



ARTBOUND

VISUAL ARTS

# Arguing the Landscape: Artist Don Suggs Interprets the American West

Sarah Linn | December 9, 2016



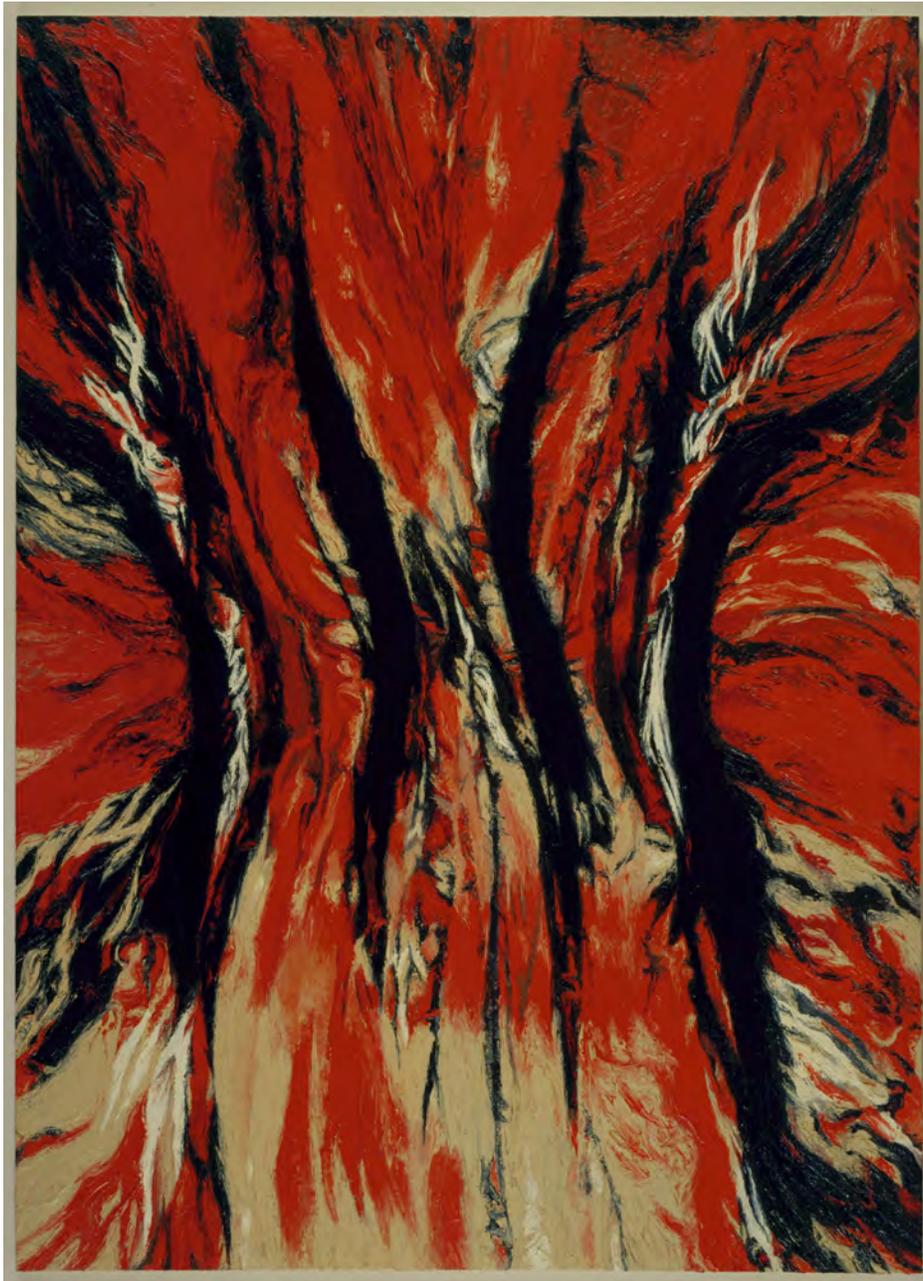
Los Angeles artist Don Suggs. | Photo: Paul O'Connor

Something is missing from Los Angeles artist [Don Suggs](#)' arresting landscapes: a patch of sky, a stretch of desert, an expanse of sun-warmed stone. In place of those essential elements are colorful concentric circles — abrupt visual interruptions that force the viewer to pause and reflect on what is hidden and what is revealed.

Each circular form “disrupts the usual picturesque comforts we seek in landscape views, but it also informs us,” Suggs writes. “The thing that blocks our view is an opening in the picture to further meaning.”

The recipient of two National Endowment for the Arts grants, Suggs has spent much of his career grappling with his relationship with the landscape — creating works exhibited in two recent solo shows. “Paradise,” featuring paintings and archival ink prints from the past two years, ran May 25 through July 1 at Venice gallery [L.A. Louver](#). “Arguing the Landscape,” which ran Aug. 19 through Sept. 16 at Cuesta College's [Harold J. Miossi Art Gallery](#) in San Luis Obispo, collected paintings and photographs created over three decades.

Cuesta College fine arts instructor [David Prochaska](#), who oversees the Miossi gallery, said he selected Suggs to kick off the 2016-2017 season because of the way his wide-ranging works address narrative and natural processes of awareness. In addition to Santa Barbara artist [Eric Beltz](#), showcased in October, the gallery will host the group exhibition “Vanished: A Chronicle of Discovery and Loss Across Half a Million Years,” on display Jan. 19 through Feb. 16, and Arizona artist [Irene Hardwicke Olivieri](#), showing Feb. 24 to March 24.



Don Suggs, "Enid Angle (The Tree's Heart)"

“The artists I chose this season are really exploring their perceptions of the inner and outer worlds, trying to address that duality,” Prochaska explained. “So much of this work is about reflection and how we construct our perceptions from natural experiences, as well as... the way that we look internally to our association to try to build some sort of continuity between the two worlds.”

For Suggs, who was born in Fort Worth, Texas, and raised in San Diego, scenery — rolling green hills, verdant valleys, snowy mountain peaks and the like — holds a seductive, slightly sinister power. “[I’m not] immune to the charms of the landscape. Nobody is,” the UCLA graduate acknowledged, “but to be able to couch it in terms of what artists are required to do, it does require... a strategy of challenge, a disruptive strategy.”

Rather than wholeheartedly embrace the pretty and picturesque, as past generations of artists have done, he opts for a more nuanced view of nature.



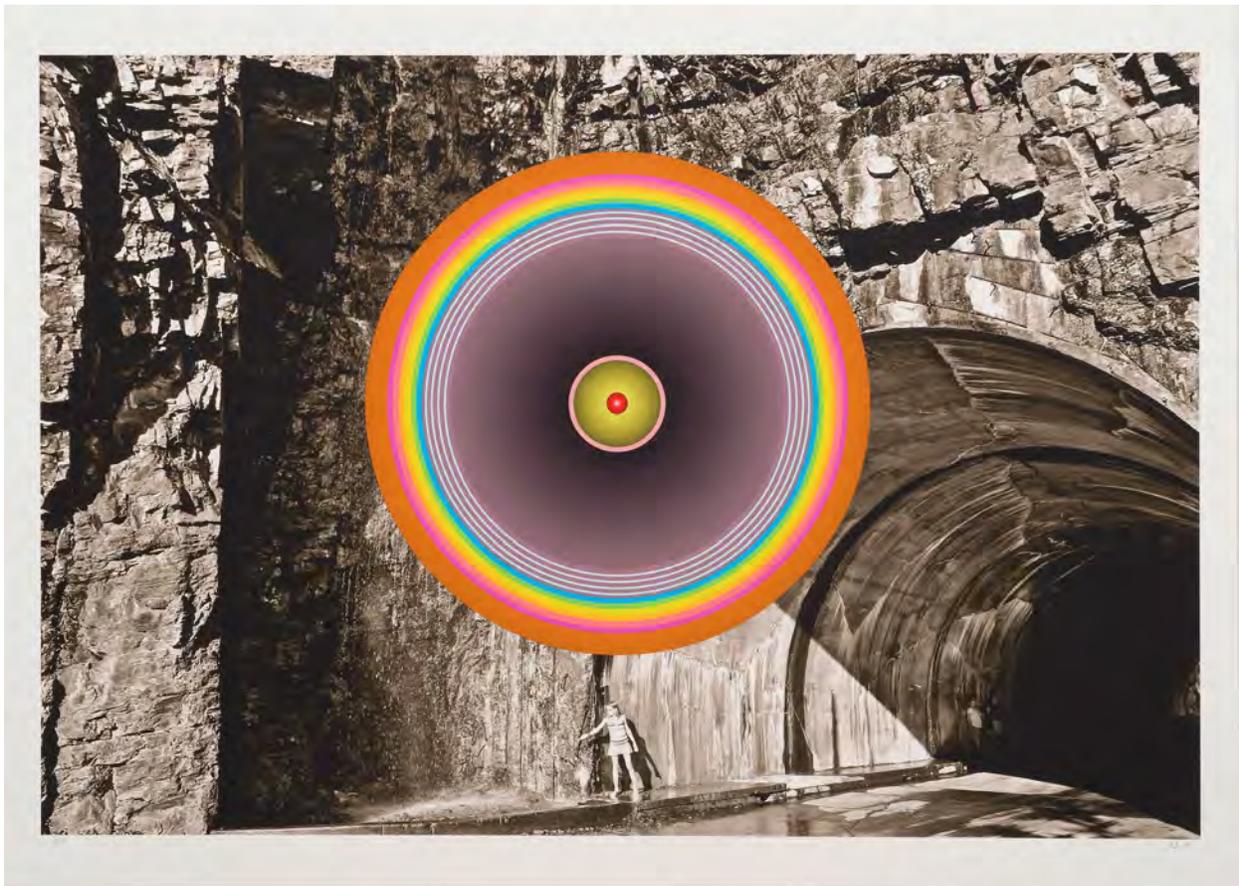
Don Suggs, "Dark Girl"

As “Arguing the Landscape” demonstrated, Suggs has found several ways to get his point across, from mesmerizing circle paintings to collaged photos of people looking at iconic landmarks. (“Every three or four years I do a radical flip,” he said.)

His “Autochthonous Views,” created in the mid-1980s, are barely recognizable as landscapes — registering rather as something more abstract. (The word “autochthonous” means “native” or “indigenous.”) Suggs created the extreme close-ups of trees, rocks and other natural features by cropping grainy black-and-white photos he found in old Arizona Highways magazines, then rendering them in raw, radiant color.

“If you take a picture the size of a normal magazine picture and you crop it to the size of a postal stamp,” he explained, a new narrative comes into view. “I wanted to do the landscape without the punchline, without the zinger or the money shot. (laughs) It was supposed to be eluding... the landscape and eluding the picturesque,” he added.

Suggs' “Proprietary Landscapes” series from the late '80s pushes the concept one step further. Part of each sweeping vista, depicted realistically in **Sierra Club calendar** fashion, has been replaced by flat rectangles or triangles of color.



Don Suggs, "Sprite"

More recently, Suggs has been experimenting with circular forms.

His “Abyss Pool” paintings reinterpret hot springs and thermal pools at Yellowstone National Park in Wyoming as colorful concentric circles — glowing greens, acid oranges, bold blues. Each ridged ring represents a different element: water, minerals, even algae.

“These are the furthest reductions I could do and [still] have them be landscapes,” Suggs explained.

In the case of his “Paradise Prints,” the artist superimposes his circular abstractions on black-and-white photos of scenic spots such as Montana's **Glacier National Park**. Again, the colors come from the scenery itself.

“My colors actually have a lot to do with narrative meaning,” Suggs said, although he hesitates to discuss exactly what that meaning is. “The worst thing about narrative in art is didacticism. I’d like there to be a narrative that is accessible without it being preached or over-explained or even explained at all.”

But Suggs did open up to Artbound about the philosophy behind his work:

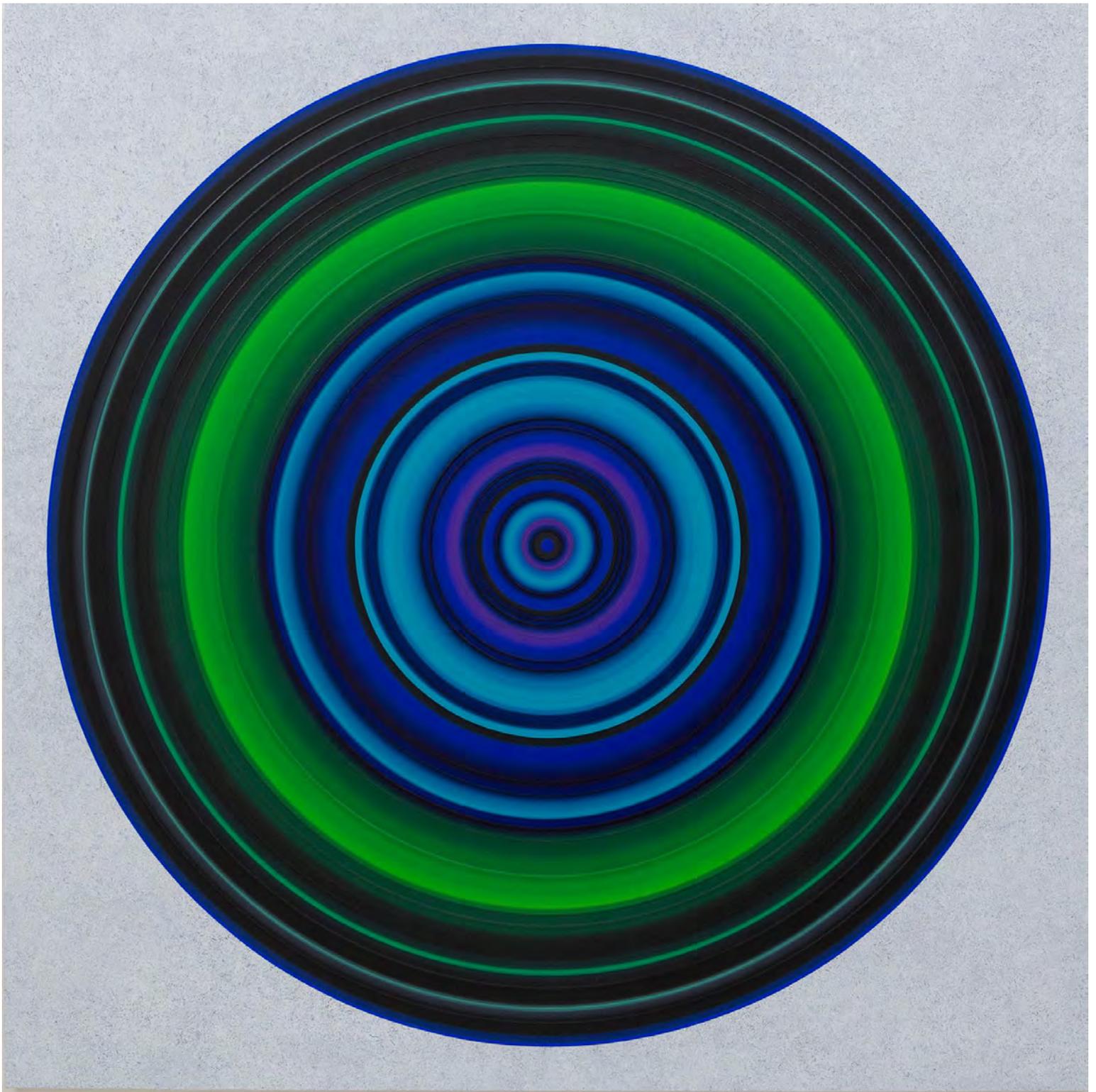
### **How did you first become fascinated with landscapes?**

The first memory I have of being interested in the landscape had to do with a Bible lesson. ...There was an image of the expulsion from the Garden of Eden. And right in the middle of this green and blue landscape was this red and orange and yellow circle. It was the whirling blade of fire that was inserted between Adam and Eve and the Garden of Eden to keep them from returning.

I was 8 years old. The only place I'd ever seen anything like that was in a comic book.

The impression was memorable enough so that after that when I'd look at scenic landscapes — like a Sierra Club calendar or a scenic picture book — I would interpolate a circle over that and wonder, “What would that look like with that whirling sword of fire?”

That was one of my first [experiences] with aesthetic arrest. It wasn't really about the content of the narrative. ...There was just some sort of collision of complimentary colors, geometry and virtual imagery.



Don Suggs, "Abyss"

**How do your paintings and photographs address the idea of landscapes?**

They were always from the beginning about challenging an idea of the landscape — the primary and central cliché, which is the picturesque. We all know the formulations of the picturesque.

They're all over media and they're all over coffee table books. In fact, they're almost inescapable when you are in front of the landscape yourself because you mentally start cropping and cropping and cropping and trying to arrive at whatever this ideal version of the landscape is in your mind.

[For] the fortunate few of us who have grown up in wild places, that is probably not the case. But anyone who's grown up in the city — even L.A., which is close to natural places — they have been seriously warped in their view of the natural world.

In most of our minds, that has been conditioned by the history of the picturesque.



Don Suggs, "Mountain/Molehill"

## **Talk more about that history.**

Where it evolved from, initially, was a practice of painting that was basically for hire. ...In the 1600s and 1700s, people started hiring artists to depict their land holdings. And their land holdings of course included their house and their horse and their wife or their husband, their servants and their crops. There's a great [Thomas] Gainsborough picture that John Berger used in [the book and television series] “Ways of Seeing” of these two people standing... in front of this vast farm. They're on the left and there's a large tree and on the right is a small tree and in between is their wealth. When Berger put that in “Ways of Seeing,” he stuck a little sign in [the image] that says “No trespassing” (laughs) — because what the picturesque is about is *my* property. That's why we have the term “magisterial view” — you've mastered the land.

The proprietary landscape is a catalog of one's holdings. Even if it doesn't include anyone's personal property, the way it's couched enables you to command. It's a commanding view. There is something close on one side to create scale and there is something farther away on the other side to create depth of field. And then further beyond that is this vista — the scenic perfection of the picturesque.

## **For many artists, the landscape is not just scenic. It's spiritual.**

I think it's largely come down to us as something approaching the sublime. ...Implicitly there's something about the picturesque landscape that says “This is paradise.”

I just had a show called “Paradise” and it was about that first impression of that whirling blade of fire keeping you out of paradise. The distraught figures of Adam and Eve are on one side of the circle, and on the other side is paradise. You can't go back.

Now it's incumbent on the artist to supply paradise, to supply the sublime. And the picturesque was a way to do that.



Don Suggs, "Firehole"

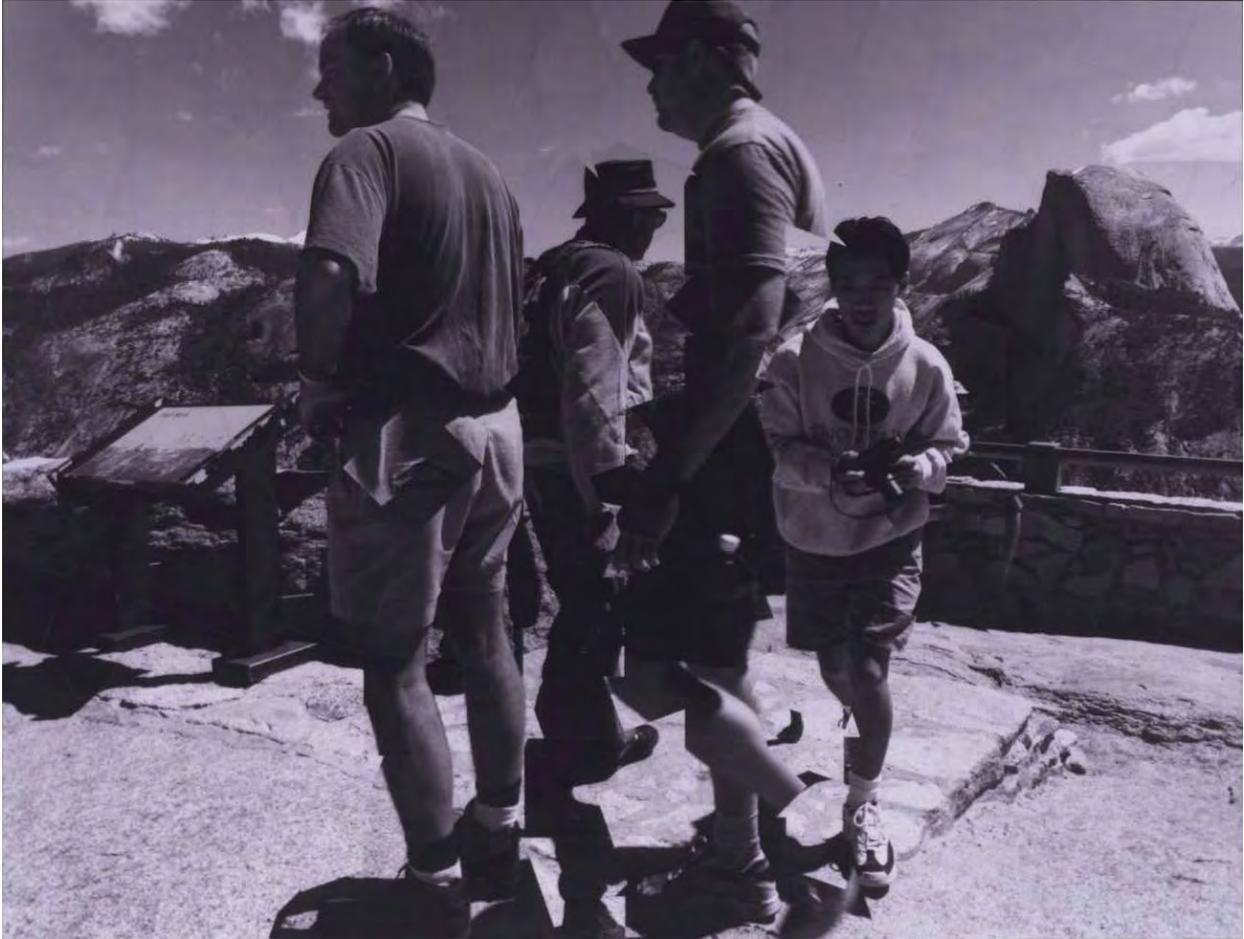
**What was your original vision for the “Paradise” series?**

Initially it was about going to a place that was arguably wild [such as] a national park. I'd go to a place where there was no evidence of human presence, and I didn't really get off on it. It was too picturesque or it was too pretty or it was too perfect. So when I did these photos, those ones with the people in the landscape, it was about the people. It wasn't about the land.

I like to have people in the lens. I guess it comes down to that.

## Why is it important for you to feature a human presence?

It's about my persistent concern about locating people in the land without them thinking that they know what it's all about... Right now I'm interested in the urban landscape particularly because I'm more interested in [seeing nature] interrupted. People have interrupted the land and these are the ways that they do it.



Don Suggs, "High Sierra"

## How has spending time in the wild affected how you view landscapes?

When you get out in the real wild place you perceive differently. You're not being interrupted by the picturesque bracket. You see things you never imagined would be there — phenomena of light, accidents of delineation like ley lines, things in the clouds.

I'm not religious, but if there is a religion I would buy into, it would be that. John Muir, there's someone that definitely had that religion. I think the whole idea of geomancy is not too far from that.

When you get into a real wild place, it conjures something in you. And it's deep and it's old.

Now hopefully you don't revert to a wild state because you'd probably starve to death. (laughs)

There was an excellent essay by [British novelist] **John Fowles**... that was very influential on my view of the landscape. It was called “**Seeing Nature Whole**.” ...He [Fowles] grew up with a father who was a cultivator of apple trees in his back yard. Everything was perfect. The English tradition of the garden is the perfection of the picturesque. And the French idea of the garden is ever more geometric and abstract. This whole European legacy of the land was something his father believed, and something that [Fowles] says he learned not to believe.

Because the best thing about the natural world is that it's wild. And what he was making a case for was making places for the wildness of nature and not feeling as if you grasp it or can own it or can exploit it.

**Is that your goal with your landscapes — to make an argument for wildness?**

This is about [being in a] wild place, a place where you don't [think]... “I command this. I understand it. I have control.”

It's just about respect. Respect those places and leave them alone. And don't step off the boardwalk. (laughs)



Don Suggs, "1,000 Feet"



Don Suggs, "Autumn Palm"

*The interview portion of this article has been edited for length and clarity.*