

### C. E. Watkins at Yosemite\*

From the beginning of the 1960s, and for slightly more than a decade, I lived in California. My curiosity about the roots of California art was avid. I got to know firsthand the widest range of artists, photographers, art historians, and museum people, yet never once did the name of Carleton Watkins ever crop up. Nor do I recall seeing a single photograph of his exhibited at any of the numerous museums dotting the state.

I therefore reacted with astonishment when I viewed Watkins' photographs in the Metropolitan Museum's 1975 exhibition, "Era of Exploration: The Rise of Landscape Photography in the American West, 1860-1885" (organized by Weston Naef and James Wood), and read the excellent documentary catalog. To my eye, whatever the merits of the other photographers included in the exhibition (especially T. H. O'Sullivan), Watkins' photographs stood apart; they were different, not at all from the same mold. Inexplicably, they seemed in some strange way to be linked to the potency of spirit and ideas haunting the work of Clyfford Still, an artist whose work flowered almost eighty years later. True, Watkins' photographs are grounded in the seen world, and a show of basic fidelity to the factual experience of a specific landscape; nevertheless, they throb with a powerful mythic quality, a sense of mystical revelation that somehow manages to impart an allegory of American space very similar to the large abstract paintings of Clyfford Still, who also came out of the West.

But Still is a sophisticated artist who fairly early in his career was in touch with the best artistic minds of his generation in America. Also, he had an extraordinarily finely honed grasp of the roots of modern European art; consequently, his painting is dialectical in thrust as well as revelatory in character.

I knew that in 1854, when Watkins came to San Francisco as a young man and worked there as a clerk in a stationery store, the city was small, with barely 10,000 inhabitants, and though the population doubled in size over the next decade or so, it could hardly be thought of as a sophisticated urban environment in comparison, say, to Boston or

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Philadelphia, let alone to London, Paris, or New York, all of which could boast rich intellectual accomplishments and a wide access to knowledge in many forms. Despite this lack, it was obvious to me that Watkins was no frontier photographer. By the early 1860s his work could be ranked with the finest anywhere, and in many respects was superior both technically and artistically to most. How, I kept asking myself, did his strange genius flame out of nowhere? Not previously being aware of Watkins' existence had led me to assume that Muybridge had gained his model from England and New York, where he had traveled and learned photography. I had not realized until the Met exhibition that Watkins had laid the ground for him. (Nor do many Europeans to this very day.) Muybridge was a very impatient and restless man, he was always forcing the pace, always trying many different things, that's where his intensity came from. The more I looked at Watkins' work the more tremendously hermetic it seemed. Paradoxically, it may well be that this very inwardness has led to the eclipse of his art from the high regard in which it was once held in Europe and America, for as I criss-crossed America over the ensuing two years seeking out Watkins' photographs in libraries, museum basements, universities and historical societies, they seemed to be surrounded by an aura of benign neglect. No one quite knew what to make of them: the custodian would often remark, "Yes, Watkins is interesting, isn't he, but Muybridge is *really* important, you know."

Even the closest examination of the early records does not illuminate the mystery of Watkins' beginnings.<sup>1</sup> Nor do we know how he raised the capital to finance the building of his giant wet-plate camera, or to purchase the costly Globe lens and all the necessary darkroom equipment. If such information ever existed, it appears to have gone up in flames with his studio in the 1906 San Francisco fire. A major problem is our uncertainty of the specific stream of cultural ideas informing his early years. True, in the middle of the nineteenth century the subject matter of painters and photographers often coincided, but they did not necessarily share the same outlook. No academy existed to ground the photographer in the technique, esthetic principles and ambitions of the medium. Photography, at least in San Francisco, was essentially a

commercial medium. Thus we are insecure in our knowledge of what led Watkins to create with such great devotion and passion the series of extraordinary photographs that emanated from his camera over the ensuing years. We sense that his photographs contain a uniquely independent outlook, but we lack data upon which to erect an informed critical exegesis. We can only deduce our ideas from the photographs themselves and speculate on their making.

Watkins' 72 signed, albumen glass stereoscopic views of the Yosemite valley (from the collection – now housed in Yosemite Park Museum – of Professor Spencer F. Beard, 1823–87, the noted American naturalist) can be firmly dated 1861. Naef suggests European picturesque romanticism as the source of these stereos, citing and reproducing as exemplar an 1856 work by the English photographer Francis Frith. And since Frith stereos were marketed in San Francisco, his ground for this assertion may well be firm.

These stereos provide the first cohesive overview of Watkins' earliest images of Yosemite. They look like a bunch of random, inchoate images until seen in the stereo viewer, where their extremely effective three-dimensional qualities can be appreciated. The images are complex fragments, glimpsed bits of nature. Compositionally they are severely cropped. Only in rare instances is there an attempt to give an overview of the valley, of how parts relate to the whole. Mostly they are close-ups, or details of peaks or deep chasms. The stereos are numbered and entitled, but the sequence itself makes no sense; there is no implication of an orderly journey.

Yet in two respects the stereos seem to be crucial to Watkins' future development: 1) he had found a subject that obviously stirred his imagination and ambition, and 2) in these stereos there is an unusual equilibrium between what is nearby and what is far off. The veining on the polished surface of a cliff in the background and the leaves of a bush in the foreground are described with equal clarity. This parity of detail may be thought to be the result of some optical superiority of the stereo camera's eye over that of the human. Not so.

It is inherent to the valley itself, and forces itself upon the naked eye. The valley runs on an axis roughly from southeast to northwest, and is approximately seven miles long, averaging half a mile in width.

Toward the northern end it burgeons out to about a mile in width and then constricts at the end, at Mirror Lake, to a quarter mile or so. The Merced River coils irregularly through the middle, meandering from side to side, often closely passing the base of a cliff. Ten million years ago the river bed was situated 2,000 feet higher and directly connected to the tributary streams and valleys at either side. Beginning a million years ago, and up to the last 30,000 years, a giant glacier filled the valley and eroded the weakest rock with great vigor to form a deep U-shaped gorge; it ground down the river bed, shearing and polishing the granite formation on either side to form high vertical cliffs and peaks.

Astonished by the sight, the first white men in the valley reported a granite cliff "sliced like a loaf of bread." At the entrance of the valley, El Capitan's polished face rises vertically over 3,000 feet above the floor; at the other end, the sliced bulk of Half Dome looms 4,800 feet above the floor. In between these two landmarks are equally vertical elements that rise up either side. The tributary streams that fed the prehistoric valley were left hanging high on the sides by the glacier's deep erosion and became waterfalls. Yosemite Valley Falls, for example, tumbles 2,425 feet to the valley floor. The valley's enclosure and the vastness of the vertical elements make a stupendous impression pictorially; everything is compressed, and natural scale is distorted. Enormous trees, 200 feet high, are dwarfed by the towering backdrop, mountainous peaks loom over meadow and water. The clarity of light in the valley is superb. Constant mirror-images of the tall trees and high backdrop are reflected whenever the waters are still. There is an aura of extravaganza to all this, of elements of nature compressed into an arena of visual abundance, of visions foreshortened and magnified. It was the optical element that Watkins concentrated on, leaving the picturesque to look after itself. As a result, he compacted into his imagery an unusual detailing of nature, a quality that pervaded his work from the beginning, and which was to become a major element of his style.

Though stereos are small in size, they cannot be thought of as small photographs. Paradoxically, when viewed in a stereo holder, the stereo image seems larger than the largest photograph viewed with the naked eye because of the way in which it consumes the total field of vision. It provokes a sensation similar to that of looking through a pair of binocu-

lars, where peripheral vision is cut off, and sight is intensely magnified.

I think Watkins wanted to match the intensity of stereo sight in his ordinary photographs, and for this reason adopted the mammoth format. (The largest photograph that could be made at the time, it involved a huge camera and an 17-by-21-inch glass plate negative.) For this, he needed an image that would fill as much of the viewer's field of vision as possible and would get as much detail as possible along with a maximum sensation of depth. We may presume that by adopting a format as large as the average easel painting of the time, Watkins thought it would be possible to elevate the photograph to the realm of art. The stereo and the mammoth were to complement each other, and Watkins used a stereo camera side by side with the mammoth throughout most of his career.

The making of his mammoth Yosemite photographs was a self-imposed task not contingent on outside pressures or events, commercial or otherwise. Watkins brought to this task the imagination, flexibility and reflectiveness characteristic of major art. It was purposeful activity in which new answers were sought rather than services rendered; he used photography as a form of learning process. There is no taint of commercialism in Watkins beyond the mundane circumstances of survival.

Watkins knew the large wet-plate photograph long before he began in Yosemite. He had made photographic copy enlargements of smaller works in other mediums, a lithograph and a painting. Moreover, there exists a mammoth (15-by-20-inch) wet-plate photograph of Mission Los Dolores, a cropped portion of which is included as folio 30 in the well-known G. R. Fardon album published in 1856.<sup>2</sup> The uncropped version looks suspiciously like a Watkins. Be this as it may, by the late 1850s Francis Frith had already published mammoth outdoor photographs, a fact surely known to Watkins.

One of the problems facing the nineteenth-century landscape photographer was that the wet collodion compound used to coat negatives for albumen prints was so sensitive to blue that if the landscape was correctly exposed then the sky became overexposed and printed out white. As a result, most landscapes from that period are weighted with

detail toward the bottom and visually bland, even blank, above.

Watkins overcame this problem in his valley floor photographs by melding organic shapes formed by the contours of mountains, or branches of trees, etc., into the white sky zone, turning it into a positive compositional element. This served to lock the background into position, to stabilize it and thereby to create a frontal rather than recessive space. In addition, the distance between the farthest point in the background and the nearest point in the foreground is rendered in well-defined and tangible steps. In the valley floor photographs, although Watkins masses an amazingly wide variety of lights and darks, piling detail upon detail, he manages to bring to order a great diversity of elements.

A number of the valley floor photographs are composed around reflections, which enabled Watkins to vary mood and to vivify and enhance the viewer's experience of the valley. Two photographs, numbered by Watkins 37 and 38, reveal the contrast between similar views, one without reflection and the other with. The first consists of a long horizontal shot down the valley that frames the massive bulk of El Capitan and positions the viewer on the unseen but opposite side of the Merced River bank, with a small part of the river below in the foreground. Obviously shot immediately afterward is a vertical photograph of the same scene. El Capitan appears again in the upper half and roughly the same size. Less of the valley and more of the river below can be seen. The river now contains a perfect mirror-image of El Capitan. On the left, where the sky is reflected in the water, floats a large tree with branches. The opposite river bank is in the center and acts to hinge the lower part to the upper, the reflection to the reflected, creating a unified shape of the two parts so that a continuous transaction between the real and the reflected is sustained in the viewer's mind. The log implausibly floats in the reflected sky. But which of its branches are real, and which are a reflection? Fact and mirror-image commingle, and the photograph becomes ambiguous and dreamlike, inducing a state of reverie.

Because Watkins focuses on lateral vision and the perception of the far horizon in his high ground vistas, in these he is forced to compose differently from the valley floor photographs. In several photographs,

for example, *First View of the Yosemite Valley from the Mariposa Trail*, 1866, the viewer seems to hang in mid-air, as if there were no ground for the camera and tripod to have stood upon. The viewer is metaphorically levitated in an uneasy way. This gives a sensation of the great heights encountered in the valley. In these high ground pictures, the landscape is bulked, blocked, and compacted, then divided by arcs, diagonals, verticals, and horizontals that gently demarcate one form from another; finally, irradiated by contrasting lights and darks that fade plane by plane until the horizon is reached, it gently melds into white sky. Watkins' use of such transposition is very painterly. By this I mean that although a photographer cannot invent to the same degree as a painter, the detailing within a Watkins photograph – for example, the relationship of figure to ground, of dark to light, or the arc of a shadow to a notch of a tree – is so carefully ordered that it *appears* to be under the same kind of control that a painter can exert.

Not only was the wet-plate process deficient in its ability to render the sky, but in the mammoth size it was also unable to freeze movement. Neither shutters nor fast emulsions existed. The cap was taken off the lens and replaced after the appropriate interval of time, sometimes as long as half an hour. The artifices to render various effects within nature in paint, part of the artist's stock in trade, were denied to the photographer: no scudding clouds, threatening storms, flashes of lightning or racing waters. All these effects, so central to rendering the sublime in painting, were beyond the range of the nineteenth-century camera, as was the use of color.

With rare exception, Watkins' valley is seen devoid of man or traces thereof. Though there are very religious feelings apparent in Watkins' approach to nature, his pantheistic outlook is devoid of threat, danger or anxiety. Yosemite is revealed as Edenic. In contrast, Muybridge's use of vast recessive spaces in his Yosemite photographs focuses on the awesome aspects of nature – one can almost imagine a gargoyle sprouting from one of his rocks. With Watkins, the traditional theatrical effects of the sublime, so dependent on ephemeral surface phenomena of nature for mood, are exchanged for straightforward perceptions of the wilderness and its wealth of details that are articulate in themselves. In their utter stillness his photographs have an edge of intense receptivity

to nature that differentiates them from the melodramatically weighted compositions of Muybridge, who sometimes also added clouds with a second plate. Watkins' sublime is emotionally serene.

Because Watkins often photographed into the early morning light (particularly from the heights), the brightest elements of his imagery are most often those things remote from the camera's position. Paradoxically, this creates a reversal of expectations in ordinary experiential terms, in which the most knowable is closest to the picture surface and usually rendered in light, and the most baffling is distant and dark. Those elements nearest to Watkins' camera are invariably vegetable, often trees – things that reproduce, grow, flourish, and die, and which signify something related to life itself. These areas are rendered dark, mysterious, and flat. (In the wet-plate process, green registers as black; also, in Watkins, the light usually does not fall on these foreground elements.) Likewise, his black shadows are invariably of vegetable origin. The brightest elements in Watkins' views of the valley are invariably the geological structures – equally they are the most lucidly described. But the strength of Watkins' photographs is not in this reversal; nor in the heights, the vastness of the sweep of the valley, the mysteriousness of the giant sequoias, or even in the predictable responses to this melodramatic valley. Rather it is within the finely honed balance of his dramaturgy. Each natural part of the valley claims to define itself and its sense of sweep, thrust and energy, its feeling of upheaval. Watkins balances all these contradictory claims; he fits all the parts together so that nothing overwhelms. And by doing so he asserts his own artistry against man's generalized sense of awe of nature.

Each of Watkins' photographs was composed freshly and inventively to reveal a hitherto unknown aspect of Yosemite. However, each revealed a piece of the valley, and, because of the very limitations of photography in comparison to painting, no one photograph was capable of projecting the archetypal significance and scale of the place. It required many of them to unfold the valley dynamically as a total spatial and emotional experience and to project this experience in some comprehensive and comprehensible way to an audience.



In 1866, some five years after Watkins first began photographing Yosemite, he made a decision to reorganize the imagery to make the experience of the valley more inclusive and holistic. By themselves, the views of the valley floor failed to reconstruct the overall experience. By adding photographs from the high ground at the beginning and end of his series, and by numbering the pictures sequentially from one to over 100, he transformed them from a set of random views into a series which initiates an orderly journey through the place. The views now become photographic metaphors for a traveler's stopping places as determined by the urgency of Watkins' sensibility. At the same time Watkins names the high points and gives the heights and other data in captions. Thus he is responsive both to fact and his audience.

First he oriented the viewer by leading his eye from the opening of the valley in a distant sweep above and beyond to the cap of Half Dome on the northern rim and then past, to Cloud's Rest and the High Sierras. Each image thereafter leads progressively down and into the valley until the floor is reached, then through the valley floor to the end, at which point he once more climbed the high ground and photographed. From Sentinel Dome he made vistas toward the north and west, from Glacier Point he made a 180-degree pan of the valley to the west, north and east. The last photograph is a close-up of the Half Dome that reveals the dizzying drop to the valley floor some 5,000 feet below, the mountains visible beyond.<sup>3</sup>

In the nineteenth-century photographic milieu the word "series" is used very loosely. Usually, but not always, it denotes any cluster of work linked by a shared theme or subject matter, rendered in a similar technique, and the same size. In addition, for purposes of easy reference a series may be numbered. But the numbering system and any order within the series, such as the sequence the images were taken in or even a correct sequence for viewing, might or might not relate.

In Watkins' photographs, however, *series* takes on a special, innovative meaning.<sup>4</sup> Inherent to his use of seriality is the notion of a beginning and end; the coequality of the parts, which are self-sufficient as images yet part of a set; and their uniformity of size, format, and technique. However, what more than anything else differentiates Watkins' use of seriality is the notion of a macro-structure, which he was, it

seems, the first to employ. His macro-structure is defined by relational order and continuity. There is a consistent semi-narrative structure and syntax to the Yosemite photographs, encompassing both vista and panorama – distant and lateral vision – and endowing the pictures with their serial quality. Watkins, then, subsumes the notion of painterly masterpiece into photographic seriality.<sup>5</sup>

To what extent were the structure and ideas informing Watkins' Yosemite photographs influenced by outside sources? We know that C. L. Weed, another San Francisco photographer who had made stereos in Yosemite as early as 1859, reappeared in Yosemite in 1865 with a mammoth camera and most likely began photographing from the high ground before Watkins. But he had an insipid eye and proved to be no rival to Watkins, despite the fact that Watkins' *Valley from the "Best General View,"* 1866, derives from a Weed photograph taken from the identical location a year earlier. No, all that could be claimed for Weed is that he took that particular view first.

Then what could have led Watkins to the solutions he arrived at? Could he have been influenced by the fact that there existed in San Francisco since 1850 a local tradition of daguerrean panoramas?<sup>6</sup> Perhaps. Because of the steep hills overlooking the bay, San Francisco provided a natural platform for 360-degree panoramas of vistas that sweep over buildings down to the shipping waters and across to the foreshore and hills on the opposite side.

There is also the question of the previously mentioned Fardon album, reputed to be the earliest *published* photographic album known of views of any American or European city. It contains a cut-up panorama of San Francisco bound out of sequence.<sup>7</sup> It also contains views of street and buildings massed against a backdrop of hills. The space is shallow and even the farthest buildings are clearly detailed.

Could not Watkins have looked at the valley floor and decided to approach it with his giant camera in a similar manner – the river and the bushes and grasses in the foreground substitutes for the streets, sidewalks and street furniture; the trees for architecture; and the rearing granite walls for the hills upon which buildings rise? There is even a cropped telegraph pole in the album that is reminiscent of Watkins' cropped tree in the high view of the valley. Even more important,

implicit in the Fardon album is the idea of recording the inside and outside physiognomy of a site. Were Watkins' ideas influenced by this album?

Certainly Watkins must have been aware of panoramas, and he may have known of the Fardon album. But this proves nothing, because it is most likely in early photography, and particularly with Watkins (as well as O'Sullivan), that pragmatic choices – temperament working with opportunity and subject – played a greater role than precedent. Unlike more modern photographers, Watkins gave no clue as to how he conceptualized his ideas; he published nothing. Nor do we have any evidence that he saw solutions to pictorial problems in terms of how the problem had been solved elsewhere. He seems to have been mainly empirical in his approach: his photographs reveal a great deal of observable trial and error, especially in the beginning, around 1861, where the same subject is photographed time and time again with a wide range of results. I think we simply have to think of Watkins as a pioneer who technically explored landscape with a big camera, and in the process extended the possibilities far beyond his contemporaries.

Watkins had an exceptional pictorial intelligence, particularly in the way in which he organized his image on the ground glass, balancing light and dark into a completely integrated surface. One doesn't come across this quality too often in nineteenth-century landscape photography, the exceptions that spring to mind being O'Sullivan and Samuel Bourne, the Victorian photographer of India. Bourne was a romantic imperialist and very clever tourist who went around photographing in a documentary vein to convey information to the public back home about the glories of their empire.

Watkins is very different from Bourne in spirit: Watkins became deeply involved in an obsessive fantasy which was simultaneously personal and collective; for him, the world of Yosemite, and the many other places in the West he was to photograph later, became a dream-landscape of total possibility. The mountains of India meant little to Bourne except as a romantic backdrop, a marvelous stage setting, whereas to Watkins, Yosemite offered archetypal monuments of the massiveness of American space and of potential energy as yet unleashed. I also think

that as with many other American artists, both painters and photographers, there is a sense of history involved in Watkins' outlook, of past chaos and future meanings. It's as if his discoveries hover between these two possibilities.

Watkins' Yosemite photographs contain a great deal of incident yet they are extremely factual. He seems to insist on this in his work. At the same time he generalizes very successfully. His images are not mysterious like O'Sullivan's, not at all laced with his taste for passionate extremes. There are none of O'Sullivan's crazily silhouetted mountains, asymmetrically composed with abrupt blackenings, and surrounded by an empty, awesome and menacing landscape.

O'Sullivan was heavily influenced by Clarence King's anti-Darwinian theory of "catastrophism" that proposed: "If catastrophes extirpated all life at oft repeated intervals from the time of its earliest introduction, then creation must have been oft repeated." This trauma-oriented theory finds clear expression in O'Sullivan's histrionic imagery. Watkins, on the other hand, seems to have been singularly uninspired by King's theories. Among his most insipid photographs are those he took for King's 40th Parallel Survey in 1870, and indeed the air of steadiness and incremental change in Watkins' work seems to have something of the Darwinian about it. In contrast to O'Sullivan's tendency to extremes, Watkins always maintained in his work a certain distance from the putative viewer. His imagery is without conceit; he never exaggerates to gain an effect.

#### Notes

1. True, there are the recollections of his friend, Charles Turrill, published two years after Watkins' death in 1916. Turrill, however, only knew Watkins later in his life, and his memoir is based on the hearsay of a failing mind describing events that occurred some 50 years before. So far, very little in the way of proof has been turned up to substantiate this account. See. C. B. Turrill, "An Early Californian Photographer: C. E. Watkins," *News Notes of California Libraries*, 13 January 1918, pp.29-37.
2. The album has been republished in paperback with an introduction by Robert Sobrieszek, G. R. Fardon, *San Francisco in 1850s*, Dover, New York, 1977.
3. I'm aware that Watkins' numbering is a mess. At various times he numbered the valley floor images, for, I presume, catalog purpose only, and the numbers do not

match a sequential journey from south to north except at the beginning and the end. Watkins also sold photographs to other publishers, one of whom (Houseworth) used his own numbering system. In addition, Naef mentions that Watkins' early valley mammoths are not numbered at all. However, the fact that the numbers are not always sequential does not affect the seriality, since we now, or Watkins then, could have arranged the images in a sequence that followed the topology of the valley in a southern to northern direction.

4. See my *Serial Imagery*, New York Graphic Society, 1968, for further elucidation of serial systems.

5. Shortly after Watkins, in 1871, O'Sullivan also employs seriality in his journey up the Colorado River on the Wheeler Expedition. As he journeyed up the river he photographed each campsite, including whenever possible his boat, the *Picture*; the view upriver; and then a second, matching view down river. Thus each linked pair of photographs reveals the present (the campsite), the future (the view upriver) and the past (the view back the way they had come). These photographs are united by a macro-structure, the journey recorded from stop to stop. O'Sullivan was in San Francisco in 1867 and most likely saw Watkins' photographs. However, it is just as likely that the journey itself suggested the structure. In addition, there is O'Sullivan's Green River 1872 serial set of six photographs recording at intervals from a fixed point the light passing over the river canyon.

6. One of the more famous surviving daguerrean panoramas is *View of San Francisco*, 1853 (maker unknown), a six-plate panorama reproduced in the Oakland Art Museum catalog of the 1973 exhibition organized by Therese Thau Heyman, "Mirror of California."

7. I'm grateful to Beaumont Newhall for pointing this out to me.