

VISIONS OF AMERICA

LANDSCAPE AS METAPHOR IN THE LATE TWENTIETH CENTURY

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1-4 LEWIS DE SOTO **TAHUALTAPA PROJECT** (SERIES) 1983-1988, collection Seattle Art Museum, Seattle, Washington

1 **HILL OF THE RAVENS**, black and white photograph, feathers, wood, 32 x 32

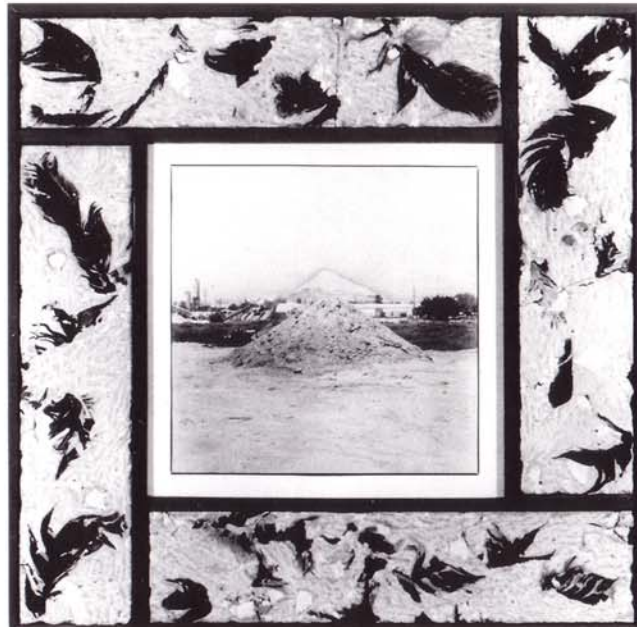
2 **LITTLE MOUNTAIN THAT STANDS ALONE**, black and white photograph, feathers, cement, marble, wood, 32 x 32

3 **MARBLE MOUNTAIN**, black and white photograph, marble, wood, 32 x 32

4 **MOUNT SLOVER**, black and white photograph, cement, wood, 32 x 32



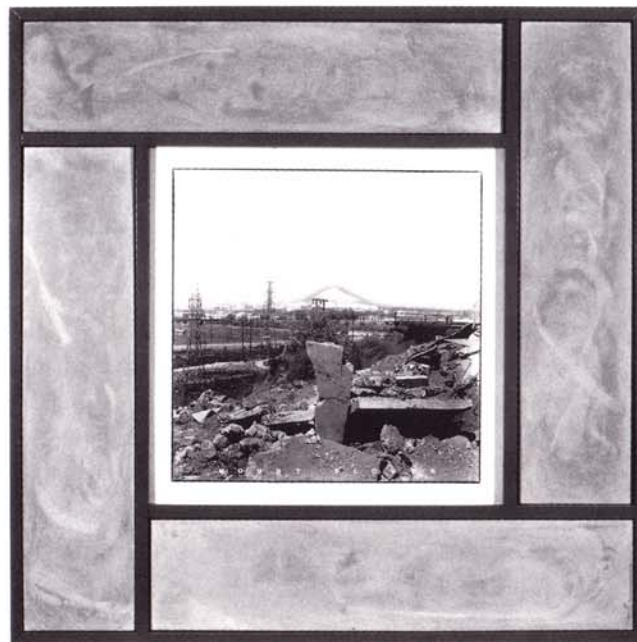
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LEWIS DESOTO

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LEWIS DESOTO (b.1954, lives in San Francisco) draws upon the legends of the Cahuilla Indians of southern California for his conceptual sound and projection installations. Images of mountain and desert lands revered by this ancient culture figure prominently in these projects. Through his highly conceptual evocative art, deSoto seeks to reconcile long held tribal beliefs, central to Cahuilla heritage, and highly complex

scientific theories about humankind's relationship to the universe. His recent solo exhibitions include *Pé Túkmiyat, Pé Túkmiyat (Darkness, Darkness)* San Jose Museum of Art, California (1991), *The Language of Paradise*, Artist's Space, New York, New York (1991), *Tahuallapa Project and Video Room*, Moderna Museet, Stockholm, Sweden (1993), and *Falling*, Christopher Grimes Gallery, Santa Monica, California (1994).

Within all the diversity of landscape art, we seldom see the constants. One of the most deeply buried and most constant elements of Euro-American landscape art is its dependence on the cosmology of Genesis. Because most viewers are also permeated with beliefs framed in Genesis, this specific condition is often mistaken for a universal when it is noticed at all; most often it remains invisible, and the more invisible a bond, the harder it is to liberate oneself from it. Genesis is a ceiling often mistaken for the sky.

Lewis deSoto's work is important for many reasons, perhaps most of all for the glimpse it gives us of how the world might look if Genesis had never been written, or if we had never read it. This is a vastly original accomplishment, one that distinguishes his work from almost everything else in the landscape field. I am not proposing deSoto here as an untutored child of nature; his is a perspective not determined but complicated and liberated by his Native American ancestry and early exposure to the traditions of his father's people, the Cahuilla Indians of California's southern deserts. His understanding of landscape is not simply a traditional one, but a synthetic one, wrought as well from readings of Taoist, Buddhist, and phenomenological texts.

Genesis is a story of creation that describes a relationship between creator and creation and the nature of the creation. Both of these aspects have determined a great deal about Western art. The creative relationship is less of engenderment, of procreation—extension of self—than of manufacture, of the creation of “notself” by an act of volition. (Genesis is an altered account of an earlier procreation by a male and female deity; the oneness and maleness of the Judeo-Christian God required the suppression of the collaborative, engendering nature of creation in the earlier story.) God makes the world, but remains separate from it; and the world lacks divinity. A kind of binary schism has already entered the picture.

Secondly, the creation is first static, then flawed. Another schism has entered the picture: the evolving, the mutable, the temporal, the unstable are imperfect, and perfection is a standard against which all things are measured—and fall short. Thus, the flawed, sublunar world of medieval theology is a blighted way station between the Fall and the Last Judgment. Much of what seems to be radical thinking in landscape art is, in fact, deeply rooted in this binarism. Contemporary landscape photography, for example, often works in terms of the before/after, virgin/



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whore, pure/polluted in representing the landscape; central to this dualism is the belief that nature exists or ought to exist in a static state and that humanity is distinct from nature-creation, an intruder. All that has changed here is that Paradise Lost has been updated from before the Fall to before the first footstep or last century. Readings of the landscape of the American West as a raw, blank arena—an escape from culture and from the cultural mediation of meaning—is one of the most problematic aspects of a worldview that tends to be Eastern and urban.

The Cahuilla creation myth begins with a miscarriage out of the primordial darkness, goes on to a drawn-out creation involving two brothers distinguishable by the quality of their workmanship, and doesn't have a clear endpoint: the gods create tools as well as creatures, and the creatures create and destroy as well. There is a continuum of change without a fall from grace; imperfection is original to the world, and creation is never finished. Culture and nature are not useful categories here. DeSoto's installation for *Landscape as Metaphor, Tahquitz*, most clearly operates outside of all the givens of landscape. However, I want to frame it in the context of the work that came before.

DeSoto's oeuvre begins with *Botanica* (1980), a series of photographs of flowers that abandon the rules for landscape photography. The arcadian nostalgia of the genre is a monumental irony, given that all photography depends upon modern machinery

and chemistry. DeSoto's flower photographs, however, explored the affinities between the camera and the flower. Because both flowers and cameras are light-responsive, he organized the image making around that responsiveness: a slow exposure allowed the camera to receive the flower's light, and a flash gave it back. In this version, flowers become somewhat less romantic, the camera more so—in fact it becomes possible to see the camera as a kind of mechanical flower, with its petal-like, irislike aperture. Again, the organic and the mechanical cease to be opposed to each other, but instead, the one emerges as a metaphorical echo of the other. Rather than traditional subject/object, viewer/scenery relationships, *Botanica* establishes a reciprocity, insists on the responsive sentience of the landscape. The mechanical becomes not a violation of the natural order but an echo of it, a later wave of an ongoing creation.

Too, the *Botanica* images are less about photography as a means of composing images than as a performance, a process: the blurred, crowded images are only documents of an encounter between camera and plant. The subsequent *Projects* (1983) series of photographs were documents of sculptural events and site-specific installations. The next major photographic project, *Tahualtapa* (1983–1988), would begin to eliminate the photographic mediation of these elements. *Tahualtapa* is basically a multimedia work centered around a mountain the Cahuilla call Tahualtapa in San Bernardino County (not far from the mountain that is the site for *Tahquitz*; both are part of what has long been Cahuilla country). The work was instigated by a friend's remark to the effect that it was too bad the mountain wasn't there anymore. The leveling of the mountain had been so gradual, deSoto himself hadn't realized it was going on. *Tahualtapa* made that history visible. The four photographs relate to four chapters of that history: *Tahualtapa*, or Hill of the Ravens, for its original cultural status; *El Cerrito Solo*, the Little Hill that Stands Alone, or its renaming by the violently evangelical Spanish; *Marble Mountain* for its earlier Anglo history as a marble mine; and *Mt. Slover*, for its current phase as a cement quarry. The images have their titles inscribed on them, props set in the foreground of the photographs, and frames as much a part of each work as the photograph. The frames are filled with materials relating to the mountain's role: feathers, feathers and marble dust, marble slabs, cement.



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Regarding these substances as much a part of the mountain's essence as its form gives a different emphasis to its metamorphosis. *Tahualtapa* is not a mourning for what has been so much as a chronicle of what has become, and a recovery of both lost history and lost material. Further aspects of the project position the mountain in its surroundings and extend the territory of the artwork to that of the mountain. In *Slover Compass* (1988), a cross of topographical maps and photographs document the artist's distance markings on cement sidewalks made from the nearby mountain. In the cement relief of *Slover Quadrant*, the mountain's materials are extended into the exhibition space. Clearly, the evolution from the

sacred hill of the ravens to a cement quarry is not a paean to progress, but the loss recuperated by the project is as much the knowledge of where so much of the cement in the region comes from as where the mountain went. The mountain is never seen independent of the three cultures that named and valued/devalued it (and the artist's interpretation becomes a fourth, memory-restoring layer of evaluation). The piece is as much about the metamorphoses of perceptions of the mountain as of the mountain's own metamorphosis—it is subjecthood that is the object. Under the diminishing gaze of these subject-states the mountain itself disappears. As the artist remarked recently, understanding the



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history of the mountain and the source of the material meant that you could be in the landscape while driving on the freeway—not a devaluation of nature, but a revaluation of culture, and so finally not a mountain that disappears, but an already absent mountain that is made manifest.

Tahualtapa and three subsequent installations, *Háypatak*, *Witness*, *Kansatsusha* (1990), *The Language of Paradise* (1991), and *Pé Túkmiyat, Pé Túkmiyat (Darkness, Darkness)* (1991), all deal with indigenous California points of view—the latter two specifically with Cahuilla creation mythology. Together they can be seen as a midrash of the less referential works, from *Botanica* to *Office* (1992) and *Observatory* (1993), the last dealing with the cosmic origins of static and the possibility of searching it for meaning.

Another category deSoto dismisses is that of the banal: he points out that his paternal tongue has no word for sacred. In the same way that Genesis slices time into a dreamtime and a fallen aftermath, the notion of sacredness localizes certain kinds of power or value and relegates everything not sacred to the status of the profane. Increasingly, his installations rely upon quotidian objects—most often, furniture and machines, the objects appropriate to rooms for living and making, rather than looking at. The results seem intensifications of the everyday world rather than a realm apart from it. The wintertime installation *Edison Song (Tesla Sings for a Deaf Edison)*, (1990), for example, consisted of a heater miked to an amplifier, a table hovering above the

floor, and a chair. Resting on the table at the far end of a long, multi-windowed room at the Headlands Center for the Arts, the heater vibrated as its wires glowed red. The amplifier turned the humming wires into a more audible music, and the viewer gravitated toward the chair set before the heater, the source of both sound and warmth in the chilly, blue-tinted space (it can be considered a landscape defined and occupied by luminosity, temperature, and sound vibrations rather than by more conventional visual objects of scenery). Offered up as an object for contemplation, the heater became alluring, fascinating.

Even the opulent installation *Pé Túkmiyat, Pé Túkmiyat (Darkness, Darkness)*, at the San Jose Museum of Art, consisted of, in addition to a range of light and sound zones, two tables, a fan and a tiny video monitor, so that the Cahuilla creation was represented as a domestic interior, a made world within the created world. It is easy to describe *Edison Song* as dealing with a different body of concerns than the mythologically generated works, but it is also possible to see it as a parallel exploration of spaces, energies, and transformations. Similarly, installations such as *Aviary* (1990) and *Air* (1990) translated outside phenomena into palpable indoor sounds, addressing the landscape not as a visual composition of a specific locale but as a pervasive field of sound and motion.

The *Witness* (1990) installation was organized around the viewer's position in the piece. A darkened room with a wooden

decklike floor over a bed of stones was organized around a video projection of the landscape around Drake's Bay in Marin County; the flooring extended as a kind of spit almost to the screen, and as the viewer watched from this position, his/her own shadow became part of the projection. The terrain was shot in three styles: close-ups, sweeping views, skylscapes. The title's three words referred to three cultures of the region: the Miwok, the Asiatic, and the imperial English. Composition became a means of reiterating consciousness. Like the mountain in *Tahualtapa*, the bay in *Witness* served as a checkpoint for cultural shift rather than landscape as a given. In the same way, the viewer's shadow on the screen established that we were seeing ways of seeing nature, not nature itself, and a tiny monitor atop the projector showed a figure standing within the landscape on the screen. Spectatorship becomes a mode of participation rather than the detached state asserted by most Western image-making traditions, and the subject becomes an object of contemplation. This is one of the areas of concern that installation opened up for deSoto: photographs operate within certain assumptions about the act of viewing, while his installations make the viewer into a reader, a sitter, a shadow, a palpable participant in the work under consideration, and part of the whole rather than outside it. The examination of premises and assumptions that has been part of his work is more available in a medium with so few premises of its own.

Further, a photograph is a completed act, a finished creation. In deSoto's installations, things are unfolding in real time, incomplete, part of the mutable world rather than a comment on it. The artist has described his installations as being akin to camera obscuras—in that sense, the works bring together the objects that make the image, but put us amidst that image as it is in the perpetual present tense of being made, rather than freezing and representing it. They transform the act of representation from one of commentary on the past to a constant conjuration into the present, shifting the tense of creation into the now.

Tahquitz is both an installation about a Cahuilla myth and a symbolic reenactment of the myth, bringing the viewer into a narrative that is unfolding within a room to be read. Most unemphatically, it presents the kind of Western landscape that is most often read as raw, new, virginal, and uninhabited in terms of the folklore that has in fact accumulated around many such places in the region. As in earlier pieces, the landscape is viewed not as

itself, as the respite of the romantics, but as an experience modulated by the layers of inherited experience and the means of perception.

The artist describes the event that the installation regenerates: "Tahquitz is an ancient creature who lives in icy caves atop the San Jacinto peaks. He kidnaps, enslaves, then feeds on the souls/spirits of humans. One day he seizes a pretty young maiden . . . enslaves her and commands her to feed on souls as well. Eventually he pities her and allows her to return to her village. He forbids her to speak of her experience. She returns after a few days, but sees that years have passed. She is badgered by the village people to tell her secret. At the moment of her telling, she is struck dead." The story bears a great deal of resemblance to nineteenth-century gothic literature, from *The Legend of Sleepy Hollow* (in which Rip Van Winkle sleeps for many years) to *Dracula* and *Frankenstein*, particularly in the sense of the mountains as numinous, sublime, and dangerous places. It doesn't have much to do with contemporary readings of landscape as refuge, as paradise, as good in contrast to the evil that is culture, nor does it with further conventional association of the female with the natural, the male with the cultural. One could also read it against Plato's allegory of the cave, for here the scene is not the territory of the limitations of the sensory aligned with the vaginal space of the dark cave, but is a dangerously luminous cave beyond the realm of the familiar, in which ascent to the heights imparts a knowledge that is death rather than deliverance. Implied within the story is a contentment with the ordinary sphere of human activities, rather than endorsement of a restless desire to cross its circumference.

The installation seems to propose two readings of the story: the ice melts under the light as though knowledge annihilates the fear that is Tahquitz and his ice cave. The reading of the story within the ominous environment, however, proposes an act of communication that is ongoing, incomplete, and liable to be fatally interrupted at any juncture—for the stories may not be completed, the voices may be those of the dead as recorded voices often, uneventfully, are. *Tahquitz* establishes a moment of tremendous tension in a conceptual landscape that is far from an escape and presents us with the profound risks of any act of communication.

LEWIS DE SOTO TAHQUITZ

Lewis deSoto's moody, austere installations, such as *Tahquitz*, are filled with references to Cahuilla Indian culture that include descriptive texts about its origins and beliefs, and videotaped images of its land in the southern California desert. Through his art, he envisions a reconciliation of long held tribal beliefs central to his Cahuilla heritage, and complex scientific theories about humankind's relationship to the universe, ranging from cosmic strings to fractal geometry. In both perceptions, ancient and modern, the landscape exemplifies a timeless, intricate order within which all of nature's manifestations, animate and inanimate, are interdependent.

As Cahuilla tradition has it, certain areas of the land are the domains of potent spirits, some benign, others fiercely destructive. Their powers are synonymous with nature's unpredictable forces. In his *Landscape as Metaphor* installation, a Cahuilla Indian creation myth about a fearsome ice spirit, Tahquitz, who inhabits a peak in the San

Jacinto Mountains, is metaphorically evoked. Tahquitz (pronounced tahkwish) feeds on the spirits of humans luckless enough to enter his realm.

Within a somber, blue-lit space, a long, galvanized-steel table supports two huge blocks of ice, which represent the hapless victims of the demi-god. Water from the melting ice drips into two large ceramic ollas beneath the table. The ice blocks are replaced periodically. At opposite ends of the room, videotaped images of the San Jacinto range, including the ominous "Tahquitz" peak, glow on two video monitors. On one monitor, the mountain range appears in "real time," while on the other, it is revealed in a sweeping dawn-to-dusk time-lapse sequence. From speakers installed in various locations, a voice narrates the Tahquitz story in the Cahuilla language. As sound comes from different parts of the room, an invisible narrator seems to be moving restlessly about the space.



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