Unearthed:  
*Indian Mounds and Former Town Sites of the Southeast and Midwest*

by

Emily J. Gómez

B.A. Loyola University Chicago, 1998

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Michael Marshall, Major Professor

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My photographic work investigates the treatment of landscapes of Native American significance, considering the history of the places in juxtaposition to their contemporary interpretation and handling. I ask the viewers of my photographs to consider the fact that these landscapes are devoid of Native American people and to question the genocidal roots of America. I hope that the images will facilitate thought and discussion about the actions and policies on which America was founded, and about how we can change the way we treat people at home and abroad. The landscapes project is a culmination of my years of experience as a photographer— from my first introduction to the camera as a tool with which to record travels, places and memory, to the influence of the Pictorialist photographers who sought to express something more emotive than just a straight document, to the political concerns I developed while working as a photojournalist. In this paper, I will give a brief background on how my vision for this work developed followed by a specific discussion of the photographs and the artists who have influenced my work.

I. Background

The content of my work can be traced back to my initial introduction to the camera. Almost all of the photographs I made as a child and teenager involved preserving my memories of places. My first camera was a Kodak Instamatic given to me by my parents in order to document our summer trips to Europe. Making photographs became a way of discovering for me—a way with which to capture my impressions of historic cities and landscapes. This early association between travel, discovery, and photography set the stage for my current work in which I research places of Native
American significance and travel to both nearby and distant places in order to document what I find.

My current photographic style can be partially attributed to my love for the Pictorialist era of photography. The influence of Pictorialism began to play into my work during my undergraduate years at Loyola University Chicago. I first encountered Edward Steichen’s photographs from the late nineteenth and early twentieth century in a History of Photography class and instantly felt drawn to the soft, emotive quality of his gum bichromate and platinum prints. I wanted to learn how to print in this nineteenth-century style, so I enrolled in a summer platinum/palladium printing workshop at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. This was when my fondness for the view camera began. Since alternative processes such as platinum require contact printing large negatives, I started to photograph exclusively with a 4x5 camera.

I continue to photograph with a large format camera, now an 8x10, in order to have the ability to make 8x10 platinum prints and for the experience of using a large camera in the landscape. I feel a closer link to the places that surround me when I photograph in this traditional manner. My 8x10 Deardorff allows me to slow down and exert some physical effort in order to set up a shot and to expose my negatives. The effort involved makes me feel as if I am putting my energy or spirit into the work. I see a link to Pictorialism in this sense because my attraction to this style is partially in its ability to convey metaphysical ideas. Though this method of shooting and printing is important to me, I see my current style as more of an amalgamation of Pictorialism and Documentary photography.

I cultivated a documentary style in the five years following my undergraduate education, while employed as the Staff Photographer for SCN Communications Group, a
publication group based in Union Lake, Michigan. At this time, it was important for me to communicate a straightforward message to the newspaper's readers through my photographs. The images I made had to tell a story in a direct way. I still approach my subjects in a straight way in order to give a realistic document of a place while utilizing a Pictorialist aesthetic in the prints to convey a sense of sacredness.

While working for the newspaper I developed a deeper concern for political and social justice. The assignments I found most satisfying were ones that made me feel as if I were making a difference in the community. I am an introverted person by nature, and this job forced me to talk to people and put myself in situations that would otherwise not be available to me. I began to empathize with peoples' problems, which often involved local officials not keeping promises to their communities.

My experiences at the paper helped me feel more connected with my community and with my role as a person who could make a difference in the way people perceived their government and their surroundings. The idea that I could have an effect on the world through my work was an important lesson for me to learn and to carry with me in my artistic endeavors. I believe that artists have a responsibility to make art that challenges people to question what it means to be a person in contemporary times. It is up to us to communicate ideas that will instigate thought and change and this is what I attempt to do through my artwork.
II. Indian Mounds and Other Sacred Landscapes

The Stone Circle of Avebury, Stonehenge, and Silbury Hill, 2000

The Beginning

My interest in photographing sacred landscapes began in England. In 2000, I spent a day photographing Neolithic monuments such as Stonehenge, Silbury Hill, and the Stone Circle of Avebury. The Stone Circle left me with a particularly strong feeling of awe. I had a sense that the people who arranged the stones were somehow more closely connected to nature and had more reverence for their land and their surroundings than we possess today. The sites caused me to ponder the seeming permanence of the stones in comparison to the more recently erected buildings surrounding them and all the generations of people who have visited and continue to visit these sites. I longed to experience the visceral feeling of being in the presence of something mysterious and larger than life once again.

As artistic inspiration, I looked to the work of Linda Connor, Hiroshi Sugimoto, Michael Kenna and Paul Caponigro. Connor and Caponigro set a precedent in photographing sacred places throughout the world. Their subjects have also included the monoliths of England. All four photographers photograph landscapes in a way that conveys the sense of the spiritual through black and white film’s ability to capture light, shadow and atmosphere. These photographers set a precedent for photographing landscapes in a way that I consider Pictorialist despite the recentness of the work. I see my work as following in this tradition.
My graduate studies at UGA began with the idea of reconnecting to the feelings I experienced at the Stone Circle. I decided to photograph Indian Mounds, which I found to have similar qualities to the monoliths and hills of England. Though I did experience a similar feeling of awe at the grandeur of the first mounds I visited, the Etowah Mounds in Cartersville, Georgia, I also was met with a sense of strangeness and disrespect in the way the mounds were interpreted. They were mown closely like a golf course—very different from the natural and wild-looking grasses surrounding the monoliths of England. When I climbed to the top of the “Great Temple Mound” I noticed a nuclear power plant in the distance and a sign in the middle of the mound that read, “ANY RELIGIOUS OR SPIRITUAL ACTIVITY PERFORMED IN ANY MANNER IS NOT PERMITTED AT MOUND AREA”.

This first visit to a mound site set the groundwork for the images I currently make. I knew I could not photograph Indian Mounds in the way that I photographed Neolithic sites. While monoliths represent creations of past civilizations that vanished somewhat mysteriously, the Indian Mounds are places that were inhabited by people that our government killed or forced onto reservations. It is difficult to have a purely romantic view of these landscapes with the knowledge that the people who lay claim to the lands are not the owners of them, and that they are among the poorest people in America because of government policies and actions.

**Discussion of Unearthed**

My thesis exhibition at the Georgia Museum of Art consists of eight 16”x20” digital prints made with Piezography inks and a book of twenty-one 5”x7” Piezography prints. The photographs I made for the exhibition are a selection from my ongoing series
entitled *Unearthed*. I will discuss two of the pieces in this section: *Gnadenhutten Cemetery* and *Keowee Town*. These images illustrate different ideas that I present and also speak to the evolution of my work as I strive toward making images that leave a lasting impression on their audience.

All of the images in this series include information about the sites. *Gnadenhutten Cemetery* is noteworthy because it was the first that led me to the conclusion that text was vital to the work in order to form a complete statement. Before making this image and deciding to incorporate text along with it, I struggled with the idea of how to present two opposing ideas within the image area alone. The opposing ideas being the sacredness of the land—most of the places I photograph contain graves of the most honored people in Native American societies—and the disrespect with which the places were conquered and are currently treated.

At the time that I made this image, I was thinking about the work of Anselm Kiefer. Kiefer was born into post-World War II Germany. Through his paintings, photographs, sculptures and books, he questions what it means to be German in a country that destroyed its Jewish population. Kiefer’s work makes me wonder why Americans have not overtly questioned what it means to be American when we destroyed the continent’s native people. Studying Kiefer’s work helped me understand that we need to deal with this issue as a society—that we cannot just cover up the past and expect that we will not commit similar acts. I decided that I needed to be more blatant with my message than a photograph alone could allow me to be, so I decided to incorporate a short history of the site along with the image.

Another artist who influenced my decision to use text is Joel Sternfeld. In his series of color photographs entitled *On This Site: Landscapes in Memoriam*, Sternfeld
presents images of places that seem commonplace at first, but are unveiled as to their importance with the addition of text. One of the images in the book is a picture of Mount Rushmore. Americans have been inundated with images of this place enough to be able to identify it quickly as a national monument and vacation destination. The text that accompanies the photograph does not identify it as such, but as a place that rightfully belongs to the Sioux Nation. Sternfeld states that the Sioux Nation regards the Black Hills region as their sacred land and that they won a settlement of “$17 million plus interest accrued since 1877 as compensation for the land” by the Supreme Court. He also indicates “the award is now valued at nearly $300 million, but the Sioux continue to refuse the money to seek title to their land.” I find Sternfeld’s method of photographing landscapes in a straightforward way and accompanying the images with the information he finds important about the places to be effective, and have begun to present my work in a similar way.

Without any knowledge of the events that took place at Gnadenhutten Cemetery, the image seems fairly benign—a photograph of a museum with a wooden cutout for children to put their faces behind for snapshots. But when one learns the story of what happened on this site, the horrific and disrespectful nature of the image is manifest.

On March 8, 1782, Ninety Christian Delaware Indians were killed here. A group of Pennsylvania militiamen supposedly mistook the Indians for a group that had murdered some of their people. They forced the men into one abandoned cabin, and the women and children into another. They left the Indians, who sang hymns and prayed through the night, bound inside. In the morning, the militiamen killed all of the Indians by smashing their skulls with cooper’s mallets.
It is important to know this information when looking at the photograph because it turns a fairly harmless image into a horrifying idea. The creation of the wooden cutout displays a complete lack of knowledge of the events that took place on this site, as well as disrespect for the people who lost their lives here. The depiction of the Indian waving from the cabin also points to the idea that Native American people are still allowed to be stereotyped in our society—that they have such a quiet and underrepresented voice that images like this are allowed to exist in our culture. I could not imagine a similar depiction being tolerated at the massacre site of any other group of people in our country.

**Keowee Town**

In order to explain the working process I have developed, I will discuss my photograph of *Keowee Town*. This process includes research, planning and preparation, the journey to a site, the photographic experience and the processing and printing of the photographs.

I learned about Keowee Town in a few of my often-used reference books: *Cherokee Heritage Trails Guidebook* by Barbara R. Duncan and Brett H. Riggs, *Footsteps of the Cherokees: a Guide to the Eastern Homelands of the Cherokee Nation* by Vicki Rozema, and *William Bartram on the Southeastern Indians*, a compilation of journal entries by William Bartram. Keowee Town was the former capital of the Lower Cherokee Nation. The land was flooded in the 1970s in order to fuel a nearby Duke Hydroelectric Power Plant. My initial interest in the site stemmed from a place I had discovered over a year prior—the Sinica burial mound, a Cherokee mound and former town site that had been flooded by the formation of Lake Hartwell. It is a disrespectful and strange idea to me that several former Indian towns have been flooded—that the
ancestors of the Cherokee and other nations are preserved beneath water often with no overt indication of that fact.

I initially photographed Keowee Town about a month prior to making the image for the thesis show. It is typical that I will make a more satisfying image on the second visit to a place than on the first because I have a better sense of what to photograph and at what time of day after reviewing the initial negatives.

My favorite time of day to photograph is in the early morning—just after sunrise, when the light and atmosphere glow. Connor, Caponigro, Sugimoto, Kenna and other photographers who wish to convey a spiritual impression have also employed this strategy. Photographing at sunrise has become incorporated into the photographic ritual I have developed. A description of this ritual follows.

After completing my research and deciding my route, I calculate the duration of the drive and ensure that I allow enough time to arrive at the site by daybreak. Lake Keowee is about a two and half hour drive from Athens, so I made sure I would be ready to leave the house by 5:00 a.m. The night before a trip, I load my film holders and ready my equipment by the back door—light meter, tripod, film holders, my loaded camera backpack, maps and books. Before I leave the house, I make a peanut butter and strawberry jam sandwich cut into fours and fill my coffee mug and water bottle. On my drive, I listen to Morning Edition on NPR until it repeats itself or until I lose the station. The war in Iraq has been ongoing since the beginning of this project. Statistics and stories about lost lives for oil fill my head on the way to a shoot.

The last few miles to Lake Keowee were filled with excitement and anticipation. A thick fog hovered around the South Carolina mountaintops and also settled in the valleys. I had a feeling that mist would be rising from the surface of the lake. Upon
arrival, I was delighted to find that I was right. I set up my camera as quickly as possible and started photographing along the shore and across the lake. I felt as if nature and spirits of the past were my collaborators. The exposures I made of the island were two of the last—by the time I reached that location, the sun was in the absolute right place reflecting in the water below.

The creation of the image from start to finish was a spiritual experience for me and that feeling comes across to its viewers. I have had more comments on the beauty of that image than on almost any other. I strive for beauty in every image because beauty is what draws people to art. The sadness of the accompanying text is what challenges people to think about who was here before us, our nation’s policies, and what we can do to change this destructive path we have been on for hundreds of years.

My work is driven by my search to uncover the past—to find evidence of what was here before us and to educate others and myself about the history of our country that we rarely learn in school. I see this project as one that will last indefinitely and continue to evolve in its presentation. Through continued work, I intend to find the most effective ways to reach people and effect social change.
Bibliography


On December 29, 1835 the Treaty of New Echota was signed here. The contract, signed by only a small group of Cherokee men, specified that the Cherokee Nation would give all lands east of the Mississippi to the United States in exchange for five million dollars and a large tract in Oklahoma. The treaty led to the infamous Trail of Tears.

On March 8, 1782, Ninety Christian Delaware Indians were massacred by a group of Pennsylvania militiamen on this site.
On March 27, 1814, Andrew Jackson along with his Tennessee militia and some members of the Cherokee and Lower Creek Nations defeated the Upper Creek Nation on this site. The Upper Creek were forced to give the United States nearly 20 million acres of their homeland following the battle. Andrew Jackson was elected president in 1828 and signed the Indian Removal Act in 1830.

Lake Keowee was formed in 1971 by the Duke Power Company in order to generate hydroelectric power for their plants.
American Revolutionary war officers' graves stand before this burial mound of Adena origin.

This Cherokee mound was the ceremonial center of the great town of Nikwasi.
This mound is most likely Adena or Hopewell in origin. It has been preserved as a park in the northern part of the city. It is also known as the Camp Tupper mound because of its use as a civil war camp.

An Indian Mound located between RULH Elementary School and Maplewood Cemetery was destroyed in a school expansion project.
The book contains 21 prints plus a foreword, index, and colophon.

11" x 13.25" x 3.25"
Book - Oak Box, Photogravure (Pictorial), Prints
Lithograph, 2005
Emily J. Cermes