

PHOTOGRAPHY

The Enigmatic Geography of Landscapes

By WILLIAM MEYERS

Alice Austen was born into a socially prominent Staten Island family in 1866. Her father abandoned her mother before she was born, so she grew up with her grandparents in Clear Comfort, their home overlooking New York harbor. An uncle gave her a camera when she was 10, and by her late teens she was taking competent photographs worthy of a professional. Remaining a passionate amateur, she took thousands of pictures over the next several decades, creating a valuable record of Staten Island, Manhattan, and her travels. The stock market crash of 1929 impoverished her and, after years of struggle, she moved into the local poorhouse in 1950.

OVERLAND: LANDSCAPE PHOTOGRAPHS BY DAVE ANDERSON AND ANDY RYAN
The Alice Austen House Museum

But there was a fairytale ending. In 1950, a publisher of photography books discovered her negatives, and her old pictures appeared in *Life* magazine. A Staten Island preservation group purchased and restored Clear Comfort, and on October 9 1951, Alice Austen Day was celebrated in Richmondtown. Austen died eight months later.

A once-gracious home, Clear Comfort has since become the Alice Austen House, a museum dedicated to Austen's work. Two young curators, Paul Moakley and Anthony LaSala, are expanding its mission to include contemporary photography. "Overland: Landscape Photographs by Dave Anderson and Andy Ryan" inaugurates a series dealing with the changing understanding of landscapes. New York, like all great cities, recycles its assets, and this show is a fine beginning for a building first erected in 1690.

Mr. Anderson's black-and-white images from his series "Roadside Ghosts" focus on oddments he has discovered in his wanderings around America. These pictures show the influence of his teachers Michael Kenna, Cig Harvey, and Keith Carter: They are simple, tightly composed, and atmospheric.

"Cowboy" (2004) is a close-up of the decapitated head of a larger-than-life-size statue, maybe folk art or a tacky roadside advertisement. The cowboy's hat is broken, but his face lies on the ground intact. We see in profile one side of his dark black beard, one clear eye, and half of his engaging smile. The body of the cowboy stands on the other side of a fence with its back to us.

Recent events have sensitized us to real-world beheadings, so the picture is more fraught than it might otherwise have been. The bright sunlight and dark shadows imply clear-cut distinctions, but the image is stubbornly ambiguous, not so much ghostly as ghoulish.

"Deer" and "Rocking Horse" (both 2005) also place statues in a landscape. The two deer are unpainted lawn ornaments — one a doe, one a stag — each standing on its own little platform. Their cement or plaster bodies contrast with the tangled thickets of trees and shrubs in the background. The picture's dark vignetting adds a mocking touch of Victorian sentimentality, and the result is simultaneously kitschy and pathetic.

The rocking horse is a fully three-dimensional figure suspended in mid-gal-



Andy Ryan, "Untitled" (2001), above; Dave Anderson, "Cowboy" (2004), below.

lop by a supporting frame. The sky is overcast, and the horse stands alone in the middle of a leaf-strewn clearing surrounded by some stately trees, with more densely clustered trees seen through a haze in the background. It is a melancholy image, redolent of the abandonment of childhood.

If Mr. Anderson's landscapes deal with bits and pieces found along the way, Mr. Ryan's black-and-white pictures illustrate the geography of a land where the sun never shines and there is not much of conventional interest. These dark pictures are composed of middle grays: You have to get close to make out what the shapes are shapes of. Often they are cars parked in the sort of anonymous real estate usually reserved for cars; dimly seen people wander in their midst, waiting for the morning light like refugees from an unpublished canto of Dante's "Purgatorio." The pictures are all untitled and undated, as if what they show — and hide — has to remain nameless and outside time.

In one picture we can make out the front half of a car parked about 6 feet from a 30-foot-high concrete wall. The car's headlights create a circle of light on the wall. The painted white stripes on the ground indicate it is a parking lot. There is a silhouette of a man standing on the far side of the car's hood. On the other side of the wall there is a structure of some sort, maybe an advertising billboard. The picture offers no clue as to which city, state, or country it was taken in.

Another picture takes place at the margin of a body of water. We see the back of one car and the front of a second parked at the side of the road next to the water. It has been raining, and there are puddles on the road. The road is at a height above the water, and a big rock protects traffic from going over. A plumpish man and a dumpy woman



stand with their hands behind their backs looking out across the water. Do they know each other, or are they the drivers of different cars, strangers who just happen to be standing at the same site? It is either after sunset or before sunrise; the water and the sky are merely different shades of gray.

One picture shows the equipment in an empty playground — slides, swings, climbing apparatus — by the side of an empty highway; it is, of course, night. Another is of a van parked by some scaffolding on top of which we see the bottom corner of an outdoor movie screen. The figures seated in aluminum beach chairs next to the van are looking away

from the screen. At what?

It is a feat that Mr. Ryan gets so much from so little. His pictures, for all their enigmatic murk, are very affecting.

Alice Austen was curious about the world and frequently left Clear Comfort to travel. Landscapes are a fitting theme to inaugurate her museum as a venue for new art, and G. Carl Rutberg, the executive director of the museum, should be congratulated for sponsoring this show.

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Until July 16 (2 Hylan Boulevard at Edgewater Street, Staten Island, 718-816-4506.)