Book Review: Texas Rangeland

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Texas Rangeland presents an unusual series of photographs of cattle interspersed with commentary by ranchers asked to discuss what they saw when they looked at the images. Burton Pritzker made the photographs; his wife, Renée Walker Pritzker, collaborated by collecting and editing the text of the conversations. The result offers readers a curious blend of materials. The ranchers respond not only to the photographs but recount their own memories and discuss ranching as a disappearing way of life. This provides a background to the photographer’s dramatic visual responses to cattle.

The burden of interpretation falls on readers through a purposeful withholding of contextual information. The dialect and simple phrasing of everyday speech are preserved in conversational quotes. Except for a general list of names in the acknowledgments, however, there is no attempt to identify in the text who said what by name, date, or place. Similarly, there is no statement by the photographer. The titles of his photographs, in a list of plates, consist of simple identifications, such as “Bull #1, High Plains.”

Many of the photographs are cropped tightly at a close distance and are intentionally ambiguous. Through formal arrangement and unconventional printing they transform “ordinary” subjects such as cattle into surreal and dreamlike images that undermine our assumptions. An uneasy kind of romanticism creates a dramatic visual and conceptual dislocation that we must search through on our own. We are invited to experience cattle, the landscape, and the changing demographics of contemporary rural life in new ways. By extension, perhaps we are also being challenged to reconsider how the history and mythology of ranch life have conditioned our expectations and understandings of it thus far.

Although the volume’s missing contextual information about the photographs and quotes may seek to emphasize “artistic” or “literary” instead of “literal” connotations, it is really not necessary to remove such information to produce such effects. Photographs and quotes, by their very nature, always take things out of context, and the details they present already function as both fact and symbol. The missing information simply would have added to the
complexity and contradictory tensions that are already compellingly present in the work.

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