

Arts & Leisure

Section 2

From the Sky, a Guilty Beauty in Earthly Devastation

By LYLE REXER

NEW HAVEN

FOR a photographer in pursuit of beauty, Emmet Gowin has managed to find his way to some very damaged places. From the polluted Hanford nuclear facility in Washington State to the hellish factories of the Czech Republic; from the dioxin-poisoned town of Times Beach, Mo., to Nevada's nuclear test sites, Mr. Gowin has created a spectacular archive of environmental devastation. Yet even a cursory examination of the 92 images in "Changing the Earth: Aerial Photographs" at the Yale University Art Gallery reveals that Mr. Gowin has looked into the abyss and found sublimity.

The end of the world has never looked so good.

"I liken my experience in these places to the time as a child when I ran behind a DDT truck," Mr. Gowin said. "There was no sense at the time of the damage it causes. We ran behind the plume of the truck because it was exciting and magical, and it was forbidden. We rarely look at something with the utter bewilderment of unknowing, but there can be that moment of unassigned perception that inspires a photograph, and only after the encounter do we pile on meanings and become caught up in history."

For 30 years, Mr. Gowin has perhaps been best known for the luminous and celebratory photographs he has taken of his wife, Edith, his family and their home in southern Virginia. Yet for the last 20 years he has also been documenting what would seem to be the exact opposite: landscapes altered on a vast scale, usually by events that are anything but causes for celebration.

What the projects have in common, however, is their origin in a close bond between photographer and place, a bond that cannot be broken by subsequent

knowledge, however horrific, and that is even deepened by it.

In 1980, Mr. Gowin went to Washington State to photograph Mount St. Helens after its eruption and returned several times to record its changing landscape from the air. But his true environmental epiphany came in 1986. Two years earlier, he had turned down an invitation to photograph near the Yakima Indian Reservation to dramatize the pollution of the Columbia River fishing grounds. But his curiosity was piqued, and on one of his last visits to Mount St. Helens, he took a side trip over the Hanford Nuclear Reservation, where uranium had first been enriched for nuclear weapons and where leakage from deteriorating storage containers threat-

**Beyond any outrage or agenda,
Emmet Gowin seeks out tortured
areas and finds their grandeur.**

ened the great Columbia River system.

The first photograph he made has been described by Jock Reynolds, the Yale Art Gallery director, as "immorally beautiful." In it, a ragged ribbon of river, expertly toned in the darkroom by Mr. Gowin to a pinkish silver sheen, unwinds toward the horizon. Along its banks is etched the ghostly pattern of a dismantled city that once held 30,000 people engaged in creating weapons of mass destruction. Mr. Gowin encountered a place that could never be saved by science but could perhaps be redeemed by art. "I vowed never to exclude myself from something I might be drawn to," he said.

The link between attraction and horror is strongest



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Emmet Gowin's 1986 picture of the Hanford Nuclear Reservation.

A Guilty Beauty, Seen From the Sky

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in the photographs of nuclear test sites at Yucca Flat and Frenchman's Flat in Nevada. Chilling aerial images portray the original ground zero and the lines of trenches where troops were stationed for blasts. More mysterious are photographs of a landscape dotted with subsidence craters from underground testing. At first glance, it seems that Mr. Gowin had managed to catch a flight to the moon. Only later does it dawn on us that the United States is probably the most irradiated country in the world.

Mr. Gowin tried for eight years to gain permission to fly over the sites. "When I first went up," he recalled, "I was euphoric at what I saw. By the third time, I was so sad, I realized I couldn't go on. I felt I had to bring this whole experience back into the arena of reflection."

The Nevada pictures have an apocalyptic gravity that resists easy conscription into an antinuclear campaign. Mr. Gowin said that the people who appreciated them most were those who had worked at the sites.

"They recognized I was not there to do harm," he said. "The work honored their sense of the seriousness and importance of what they had done." It also brought home to him that the genie of nuclear men-

Changing the Earth

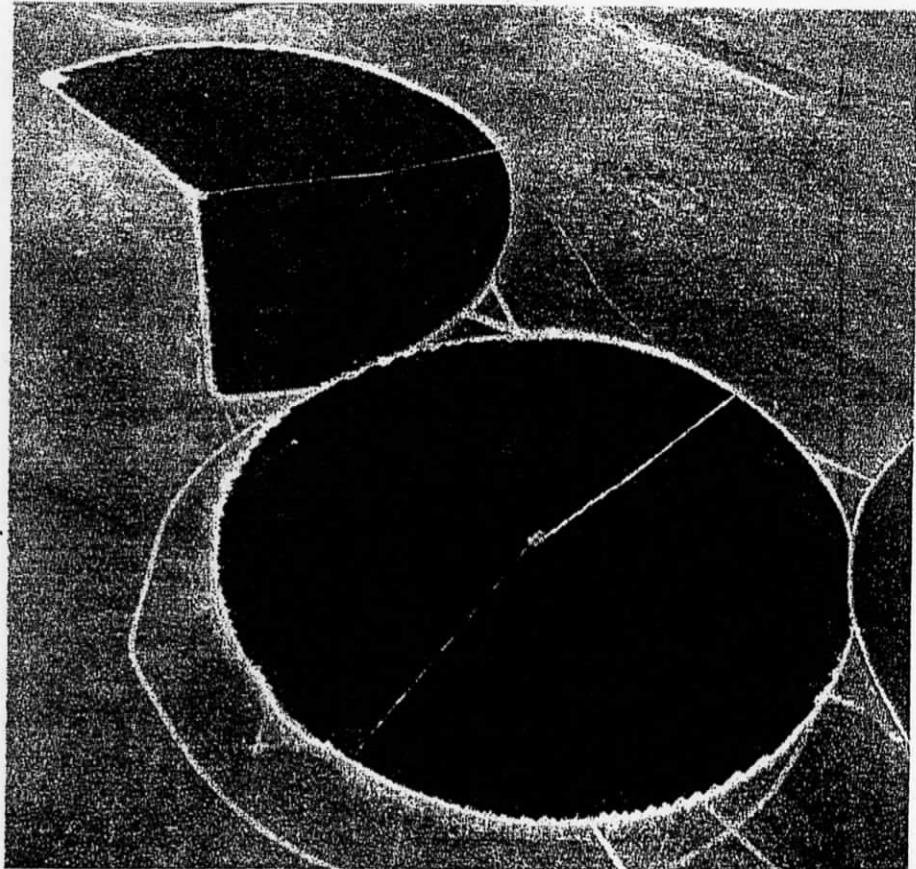
Yale University Art Gallery,
New Haven.
Through July 30.

**For Emmet Gowin,
it's art, not
propaganda, that
has a lasting effect.**

ace, be it war or pollution, can never be put back in the bottle. "That recognition supersedes all political considerations," he said.

In battles over the environment, indeed over nearly every cause, photographs are marshaled as weapons, evidence and outright provocation. We are inundated with images intended to sway us — from clear-cut forests to war victims and slaughtered seals. Many of the most memorable photographs verge on propaganda: take Robert Capa's image of a dying Spanish partisan, for example, or Walker Evans's W.P.A. photographs.

Caught between the documentary responsibility to bear witness and the lure of a beauty that transcends moral outrage, Mr. Gowin inevitably chooses beauty. He invests the image of a desert watershed near a nuclear power plant with the timeless delicacy of an engraving. He transforms the circular patterns of pivot agriculture, based on gigantic rotating irrigation devices and often practiced in places where water systems cannot support it, into a Bauhausian suite of forms. And he makes a striking visual analogy between the dishes of a giant radio telescope dotting a landscape and the starry heavens themselves, in the process forging a visual



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metaphor for mankind's cosmic aspirations.

Even when the cause seems just and the call to action is loudest, Mr. Gowin remains one of "the devil's party," as Blake said of Milton, because he believes that art, with all its ambiguity, and not propaganda has the most powerful and lasting effect on people.

"My friend the photographer Frederick Sommer used to say that

if you want to move people, you have to stay cool," Mr. Gowin said. "In my pictures, I want people not to know at first where they are. I want them to look for a long time, as I did. After the initial surprise and dislocation, the images will yield evidence for reasoning from what is seen. It's my hope they will help people become students of their own experience." □

Emmet Gowin's "Pivot Agriculture, South of Moses Lake, Washington, 1991," is an aerial view of fields watered by gigantic circular irrigation systems. Mr. Gowin's photographs are on view at Yale.