

Oct. 3, 2026 - Apr. 11, 2027 | Teacher Guide

ABOUT THE EXHIBITION

American Prospects and Landscape Photography, 1839 to Today presents 80 photographic works that span the history of the medium. The exhibition is anchored by Joel Sternfeld's *American Prospects*, a series of influential color photographs that reveal the character of the American landscape in the 1980s. Sternfeld's images capture scenes of sprawling suburbia, natural splendor, and the impact of human activities on the environment. Accompanying this series are works by other American landscape photographers who present their own views of the land and our relationship with it. Works by major figures in the history of photography, including Carleton Watkins, Ansel Adams, Dorothea Lange, and Robert Frank add context and complexity to the exhibition's exploration of place in the American imagination.

GOOD TO KNOW

This exhibition is on view in the museum's photography galleries (Galleries L10-L11).

The featured works vary widely in size, ranging from daguerreotypes measuring approximately 3 x 4 inches to contemporary prints measuring over 30 x 50 inches. Most of the images fall somewhere in the middle, making them suitable for viewing by pairs or small groups of students.

All works from the exhibition can also be viewed online at art.nelson-atkins.org/favorites/11035/american-prospects/objects.

Discussion questions in this guide are categorized as:

- **Inquiring Eye** – focused on the formal qualities of photographic images;
- **The American Landscape** – consider how photographs reflect different ideas and experiences of America;
- **Artist as Observer** – activity prompts for student photographers.

EXHIBITION CONTENTS

You will see 80 photographs taken by more than 30 American artists. About half of the images are in color, and the others are in black and white.

The exhibition is organized into six sections:

- **The Rise of Suburbia and Automobile Culture**
Observe the changing character of the American landscape as it was transformed by cars, commerce, and population growth in the second half of the twentieth century – changes that prompted some photographers to foreground evidence of human activity in their work.
- **Environmental Concerns**
See how American photographers use their art to communicate reverence for the power and scale of nature while also drawing attention to environmental scars and degradation caused by human activity.

- **Joel Sternfeld's *American Prospects***

Explore this influential series of photographs taken by Joel Sternfeld between 1978 and 1985, in which he sought to observe the landscape as a reflection of American identity.

- **The Importance of Color**

View works that represent the movement toward color film that took place in the 1970s, when artists like Joel Sternfeld embraced the role color could play in adding visual unity and expressive meaning to their landscape photographs.

- **Living with the Land: Art and Social Observation**

Consider how twentieth-century landscape photographers pursued a variety of artistic goals, including demonstrating positive and negative aspects of industrialization and celebrating the beauty of nature.

- **Early Expansion and Exploration**

See how early photographers took the emerging medium out of the studio and into the field, capturing landscape scenes that showed Americans their country in new ways.

BEFORE VIEWING THE EXHIBITION

As a class, discuss the title of this exhibition, which was inspired by photographer Joel Sternfeld's series of the same name: What does the phrase "American Prospects" mean to you?

A *prospect* can refer to either a future possibility ("the recent graduate has good prospects for employment") or a wide view of an area ("the trail offered a beautiful prospect of the valley below"). For a collection of landscape photographs that reveal aspects of American society, how might both definitions be appropriate?

Ask students to consider the landscapes that represent America to them. What scenes, places, people, or activities come to mind when they think about America as a place and as a set of ideals? How might our individual experiences and identities shape our answers to that question?

FEATURED WORKS & DISCUSSION QUESTIONS



Lauren Greenfield, *The property line between an abandoned home and its occupied neighbor in the Rosetta Canyon development, Lake Elsinore, California, 2008; printed 2017*

Inquiring Eye:

Before reading the title of this work, compare the two sides of the image. How is the house on the right similar to and different from the house on the left? If you could give this photograph a title, what would you call it?

After reading the actual title of the work and the information on the accompanying gallery label, does your understanding of the image change?

The American Landscape:

If this photograph were your only source of knowledge on the subject, what conclusions might you draw about American society?

Artist as Observer:

Take a landscape photograph that uses **contrast** (a difference in appearance, condition, size, etc.) to send a message about what America is to you.



Victoria Sambunaris, *Untitled (Border Road East, Douglas, AZ)*, 2010

Inquiring Eye:

Examine the entirety of this image - what path do your eyes take through the composition? Which areas of the image draw your attention? What impression does this photograph give of the land shown here?

The American Landscape:

Victoria Sambunaris stated that her goal in making this photograph of the border between Mexico and the United States was "to convey that it is one: one landscape and one place, although they're two different countries." Do you think she was successful? Why or why not?

Artist as Observer:

Think about a place in your community that might be misunderstood by someone who is unfamiliar with it. Take a photograph that shows the truth about that place, as you see it.



Joel Sternfeld, *McLean, Virginia, December 4, 1978*; printed 2005

Inquiring Eye:

Think of this photograph as one scene in the plot of a larger story. What do you think happened just before this photograph was taken? What might have happened after?

The American Landscape:

What initial impression does this photograph give of the landscape it depicts? What do think the artist is trying to convey about that place? After reading the

label that accompanies this work, how does your understanding of it change?

Artist as Observer:

Take a landscape photograph that includes action. Think about how the action you choose to capture can help reveal the character of that place.



Joel Sternfeld, *After a Flash Flood, Rancho Mirage, California, July 1979*; printed 1984

Inquiring Eye:

What words would you use to describe the top one-third of this image? What words would you use to describe the bottom two-thirds of the scene?

What do you think happened here? What do you see that makes you say that?

The American Landscape:

This photograph shows what can happen when human activity and powerful natural forces collide. Can you think of other instances from American history or from your own local community when nature and the built environment interacted in a startling way?

Artist as Observer:

Take a photograph that depicts an aspect of the relationship between human activity and the natural world.



Walker Evans, *Joe's auto graveyard, near Easton, Pennsylvania, November 1935.*

Inquiring Eye:

Photographers choose what to include within the borders of an image and what to leave out. Think about the scene shown here – what do you think was deliberately included and/or excluded from the photograph? How might the image be different if the photographer had made a different choice?

The American Landscape:

When we think of landscapes, we often think of pristine natural scenes. Why might an American photographer choose to make a landscape photograph that contains industrial elements like these abandoned cars?

Artist as Observer:

Look around your community for industrial products or structures that are placed within a natural setting. Think about what to include and exclude from your image as you take a photograph of that place.



L: Ansel Adams, *Half Dome, Merced River, Winter, Yosemite, about 1938; printed about 1980* | R: Mark Klett & Byron Wolf, *Eight Minutes at Glacier Point, 2002*

Inquiring Eye:

Compare and contrast these two views of Half Dome, one of the most recognizable natural landmarks in Yosemite National Park. Which one would you like to step into? Why?

The American Landscape:

Why might a photographer choose to **exclude** any hints of human presence from a landscape scene, even when photographing a location where people are typically present? Why might a photographer intentionally **include** people in a landscape scene?

Artist as Observer:

Take two photographs of the same natural environment. In one, try to avoid including any people or signs of human activity. In the other, capture a scene with people present.

AFTER VIEWING THE EXHIBITION

If students attempted any of the *Artist as Observer* photography challenges, have them compare and discuss their resulting photographs with one another. Were there any notable similarities or differences among the

landscape photographs they made? How do the photographs they took compare with the landscapes they saw in the exhibition?

In addition to the works in Joel Sternfeld's *American Prospects*, several of the photographs included in the exhibition were taken as part of a series or extended project. Encourage students to look online for images and information about the following series, and discuss how each of them presents a unique view of America:

- Robert Frank, *The Americans*
 - Bill Owens, *Suburbia*
 - Lewis Baltz, *Nevada*
 - Lauren Greenfield, *The Fall*
 - Mitch Epstein, *Old Growth*
 - David Taylor, *Border Monuments*
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IMAGE CREDITS

Lauren Greenfield, American (born 1966). *The property line between an abandoned home and its occupied neighbor in the Rosetta Canyon development, Lake Elsinore, California*, 2008. Series title: *The Fall*. Inkjet print, printed 2017, 19 1/16 x 28 3/4 inches. Gift of Lauren Greenfield and the Annenberg Space for Photography, 2022.20.1.

Victoria Sambunaris, American (born 1964). *Untitled (Border Road East, Douglas, AZ)*, 2010. Series title: *The Border*. Chromogenic print, 39 x 55 inches. Purchase: acquired through the generosity of the Photography Society, 2011.52.

Joel Sternfeld, American (born 1944). *McLean, Virginia*, December 4, 1978. Series title: *American Prospects*. Dye transfer print, printed 2005, 14 3/4 x 19 1/8 inches. Gift of Peggy and William Lyons, 2022.25.7.

Joel Sternfeld, American (born 1944). *After a Flash Flood, Rancho Mirage, California*, July 1979. Series title: *American Prospects*. Dye transfer print, printed 1984, 15 3/16 x 18 15/16. Gift of Peggy and William Lyon, 2022.25.3.

Walker Evans, American (1903-1975). *Joe's auto graveyard, near Easton, Pennsylvania*, November 1935. Gelatin silver print (printed later), 4 9/16 x 6 11/16 inches. Gift of Hallmark Cards, Inc., 2005.27.1348.

Ansel Adams, American (1902-1984). *Half Dome, Merced River, Winter, Yosemite*, about 1938. Gelatin silver print, printed about 1980, 14 11/16 x 19 1/4 inches. Gift of Margaret W. Weston in honor of the 75th anniversary of The Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art, 2007.39.5.

Mark Klett, American (born 1952) and Bryan Wolf, American (born 1967). *Eight Minutes at Glacier Point*, 2002. Inkjet print, 18 1/8 x 23 inches. Gift of the Hall Family Foundation, 2007.2.8.