

# Students Question Students

## Hyper-Real World: Landscape as Commodity



**Above:** Kyle Ford, *Expedition Everest*, 2008.  
**Images Below:** Bethany Souza, from the *Sunshine State Project*, 2009.



1. The photographs in this exhibition reveal the influence that artists believe we, as humans, exert on our environment. Is it acceptable, in your opinion, to label these photographs as “landscapes?” If not, what label would you give them? Consider the images by the artist Kyle Ford, who takes photographs of natural landscapes with human-built complexes encroaching on them. Do you think combining the unnatural with the natural makes the environment as a whole look “fake?” What are the ramifications of making the natural look unnatural?

2. In this exhibition, we see the way humans have changed the vegetative landscape. Humans seem to manipulate natural vegetation to their own needs and desires. For example, Ruth Dusseault makes this clear in her work focusing on the topiaries of Cypress Gardens. This exhibit focuses on the idea of land as a commodity. Do you think nature should become a commodity or should landscape be something that is left alone? Florida has a problem with non-native invasive species. Should Cypress Gardens highlight native Florida plants in their natural form or should they continue to manipulate the landscape as seen in the photographs by Dusseault? What are the ramifications of using the landscape as a commodity? What is the fate of the natural Florida vegetation in the future?

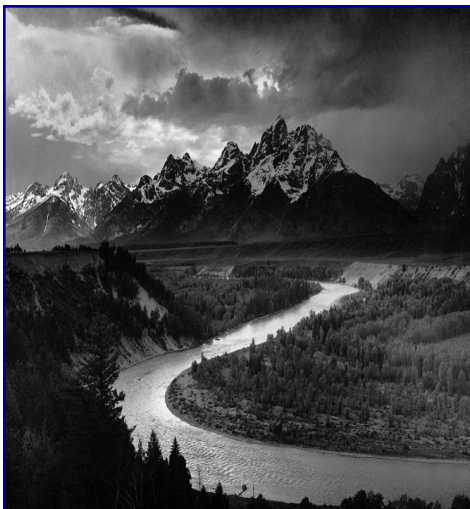


**Above:** Ruth Dusseault, *Peacock*, 2006.

3. Bethany Souza is an artist based in Hammond, Louisiana. She focuses her work on “issues of place in the contemporary world, in particular how images, objects, and memory help inform our ideas about place.” (<http://www.bethanysouza.com/bio.html>) In her works there is great thought about the placement of the objects and the relationship of the objects to each other. With this in mind, what seems to be the relationship between nature and unnatural places in her works? In looking, analyze the human-made elements and the nature they contain or represent. How is nature portrayed in relation to human-made objects that nature is a part of or contained by? What kind of reaction or feelings does the viewer experience when looking at these pictures?

4. There are two works by Souza that seem to portray a noticeable difference from the first set of works. What seems to be the relationship between human-made construction and nature in these two works? In western culture, we are accustomed to humans “conquering” nature. Is there some form of role-reversal here? What is nature’s role in these two remaining photographs by Souza? The audience is presented with nature emerging from the confines imposed on it by “civilization.” What do you think Souza’s photographs as a whole say? What do you think Souza’s intended message is?

5. Landscapes have often been a place where one can enjoy the natural beauty and splendor of a specific location. It has been the artist's intention to interpret and portray these places, to expose the audience to the awe of a setting that may be unfamiliar. For example, artists from the past, like the photographer Ansel Adams (1902—1984), exemplify the production of the beautiful landscape. Thoughts of vast rolling hills and dynamic mountains and valleys are what typically come to mind when thinking of landscape. Also a great deal of commitment is needed to showcase these natural wonders in a positive light. Justin James Reed's photographs exemplify a shift in the manner in which we handle landscape. Leaving behind the ideal of natural beauty in the portrayal of landscape, his works focus on commercial buildings that are only offset by the occasional bush or tree. He photographs earthen wounds opened by the construction of homes. As you view *Hyper-Real World: landscape as commodity*, compare and contrast the attitudes toward the landscape as exemplified by the historical artist mentioned and the works by Reed and others.



**Left Image:** Justin James Reed, *Monroe, NJ*, 2006.

**Center Image:** Ansel Adams, *The Tetons and The Snake River*, 1942, Grand Teton National Park, Wyoming.

**Right Image:** Justin James Reed, *Cranbury, New Jersey*, 2007.



**Left Image:** Alexander Heilner, *The World, Dubai. U.A.E.*, 2008.

**Above Image:** Jeremy Drummond, *65-Point Plan for Sustainable Living: Arizona, USA*, 2008.

6. All living organisms have an effect on their environment. A *keystone species* is a species that modifies the natural environment so much that the entire ecosystem is altered. Changes caused by a keystone species can be greatly beneficial to the overall ecosystem. For example, beaver dams are the primary natural method of forming lakes, ponds, and overall wetlands. This results in greater biodiversity and an overall positive effect on the environment. Conversely, an *invasive species* has a negative effect on its habitat. Such a species can either be a native or non-native species and detrimentally dominate and overpower the ecosystem. This can be seen with cattle that have been grazing in the same area for centuries, destroying the grassland and ultimately harming their own population. After viewing Alexander Heilner's breathtaking photographs of the human-made islands in Dubai or Jeremy Drummond's beautiful overhead views of suburban developments, such as his *65-Point Plan for Sustainable Living: Arizona, USA*, do you think the artists consider humans as a keystone or invasive species or not? Would the artists agree with the statement that it is our responsibility to leave the environment completely unaffected by human habitation? Defend your answers.