dust on the Lens, and to William L. Fox for the use of his wonderful desert poem.
- Michaela Rife

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six parts

rust in the street

rust in the sand

glass underfoot and

rust in your hand

sand in your mouth

sand in your eyes

rail ties and rust

long lines in the dust

rails in the sand

rails over glass

hot beds of rust

long lines of dust

hot sand and wire

barbs in the rust

hot sky and wire

barbs in the dust

hot barbs at night

hot wire and rust

hot barbs hold tight

hot hands and brush

wind over rust

wind in the wire

wind at your back

wind and white dusk

William L. Fox, six parts, 1994. © William L. Fox. Reprinted with permission, courtesy the poet.
Fox is the Director of the Center for Art + Environment at the Nevada Museum of Art. His writing, both poetry and non-fiction, often responds to the Great Basin, his home desert.

Above//Richard T. Walker
proximity of longing, 2013
Courtesy the artist and Carroll/Fletcher, London

Essay//Text by Michaela Rife

Dust on the Lens

There is a natural phenomenon whereby the fusion of a bolt of lightning with quartzose sand creates a fulgurite, sometimes called petrified lightning. A fulgurite is, quite literally, nature-made glass, and though birthed by less awesome processes, man-made glass requires the same ingredients. So, when nineteenth century explorers and surveyors first hauled their cameras and lenses into the American desert, these apparatuses were not as foreign as one might expect. Their goal was to take a seemingly alien land and present it for visual consumption by urban audiences. Decades later a young film industry would do the same thing. Dust on the Lens continues these projects, or more aptly put, responds to them.

This is no easy task, because the desert resists representation. The entanglement of a varied cultural history regarding the nature and portrayal of deserts with contemporary rhetoric of desertification, water shortage and global warming, has led to a geographic classification difficult to picture precisely. This is to say, the cartoon landscape of sand dunes and cacti is not always appropriate. In fact deserts are defined by their water levels, giving up more than they take in. So one may find a desert in bloom, or a flooded plain. And deserts don't adhere to human borders, they expand and contract, they fluctuate between technical desert and semi-desert. Dust on the Lens aims to turn an eye to the lenses that capture the desert region of the American West, while acknowledging its fluctuations.

A crucial shift in the human history of the Desert West is its estimation in aesthetic and cultural value systems. Where the early nineteenth century saw Euro-Americans referring to the vast interior west of the Mississippi River as the "Great American Desert", the driving of the golden spike in 1869 (signifying the completion of the transcontinental railroad) demonstrated the young nation's supposed mastery of geography. And yet, Timothy O'Sullivan had only recently captured the first photograph of the Great Basin

(previous attempts with daguerreotypes had failed miserably). But the camera lens, like the railroad tracks, divided spaces just as effectively as it shrank them. So while America's earliest National Parks, like Yosemite, conformed to photographic codes of sublime natural beauty, arid desert regions looked like empty wastelands. The decision of which lands deserved to be protected or sacrificed seemed simple. According to environmental historian William Cronon, it was

the encroachment of the Industrial Revolution, emblematized by advancements like the railroad, which necessitated the sudden need to preserve the American frontier: "...if wild land had been so crucial in the making of the nation, then surely one must save its last remnants as monuments to the American past–and as an insurance policy to protect its future."[1] It is this logic that allows for Death Valley National Park to share space with the Nevada Atomic Testing Site. The same logic that underpins government mandated relocation of Native Americans from land suddenly cordoned off as "untouched." One culture's home is another's national park, one culture's sacred site is another's toxic dumping ground. American deserts exist at the collision of these values.

wind and white dusk

One such protected site is the Anza-Borrego State Park in the Californian portion of the Sonora Desert. This desertscape is the stuff that fashion shoots and advertisements are made of: distant low mountains, spindly plant life, sightlines for miles. It is to this scene that British-born, San Francisco-based artist Richard T. Walker introduces a projector and screen, against the background of ocotillos and the dim desert twilight. But Walker brings more than picturing technologies, he brings (and confronts) the histories and legacies of European visitors to the New World's deserts, particularly those visual pilgrims seeking paradigmatic nature.

Walker stands distinct from those preceding generations of his countrymen who travelled into the Desert West seeking rapturous landscapes and surreal experiences. Instead he shoulders the expectations these traditions have created, turning their mediums inside out. So instead of reading platitudes to his setting, we read melancholic statements like "I have forgotten the beauty of a vista". Walker's photographic presentation, harnessing this quintessentially Western medium, complicates the notion that underpins pilgrimages to protected landscapes, the idea that we can somehow achieve unmediated unity with nature. Spreading his photographs before us like a filmstrip, Walker moves us through the frustration of the contemporary desert wanderer, the individual looking for wholeness in a place that persistently asserts its own identity.

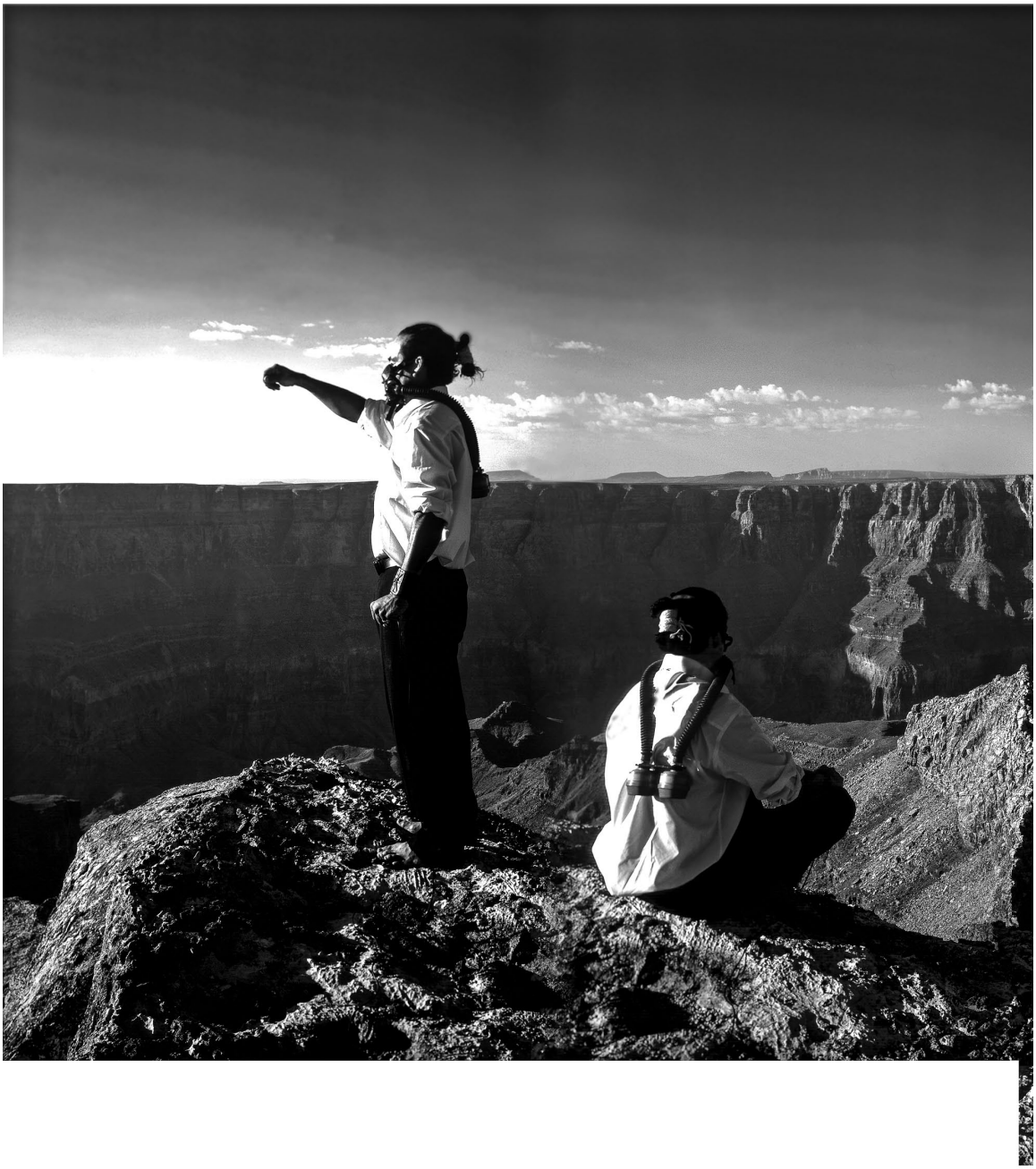
hot hands and brush

European aesthetic tradition is particularly predicated on an unpeopled space. For a landscape to be sublime it must be "untouched." And of course hand-in-hand with the gold rush and railroads came the United States Government's so-called Indian Wars, an unyielding push to seize and repurpose Native American geographies. As such, National Parks were never "untouched", and reservations were established on land that was considered valueless. But values change, and following the Second World War, uranium was at a premium and easily mined in the Navajo Nation.[2] The U.S. Atomic Energy Commission guaranteed a price

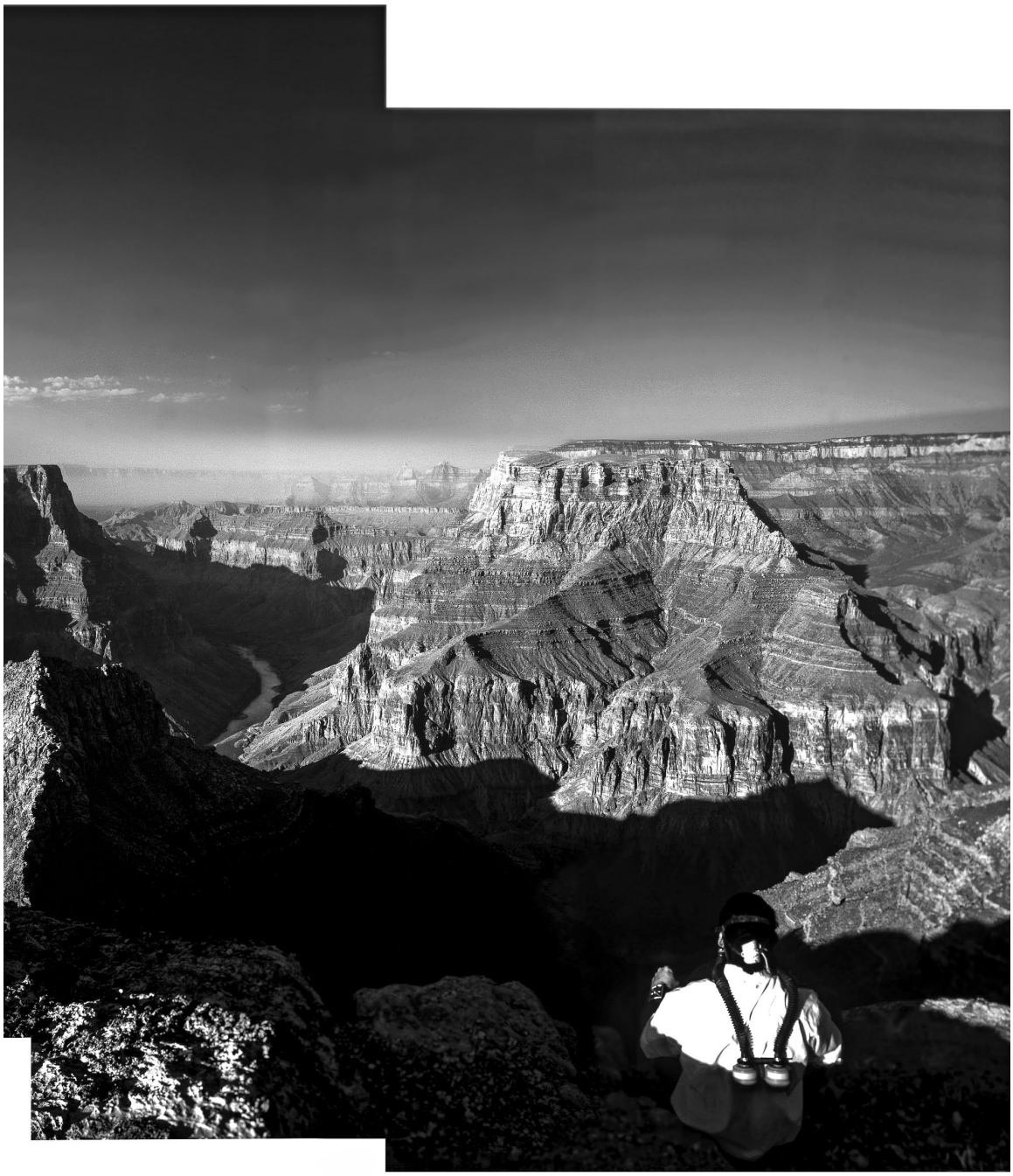
for the yellow substance that Navajo cosmology mandated remain in the ground, and another mining boom was born. The environmental plights of this and other exploitative endeavors on native land are incalculable, and abandoned mines continue to fester.

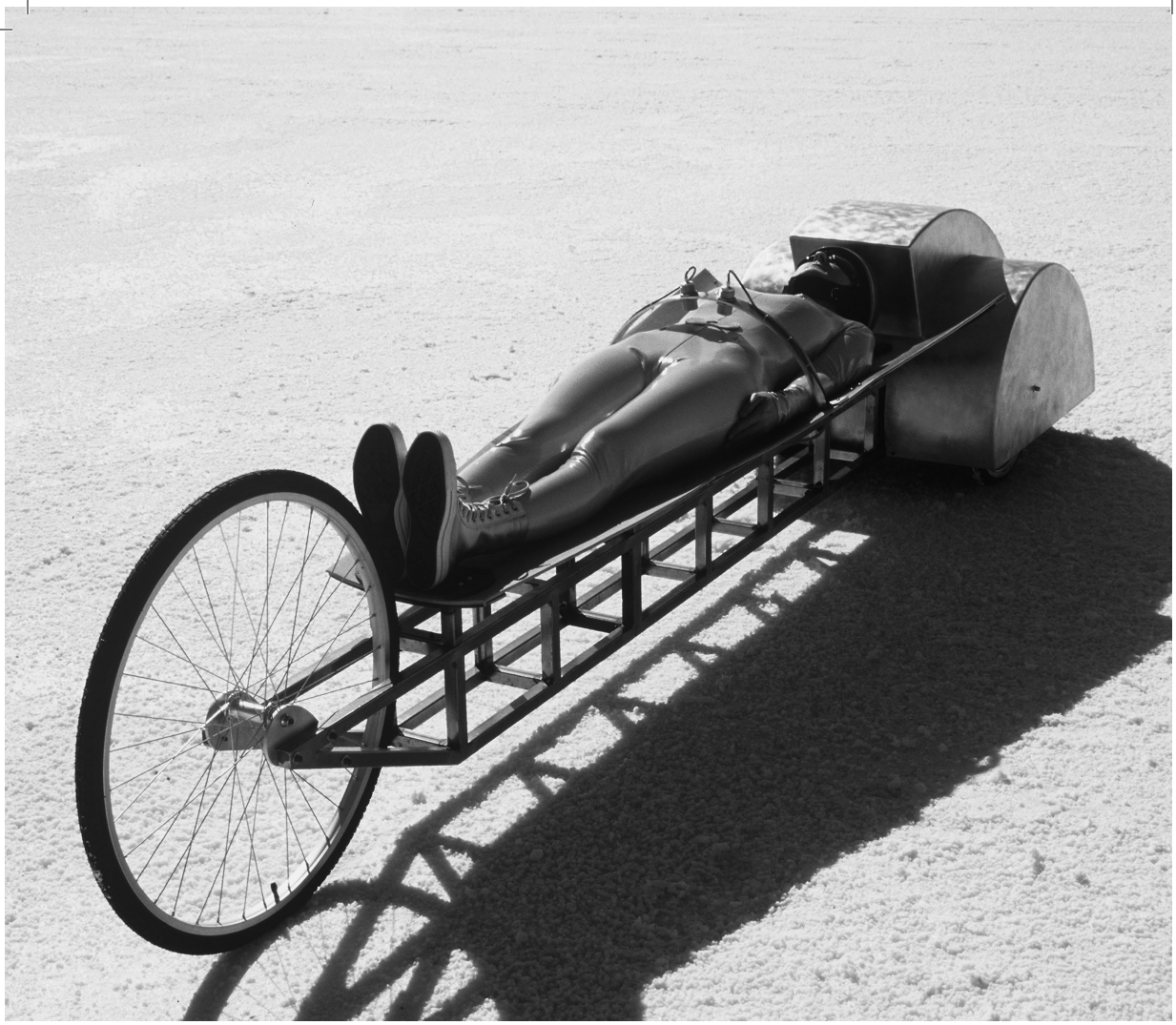
Santa Fe-based Diné artist Will Wilson grew up in the lands of the Navajo Nation before developing a photographic practice that frequently responds to the medium's history in the West and with Native peoples. His Auto Immune Response (AIR) series combines visually stunning landscapes with his own image, sometimes multiplied, often wearing a gas mask or with yellow liquid dripping from his face. These signs bely the apparent health of sublime landscapes. But there is something else at play here. We cannot be sure if Wilson's gas mask protects him, or if the land is beyond repair, but the mask indicates that this series is not an elegy. It is, as the title suggests, a response.

Above//Simone Jones
Perfect Vehicle, 2006
Images courtesy of Ronald Feldman Fine Arts, New York



Will Wilson
Auto Immune Response no. 2, 2005
Courtesy the artist





long lines in the dust

The postwar rush for uranium was part and parcel of the rush into space, another American endeavor to shrink distances. So a century after the golden spike, American men walked on the moon, an alien surface not dissimilar from the cratered desert. In fact, NASA simulates lunar missions in the Mojave, and when speed demons want to break a record they head to Utah's Bonneville Salt Flats in the Great Basin, one of the flattest places on earth.

Like many desert places, the Salt Flats are often represented with masculine overtones: the explorer in the desert, the motorcycle on a lonely desert highway, the land artist with his bulldozer. So when Canadian artist Simone Jones straps into her Perfect Vehicle, which could easily be built for speed, in her shiny suit, we expect her to rocket across the frame. Instead, powering the single-person vehicle by the speed of her own breathing, we watch her inch across an enormous white expanse to an orchestral score best suited to an epic science fiction film. Cinema has loved the American desert for its surreal beauty and awesome scale, but Jones turns the medium inside out, forcing an infuriating speed, a nearly impossible duration.

Above//Simone Jones
Perfect Vehicle, 2006
Images courtesy of Ronald Feldman Fine Arts, New York

sand in your mouth

Alongside NASA and Hollywood, the canonical generation of American Land Artists moved into the desert with their bulldozers and dynamite. Unlike their nineteenth century forbearers, capturing a landscape photograph was no longer enough: the landscape needed to be the work. The need for remote, massive, and awesome earthworks also came with a new push to make arid land tenable for everyday living. So with desert cities and suburbs expanding, the tourist system of protected lands of particular aesthetic value also expanded. Today canonical works of land art are embedded in the same circuit of pilgrimage as National Parks and Monuments. Death Valley one exit, Walter DeMaria's Lightning Field another.

Colorado-born, New York-based artist Jeremy Everett participated in this expedition in 2010, driving into the Mojave's Death Valley. Like his forbearers, Everett came armed with technology. But in direct contrast to the industrial scale commonly associated with Land Art, Everett plugged a generic domestic vacuum cleaner into his car and ran the device over the desert floor until it exploded. You can't see Death Valley Vacuum from above, but like Michael Heizer's Double Negative, it was extractive at its core. And, like Double Negative, it will be experienced almost exclusively through the mediation of a lens.

As part of their Moon and Mars research activities NASA takes equipment into the Mojave Desert. The extreme conditions allow them to experiment with rover mobility and test imaging equipment. These activities emblematize the American desert's place today. It exists at the intersection of time immemorial and an immediate future; it is both mastered by, and master of technology; it is the backdrop to our science fiction fantasies and our scientific realities. The artists of Dust on the Lens recognize that these apparent contradictions are the result of humans heading into the desert, and that we kick up dust when we do. They point their cameras into the resulting cloud.

[1] William Cronon, "The Trouble With Wilderness, or Getting Back to the Wrong Nature," in Uncommon Ground: Rethinking the Human Place in Nature, ed. William Cronon (New York: W.W. Norton & Co. 1995): 76.

[2] The present day borders of the Navajo Nation comprise the Four Corners region of the United States, or the area where Arizona, Colorado, New Mexico and Utah meet (though none of Colorado lies within the political borders). The area is significantly smaller than the traditional Diné homeland. The area includes desert and semi-desert regions, including the Painted Desert in Arizona.

Above//Jeremy Everett
Death Valley Vacuum, 2010
Courtesy the artist

Dust on the Lens

Jeremy Everett
Death Valley Vacuum
2010
2 archival pigment prints, each 50" x 70"

Simone Jones
Perfect Vehicle
2006
video

Richard T. Walker
proximity of longing
2013
27 archival pigment prints, each 18" x 12"

Will Wilson
Auto Immune Response no. 2
2005
archival pigment print, 44" x 70"

Will Wilson
Auto Immune Response no. 6
2005
archival pigment print, 44" x 97"

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