# Widening the Lens: Photography, Ecology, and the Contemporary Landscape

## Episode Six: Impressions

**VENUS WILLIAMS:**

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**Welcome back to *Widening the Lens: Photography, Ecology, and the Contemporary Landscape*. I'm your host, Venus Williams.**

**We're calling our last episode "impressions" as a way to think about making photographs a bit differently. What if rather than quote "*taking*" photographs of places, we reframe that process as gathering the *impressions* they leave on us instead?**

**Throughout this series, we learned that the impressions landscapes leave on us can be material, like what is left behind in photographic archives; or immaterial, what we carry in our bodies or in the stories we tell about land.**

**In the "imposing" camp is what artists and architects like to call "the built environment"—which is really just a scholarly way of referring to all the human-made stuff that's actually *on* the land. This includes homes and other types of buildings, but also infrastructure, mining operations, military installations, dams. The kind of stuff that—as we've talked about—a certain kind of landscape photographer might intentionally leave out of their frame, maybe to create the illusion that none of that stuff is really there at all.**

**But for other artists, this "stuff" is the whole idea.**

**For them, reading and recording the built environment is as important as reading and recording the land itself. Because both have something to say about change; about values; about our present and future environmental crises; and about where we might go from here.**

**Edra Soto: [in Spanish]** *Well, my name is Edra Soto. I was born and raised in Puerto Rico. I lived in Puerto Rico for 27 years, before moving to any other place in America. And I've been living in Chicago for 21 years.*

**VENUS WILLIAMS: This is the artist Edra Soto. She was born and raised in Puerto Rico and lived there for 27 years before moving to America. She's been living in Chicago, now, for 21 years.**

**Edra Soto:** My work deals with communication. I focus on site-responsive work and have expanded my practice into architectural interventions and installation work.

When I think about the landscape, I think about the house of my upbringing and the wild land that is in front of the house and the history of that area. I grew up in a gated community that was built during the 50s and the 60s. And the houses and the motifs that I represent in my work come from this residential space. These homes are emblematic of lower and middle class communities in Puerto Rico. The houses look very much alike.

The architectural motifs that I represent in my work are called *rejas*, which are wrought iron fences and decorative concrete blocks, which are called *quiebrasoles*, which is not an incredibly popular word. I think people call them *bloques* or blocks and well, these two elements are very prominent throughout the island. It's something that exists in the home to protect and also provide some ventilation.

**VENUS WILLIAMS: Soto started wondering about this type of ubiquitous Puerto Rican architecture. And wondering why these everyday structures and motifs couldn't be sites of reflection or cultural value. Especially when the literal relics of Puerto Rico's colonial past—the ones that were made *by* the colonizers—are celebrated, protected, photographed by marketers, and visited on tours.**

**Edra Soto:** There's no popular knowledge about the origins of the motifs, nobody really could tell in a casual conversation where the motifs come from, do they have any meaning. The potential for the houses and the motifs to become valuable culturally is the proposal of *Graft*.

**VENUS WILLIAMS: Like its name suggests, Soto's *Graft* is an ongoing art project that she calls an "architectural intervention". It maps this motif of the wrought iron *rejas* onto different spaces here in the U.S.**

**Edra Soto:** I thought if I think of them as something that have cultural value, I can also share the idea that lower middle class communities have that kind of cultural value.

And when that connection is made, when somebody lives in a place and they think of them as valuable. It could be powerful, it could be transformative, it could be a second look and a reconsideration.

**VENUS WILLIAMS: Each iteration of *Graft* is site-specific and is usually accompanied by reading materials that Soto commissions—essays by different writers and scholars reflecting on the work and its related histories and ideas.**

**Soto started the project in 2013 and the architectural interventions themselves started as screens Soto hung over walls, windows, and doorways, integrating them into their host environments.**

**Edra Soto:** In the early iterations,-I make representations of the decorative motifs-perhaps in a literal manner. And the experience of looking at a decorative pattern in an architectural space when it's trying to be integrated to the space as much as possible, to try to inhabit that space, to make it feel that it was there already, what happens is that it could be very present, but it could also disappear.

sometimes people will miss it and it is doing what it's supposed to do. But also as an artist, I felt, that it was not really connecting. And my impetus to connect is quite deep. I think it's my motivation. So I, I start reflecting on How could I really bring people in and have a more significant experience?

To do that I have to be very -generous and, It is something that I-also greatly enjoy I sometimes think about making art is like making a gift, how you make that perfect gift for this place, for this person something that speaks to them as much as it speaks to me.

I will never give something to somebody that I don't like or that I don't value,

**VENUS WILLIAMS: This, for Edra Soto, is where photography started coming into play.**

**Edra Soto:** Photography to me, I think about it as my memory. It allows me to just remember things that happened, where I was. In my work,-I have been able to introduce it as the archive that informs the larger body of works that I craft through my practice. It's not a formal type of photography practice, the one that I do is more about taking pictures with a camera or my phone and documenting-everything that I see that I think will become relevant to telling the story that I'm trying to craft through my work.

The kinds of pictures that I take are usually trying to document the facades of the homes and the decorative motifs of the residential spaces that I represent through architectural interventions. And then I also document the life inside the house. And that expands to-documenting something that maybe is the opposite in representation of a residential home, which is-the colonial military architecture in Puerto Rico, and how that continue to be present in the public eye through advertising and commercials and propaganda.

Perhaps because I have to travel so much to Puerto Rico in the back and forth. I start becoming more aware of how this identity is presented. So if you don't live in Puerto Rico, you don't have a real concept of what is this place or how it really looks like to people that live there.

In fact, uh, the last time I traveled to Puerto Rico, it felt even more aggressive. This form of representing the island through the tourist lens.-So you will see very large  banners, posters.

Once you arrive to Puerto Rico in the airport, while people are waiting for the luggage, they will see a very large mural of-a photo of Castillo San Felipe del Morro, which is, a military Spanish fort that is in Old San Juan, and this is the kind of military colonial architecture that I think about in, in relationship to the Puerto Rico residences and how-incredibly disconnected and, and vast is that contrast.

And I take pictures of everything. I take pictures of the TV monitor, of billboards. Anything that documents-this particular architecture. And then, I have extended this to-the Puerto Rican landscape, the political environment, and-my personal story and-my personal memorabilia.

It became more apparent to me,-the impact of the landscape and the environment in people's lives when -we have to assess the aftermath of the Hurricane Maria and what happened to the houses after the hurricane, the destruction, the things that are directly connected to-that impact. I think that is my most intimate relationship to the landscape.

**VENUS WILLIAMS: Hurricane Maria was, of course, the massive, category five storm that struck Puerto Rico in September of 2017, killing thousands in both its immediate and longer term aftermath, with widespread power outages and hurdles in importing and distributing aid to those trapped, displaced, or otherwise affected.**

**In addition to this acute damage to lives, homes, and land, Maria also brought Puerto Rico's more chronic conditions to light—most of which relate to its status as an unincorporated U.S. territory with fragile and outdated infrastructure; a struggling economy; political instability; import/export restrictions thanks to the Jones Act, and more.**

**But Soto felt pummeled yet again by how the storm and its tragedy were depicted—or, one could say, *taken, captured*—in the immediate aftermath, both artistically and in the international media. Especially as she herself didn't quite yet know how to respond.**

**Edra Soto:** I took pictures of the landscape the day after Maria. And I -saved them for about two years. I remember feeling quite frustrated because-when you go through something so traumatic and life-changing and you see a representation that you don't don't feel make justice to it or is not accurate. [Like] I remember seeing-an installation that had a huge banner of a dilapidated home. And in front of it -there was an installation of fake garbage. I think that was the turning point for me.

I was thinking, I think I need to do something about this. I cannot keep these feelings to myself, and I'm going to have to really meditate on what will be the most adequate way to represent this experience. I think it's a huge challenge to represent the tragedy of others without making work that is overbearing.-I want the experience to be gentle. I want people to feel that they are arriving to something that, is not screaming at them, but they are arriving to it and it will reveal itself.

As artists,we do have so much agency in creating an experience for the audience. We really can design how people approach that work, how they are going to move in front of it, around it. It

was a big problem to solve, and also a great form of learning for me. I felt like it forced me to reflect and it also taught me what is possible.

**VENUS WILLIAMS: Soto started building little viewfinders into her *rejas* architectural structures. She did this for the first time in a two-person show at the Chicago Cultural Center in 2019 called "Forgotten Forms." This has been a major component of the ongoing *Graft* series ever since.**

**Edra Soto:** So how it works is that there's a small viewfinder that have a picture embedded in the apparatus. And then that is hidden with a mirror and the mirror has a hole and you can look through the hole and you can see the image. So, you have to look through the wall, through this hole, and you will see your reflection as you're looking at the image.

**VENUS WILLIAMS: The images themselves are from her personal archive, and she's used a different selection in each iteration of *Graft*, including major installations at the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York and Carnegie Museum of Art in Pittsburgh.**

**And in contrast to the banner-sized tourism images Soto encountered at the San Juan airport, for instance, the images embedded in her *Graft* installations are the size of personal snapshots, which adds to the intimacy of the viewing experience.**

**Edra Soto:** I believe the perspective that I provide through my photography is unfiltered. it's not a constructed image that is trying to identify a place. But everything is contained in this particular frame of work and context. The documentation of the decorative motifs that inform the work. Portraits of my family, of me-life at home, but also the advertising and media. I think of all of these things in relationship to this constructs from the Puerto Rican Tourist Company, and, this fabricated identity that have been perpetuated throughout the years.

And it's deeply rooted in-the military-colonial history of Puerto Rico. And it doesn't really tell the story of, of Puerto Ricans or-the life in Puerto Rico~~.~~ [So] I always think that I am building a narrative with the archive. and as you start navigating, ~~y~~ou start weaving your own conclusions about what [the images] are, what they mean. ~~It's~~ a discovery. it's not incredibly obvious-people might miss the images that are embedded in the architectural intervention but once one person figure it out and, and discover this image, then others follow. So, maybe some of my favorite moments is seeing people going on their knees and really low to the ground wanting to see everything. It made me feel that I did my work.

**VENUS WILLIAMS: All of this gets back to what Soto hoped to highlight with *Graft* from the get-go: impressions of the everyday homes and neighborhoods and lives that the people *of* this place built *in* this place. Especially in light of the island's colonial history. And especially after Hurricane Maria, where efforts to rebuild—and greatly expand—the tourism sector have seemed to take precedence over all else.**

The part of the project that I believe is the most important is trying to express that there's cultural value in the lower and middle class homes, that is the information that I hope. I can continue to express and promote through the project, because, when people feel the place where they live is valuable. They have the opportunity to reconsider, and maybe take care of it, I understand that the political climate is quite divisive right now where people feel that they are being displaced. And I think it's important to continue reminding people that what they have, it matters.

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**VENUS WILLIAMS: It's only fitting that we end in the West, with a dialogue between two artists who travel across Western U.S. lands to research and compose their work as conscientious visitors. These particular artists embrace analog tools and, one might argue, an almost analog way of looking at and experiencing these places. They make work that is sensitive to the land and its changes. And work that wonders about our collective future in both the short- and *very* long-term.**

**Dionne Lee:** My name is Dionne Lee. I am an artist. I work primarily in photography, collage, video and I really think a lot about relationship to place and land, both thinking geographically, but also, one's physical environment. Another question in my work is really thinking about what I've been calling the conflict of belonging.

So thinking about it on like a micro scale in terms of my own relationship to the American landscape,and the histories that are embedded in it. And then back out to like a macro scale of our collective relationship as a species to the planet. And just looking at how our behavior implies that we don't collectively believe that we belong here or that we like are a part of the nature of body, right? Thinking also about, scale in terms of the length of time that humans have been on this earth versus the scale of our impact to the planet and to the environment.

**Victoria Sambunaris:** My name's Victoria Sambunaris. I'm an artist, photographer. I do a little bit of video work. And my interest has been in the land, the evolution of the land, the development of the land. But not just, present day. I'm thinking about past histories in hundreds, thousands, and millions of years when I'm looking at geological landscapes.

And how we interact with that landscape, and the politics and histories of that land and the human-centric ethics of the landscape that exist at the moment. Thinking about how we will go forward,, in the future and continue to exist.

**VENUS WILLIAMS: Sambunaris has been on the road working on a project called "Taxonomy of a Landscape" for the past 23 years. She travels alone across the U.S. by car with a 5 by 7 camera, making large-scale portraits of particular American landscapes at particular moments in time.**

**Victoria Sambunaris:** What shaped what I do is, growing up in Lancaster County, Pennsylvania. My parents were immigrants from Greece. And Lancaster was filled with these factories, and my parents worked in those factories, and we lived in the city of Lancaster. But we were surrounded by this bucolic Pennsylvania Dutch Amish landscape. So, on Sundays, we would get in our pink Rambler station wagon and go out to the Amish country and look at land.

but I was mostly concerned about how Lancaster was changing and the encroachment of retail, outlets and suburban developments in the land. So every time I returned to Lancaster, I saw new development on the land, farmlands that were being eliminated.

And then the elimination of factory jobs for mostly medical campuses now and outlet malls. And, this drastic transition to a consumer culture that I'm seeing all over the country. These changes stimulated my curiosity. And that was the beginning.

**Dionne Lee**: I think for me, I grew up in New York City and my entry into photography was just making street photography essentially and like documenting my friends. I was a teenager and my dad just gave me like a 35 millimeter. It was just a way of being in the world without feeling like I had to fully be in it. It was like a kind of protection. At that time, you know, it was very different because people weren't making images on cell phones a lot. So it was very different to be walking around with an older looking camera.

after High school when I went to college for art. Moving into a dark room was a totally different experience and I remember distinctly like the day learning about New Topographics and that I think was the first spark because it was depicting a world that was really unfamiliar to me and exotic coming from New York.

**VENUS WILLIAMS: Remember—New Topographics was that mid-20th century approach to landscape photography where instead of capturing sweeping vistas of wilderness, photographers documented the banal, everyday structures of modern life.**

**Dionne Lee**: New York is such a built environment, but it's very different looking at it from like, as like suburbia or like Vicky was talking about with consumerism andstrip malls, like things I've just had no familiarity with.

But it really got me to think about how places were constructed, which I think because New York is so built, I just never thought about the fact that it was a highly constructive space that I was growing up in. I just didn't know anything else. Moving to California was really the kind of the thing that really, I think, molded me into the artist I am now. Realizing that there was way more sky than I knew just like available like I didn't in New York City. It's so cut up by the built environment there and it was just amazing to be somewhere where I could like see a really long horizon line that wasn't, you know, cut up with like skyscrapers.

So, there was just this real change in not just environment, but my understanding of my scale in New York. You feel small in a very different way than you would feel amongst Redwoods or looking out to the Pacific ocean from like a cliff.

And so it was the first time I became aware of my scale in relationship to my environment.

**VENUS WILLIAMS: Sambunaris spent time in New York City, too, but kept finding herself drawn to the open road.**

**Victoria Sambunaris**: I moved to New York in 1987, and I was working a job, and taking classes at ICP at night.

**VENUS WILLIAMS: ICP as in the International Center of Photography, a museum and school now located on the Lower East Side.**

I took a class with Nan Goldin, called, like, Personal Diary, and ,it was terrible for me, like, to turn the camera on myself. I took all these different classes at ICP, trying different things, and I just kept coming back to landscape.

I was constantly driving up and down the east coast, up and down that 95 corridor and seeing all these changes on the landscape.

The New Jersey Turnpike now is just filled with distribution warehouses and truck depots and, 20 years ago there were just a few, so it's relating something about the culture our landscape is who we are. I was definitely looking at particular photographers, landscape photographers, starting with the U. S. Geological Survey photography and the Farm Security Administration photography, all of that work was influential.

New Topographics, that was big for me. I mean, all of that was of inspiration and I've taken that, survey photography in my own practice where my work is project based, and so I'm looking at a particular area of the country every year.

**VENUS WILLIAMS: Though unlike her 19th and 20th century predecessors, Sambunaris, of course, hasn't been out there surveying sites for resource extraction, recreation, and development. She's been surveying and documenting the extraction, recreation, and development itself—and all the changes those things have brought with them to the land. And she does so with curiosity and sensitivity. Her only agenda is to be a witness. And to gather impressions of what she sees.**

**And unlike her New Topographic predecessors who focused very specifically on the built environment, Sambunaris juxtaposes the ancient, geologic nature of sites across the U.S. with the intrusive activities of people recreating, manufacturing, and moving resources on and through them. Like an endless stream of train cargo cutting through the Mojave Desert,**

**forming a white and red band at the base of the mountain standing behind it; or dirt bikers soaring over California sand dunes that are scarred with their tire tracks for as far as the eye can see.**

**Victoria Sambunaris:** The work is research-based and usually stimulated by something that I've read. It might be an article in the *Wall Street Journal* or the *New York Times*. It might be a book or sometimes a conversation that piques my curiosity about a place. And then I start by packing up the car with the gear. I shoot with five by seven field camera and color negative film.

**VENUS WILLIAM: This, by the way, is a large-format camera that looks kind of old-timey with a lens mounted on an accordion box that has to be rigged to a tripod. It takes one plate of film at a time, which has to be loaded into the camera meticulously to avoid pre-exposure. Its a tool and a process not unlike those utilized by Sambunaris's predecessors out West—folks like Ansel Adams and the like.**

**So you can start to picture Sambunaris, like Adams, standing behind a tripod with a cloth over her head so she can see the ground glass of the camera, which reflects what the lens is seeing.**

**This kind of camera is still considered ideal for capturing wide landscapes in great detail. Though using it requires far more patience than your standard DSLR.**

**Victoria Sambunaris:** With the five by seven, it's a really slow process. I usually am scouting all the time once I get to my destination. I'm scouting and looking and looking and driving around and I spend most of my time looking at place.I have a smaller camera to document my everyday activities,

And then I have a video camera that I'm shooting. When there's movement so I'm kind of covering all bases. And then when the circumstances are right, I'll go back with the 5x7 camera and I will shoot one or two sheets of film to make sure I have it.

And so, I spend months at a time working in a particular area and returning to New York with the film that gets processed. I mean,-I was on the road for two and a half months, I guess. And I maybe shot about 75 sheets of film, something like that. And so then I come back and I'm editing all that work and in the dark room, making 20 by 24 prints to edit from. So I can see detail. And, then it whittles down to just a few. And if I don't get it, then I go back out and I do it again and I've had to do that before.

**VENUS WILLIAMS: These images we noted by Sambunaris of cargo cutting through the Mojave desert and dirt bikers in the sand dunes are from some of her more recent journeys during the pandemic, when supply chain issues and recreating on the land gained new significance for people throughout the country and, really, throughout the world.**

**Victoria Sambunaris:** I've been following the Colorado River and,-there's been so, so much-news about the depletion of water in the West, Lake Mead, Lake Powell are down.

[But] I started this project because in 2020, during COVID.-I got in the car and drove across the country because I was going crazy sitting inside my house and went to California-and I had just read *Desert Solitaire* by Edward Abbey, and I was thinking about this idea of industrial tourism, and you know, for years I'm looking at the development of landscape. I never had people in my photographs, really, but all of a sudden there were people everywhere.

I mean, the campgrounds were packed,-there were people out on motorcycles,RVs, the desert was inundated with humans. And so I was looking at that with Edward Abbey's ideas of industrial tourism and how that's impacting landscape.

**VENUS WILLIAMS: Edward Abbey published *Desert Solitaire* in 1968. It was inspired, in part, by his time working as a park ranger at Arches National Park in the Moab Desert in Utah. His concept of industrial tourism took aim at the ways in which people seek to experience nature without *really* leaving their vehicles and without leaving behind the comforts of their modern lives and homes. Like "Glamping," for example. Abbey would have hated Glamping.**

**Victoria Sambunaris:** This past year of working around the Colorado River, I think I was trying to make this point of industrial tourism, which is happening all over, like, the factories are disappearing, the industry, that was in some of these places is disappearing, and tourism has become the economy in a lot of places, places like Moab, where there was a uranium mine there, but now all industry is out, and it's completely tourism, and even at Lake Powell, the Navajo Power Station that employed mostly Native Americans, and now, that plant is gone.

And,-the only work for people is in tourism, which doesn't really pay the way some of these other industries did. So that's kind of a conundrum that we have to think about.

**VENUS WILLIAMS: Part of this conundrum Sambunaris is talking about here is that the uranium mines and power stations were, of course, incursions on the land themselves. Yet the region's reliance upon them causes *other* types of problems when they're gone—as do the toxic chemicals and radioactive particles they leave behind, a problem that is little known or acknowledged outside of the affected communities.**

**Victoria Sambunaris:** I was camped out at the Salton Sea, looking at this toxic water that is like a bird sanctuary. I was looking at these encampments out in the desert that were enormous. I mean, there's so much public land out west. And that's something that's very unlike the east.

There is no public land in the east. So you find these encampments everywhere of people in their RVs. And many of these people that are living off grid permanently. I mean, this isn't, they're not just on vacation. And-I talked to them and many are anarchists. And there's this quote that I always quote when I give a talk [from] geographer Pierce Lewis. Hhe states "our human

landscape is our unwitting autobiography, reflecting our tastes, our values, our aspirations, and even our fears in tangible, visible form." This is who we are. And it really explains so much, being out in the landscape for long periods of time and talking to people, it gets you out of your realm and it gives you a better understanding of what's happening politically in the United States.

**VENUS WILLIAMS: The approach Sambunaris takes in creating a sensitive, multidimensional portrait of a place—one that accounts for human *and* geologic history, and the interplay between the two—resonates strongly with Dionne Lee. As does Sambunaris's approach to art-making as a way of life**:

**Dionne Lee:** Vicky, you kind of started talking about process and then you wound up, I feel like, in a place that describes how your process, not like how you even arrive at the work, but how it just informs, I think, how you chose to be in the world, and that thread is just interesting to me.

I think for artists in general, you can't really draw a line between like, what's your work and what's your life. It's all just the same thing all the time, which can be exciting and also stressful sometimes. For me, I definitely read and try to collect outside source information, but a lot of what motivates a project actually comes from like an experience or something that happened to me or that I engaged with.

And something I use a lot, because I also teach, something I use a lot with my students is try to encourage them, to recognize their own experiences as like a research potential. And that just comes from my own practice. So when I am out, I'll just say in the field, so to speak, which I did recently through the program, Land Arts, the American West.

And I've also been doing that for a couple of years to another project called Unseen California that I'm a part of.

**VENUS WILLIAMS: These are both research initiatives that invite artists to conduct field work in remote places in the U.S. and bring what they discover into their art.**

**Dionne Lee:** And so when I'm in the field, I often like don't make anything. It's hard because I can't, I'm like, I don't know what to do. I'm just usually overwhelmed in like a sensory way. And so I always look at my field time as just a way to collect information. And to think about how do I intake these experiences and then turn those into questions or research opportunity. I think what really attracts me to the West and deserts specifically is that there's so much that's hidden in the landscape but it also reads as if there's nowhere to hide because it's literally just like vast and low. And so, I just find that to be a really rich environment to think about what's right on the ground, but then also what's hidden. In my travels, I really thought a lot about how to learn how to read landscapes.

I was traveling as a group of people in, like, a giant van. And I noticed over the course of time, how much easier it was for me to recognize, like, when a piece of a mountain was cut away or like when there's a mine. 10 years ago I didn't have that literacy And so it's also just building that skill

is exciting and important, but also I think speaks to a wider Illiteracy we have as a species about land and just like how to read environments. And so I just think that that's interesting and exciting.

**VENUS WILLIAMS: Much like the lands she's found herself attracted to, Lee's work exudes a sense of mystery. Her black-and-white silver gelatin photographs are often cropped in such a way that identifying the specific lands they picture is next to impossible.**

**Another recurring motif is the presence of the artist's own hands. They appear in her photographs and videos gesturing on or toward the land; holding or reconfiguring rocks or earth; attempting to build a fire; and, in the case of Lee's earlier work, tearing and otherwise combining and manipulating landscape photographs that appear in wilderness survival books and magazines.**

**Lee also experiments with papermaking and embossing to make works that resemble fossils and other markers of geologic time.**

**Dionne Lee:** Yes. I show up in my work. Usually it's my hands of some sort. Part of that is like, a real depiction of me grappling with a lot of the medium of photography and what questions I had about landscape photography and my relationship to all of that.

I couldn't figure out how to make a landscape image that felt like it was addressing the things that I was interested in. And so I think that led me to collage that led me to include my hands in my work more because I think it was just a true depiction of my grappling with the form. And a lot of what was motivating my work was trying to understand like, I liked hiking. I wanted to camp. I wanted to be in those sorts of environments. But I also knew there was a discomfort and uneasiness that was within me, and I was curious to figure out, like, what is that coming from? Which led me down to like, one, you're from New York City. This is just not what you're used to.

But then also thinking more ancestrally, and thinking about, like, how generational experiences can, like, show up and something I also think about or I've thought about a lot. It's my role as a visitor, as a temporary person in these places and what information I can get and what information I will never be able to access through just being a visitor, and even thinking about my impact in these spaces that aren't a permanent place for me.

And Vicky and I have had separate conversations about what it's like to move through indigenous territories, and how that shifts my perspective of what it means to be a visitor, but also my relationship to this land because there's United States of America and then there's Navajo Nation, right? Which is also another experience of being on the East Coast and then moving West, which on the East Coast, indigenous presence isn't as visible. In the Northeast, especially, and recognizing the visibility of Indigenous history as you move from East to West is difficult and emotional because for me it points to how successful their genocide was, right?

And so to me, I'm just like, it's heavy and it just brings up a lot of questions for me about what my relationship is to that particular history as a Black person in this country whose ancestors did not immigrate here necessarily, you know, so it's like, what does that mean in terms of my presence here and the indigenous history here. But all of that to me is very generative in terms of like how to challenge oneself and how I think about my relationship to this place, or to this land. ~~B~~But all that came, I think also like Vicky, that's just from hearing stories, right? And being in the place.

**VENUS WILLIAMS: And from there, Lee likes to zoom out.**

**Dionne Lee:** I think it's so important to just figure out what that relationship is that I have or that we collectively as a species are having right now to the planet and The really miniscule scale that humans have been on this planet in comparison to our impact, and I'm even curious about the difference between our impact versus what it means to just make an impression and does it have to be an impact?

I promise I'm not trying to solve a thing in my work. What I'm trying to do is just look at the questions, which I think is part of solving the problems that we all deal with. But it's also very much about just how do you embody this? How do you feel?

It takes work to just be in awareness of like, I'm at the Hoover Dam and we're running out of water, you know, versus like, I'm at the Hoover Dam and whoa, what a cool place. And I think that my work is trying to just put that in the forefront of like what it means to have to sit with those feelings and to grapple with the feelings versus like jump to action because if you're not situated in yourself, it's hard to know what to do.

**Victoria Sambunaris:** I feel conflicted because there's so many things going through my head and part of that is just looking at the land geologically and thinking about the millions of years that has taken these rock formations to form or what happened here.

I mean, you realize, how fleeting our time here is on Earth and just what we're doing, how we're depleting resources or how we're interacting with that and I, I think part of, part of going out is just trying to understand my place in this world but I'm conflicted because the other part of me is, you know, as that 14 year old kid, I remember looking at *Life* magazine and mostly photojournalism that were, that was telling a story and informing people.

And so, part of me wants ~~to~~ be that photojournalist, that's informing people, like, this is what's going on, and try to be aware outside of yourself. I do feel a bit of an urgency, just because things are changing at a rapid pace.

And I want to document those changes. I mean, just reading about how the Salton Sea's gonna change and become like this big lithium mine and I need to get back down there ~~to~~ work, or there's so much to address in the country. And like Dionne said, it's all about curiosity and wanting to see actually what's going on. But I think it makes you more aware of everything that's happening, having an understanding about place.

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**VENUS WILLIAMS: Let's return to an idea from geologist Marcia Bjornerud, who reminded us in episode two that:**

**Marcia Bjornerud:** ~~C~~hange is the norm, landscapes are not static, but change that's too rapid is the problem. And the kinds of change that we're bringing upon ourselves with the Anthropocene. are going to be very rapid and high amplitude changes that we, in general, have not prepared ourselves for.

So change is not bad. In fact, I'm very glad we live on a planet that is characterized by constant change, much better than the mausoleum that is Mars or the moon, where nothing changes. But what we need to do is become much more intelligent about living on this changing planet and realizing it is not going to be the same, and then trying to keep the rates of change within some kind of reasonable limits that allow us to continue to adapt and not be constantly in a reactive mode and facing crises.

And that's the tragedy of modern technology, that each time we invent something, we think this is the answer, this is going to make our lives much better, not thinking about the long term consequences of those new technologies as they interact with the natural world.

**VENUS WILLIAMS: Like coal mining, for instance. Or nuclear power. Or server farms spanning hundreds of thousands of acres all over the world.**

**So in addition to bearing witness as artists like Dionne Lee and Victoria Sambunaris so conscientiously do, how else might photography help us move forward at this juncture—and do so in spite of some of the ways it helped get us where we are.**

**Let's check in with Princeton art history professor Rachael DeLue again, who we first heard from way back in episode one:**

**Rachael Delue:** As a historian of landscape, I think a lot about landscape in the present day because landscape played such a role in the history of environmental devastation.-One of the questions I find fascinating is the question of how one might represent something like climate change, which is vast, and infinitely complex.

It's cosmic, in fact, you know, it's not a thing that one can locate in one place or one time. And so one of the questions I'm curious about is, is there a way for landscape reimagined or reconfigured to help communicate to people, not just what climate change is but its scope and its effects because I think climate change is a real problem because it feels far away or it feels too big for people.

It's been called by one theorist a hyper object, by which one means a thing so big that it's kind of impossible to imagine. Not only representing it, but even conceiving of it. So, I mean, one of the things I think is super interesting about landscape isn't just that it contains a multitude of contradictions. What I like about landscape is its capaciousness. In its broadest definition, landscape is understood as a section of Earth that can be seen from a single point of view. And so, to me, the affordance there is, alright, well, what point of view do we take?

Maybe we don't take the human—maybe we take the point of view of another planet, or we take the point of view of a bird, or we take the point of view of a whale or we take the point of view of vegetation on a shoreline and we try to imagine the world and its systems from that perspective.

**VENUS WILLIAMS: Or what if we take the perspective of the Earth itself?**

**William Fox:** It's been estimated recently that human beings are going to take two trillion photographs in 2025.

**VENUS WILLIAMS: This, once again, is Bill Fox, the poet and curator we heard talk about mythmaking in episode four.**

**William Fox:** so imaging the world has thoroughly invaded almost everything we're doing. 97 percent of those images will be taken on phones, which is interesting. And of course, that's a subset of the really large number of images that will be made in 2025, most of which are made by machines for machines and never seen by human beings anyway. And that's facial recognition on CCTV,-it's NASA, it's the military flying over Syria.

Why are we taking two trillion photographs, plus all the military and covert stuff, right? Why are we doing that? You kind of wonder, well, is there another purpose at work here?

So this is a metaphor. No way this can be proved one way or the other, but it's as if Earth is taking a selfie constantly. The earth is constantly taking images of itself. We're its agents. And it is the only way the Earth as a system can measure the effect that we've all had on the planet. So, even as just a metaphor, I find that a useful kind of conceit through which to think about our own behavior on the planet.

So photography doesn't just photograph what's out there, it enables us to see what we're doing. And that's increasingly a thought that's on my mind.

**VENUS WILLIAMS: And for a final thought, let's return to artist Dionne Lee, who earlier introduced this idea of leaving an impression on the land as opposed to an impact. Which reminds me of other ideas we've talked about in other episodes of this series—artist Raven Chacon, for instance, struggling with the word "capture" when it comes to making photographs, videos, and field recordings of the lands he and his family have cherished for generations. "Gather" was the word he proposed instead.**

**Here's Dionne Lee:**

**Dionne Lee:** The university I work at has a geological museum on campus. And so I've spent time there and there's a great library there. So it's been a good resource, but I've just been thinking a lot about autonomy of the land and -what it means to picture it, to image it. ~~A~~nd I'm just thinking a lot about what it means for an image of the land to exist without a human making it.

And that also goes back in thinking about the process of photography itself and how an image gets made chemically. And so I've been also spending a lot of time looking at images of fossils. And my whole thing is that I'm like, what if I claim this to be true and act as if the fossil is the first landscape photograph, like an imprint of a plant on a rock, right?

The leaf that fell from the tree that landed on the rock that was then compressed, right, for a long period of time and leaving an imprint. Like, to me, that is a photograph and it really mirrors an actual process of making a print. You know, like when the light hits the negative, or when the light from the enlarger hits the paper, right? That's like the leaf falling or something.

And that is just an act that can happen without us, it happened before us, and what does it mean for us to look at those as pictures, as images that can give us information about a place, right?

Versus all of the stuff that we might bring when we're behind a camera. Right? Like, what if that's just not there? Because it's impossible to make an objective image, right? We just can't. I can't remove myself, but I'm just thinking about that as like a guiding force, almost even like as an ethic of like photography of what if that's historically what we mark as the first photograph.

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**VENUS WILLIAMS: Thank you Edra Soto, Dionne Lee, Victoria Sambunaris, Marcia Bjornerud, Rachael DeLue, and Bill Fox. And thanks to all of you for joining us in thinking through photography, ecology, and the contemporary landscape.**

**A quick recap: you hard about Edra Soto's *Graft* series, which you can read more about on her website at edrasoto.com. We discussed a range of works by Dionne Lee and photographs from Victoria Sambunaris's ongoing "Taxonomy of a Landscape" series. You heard some audio excerpts from Sambunaris's 2022 video work, *High and Dry*, as well.**

**You can learn more about Dionne Lee's work and current exhibitions at dionneleestudio.com. Likewise for Victoria Sambunaris at victoriasambunaris—that's S-A-M-B-U-N-A-R-I-S—.com. Check out her Instagram, too, where she posts images from her work and journeys.**

***Widening the Lens: Photography, Ecology, and the Contemporary Landscape* is a production of the Hillman Photography Initiative at Carnegie Museum of Art, Pittsburgh. For more**

**information on the people and ideas featured in this episode, please visit carnegieart.org/podcast.**

**Once again, I'm Venus Williams. Thank you so much for listening.**

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