Review of *West and West: Reimagining the Great Plains* by Joe Deal

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The geography of the Great Plains defies conventions of what a beautiful landscape is supposed to be. There are no mountains, forests, or pristine streams and lakes. It is mostly a
flat horizon line, broken by an occasional tree, and bodies of water are almost always muddy ponds. To the untrained eye, it appears featureless.

It takes a special understanding to appreciate its vastness and subtleties. It requires an especially acute sensitivity to be able to translate these qualities to a photographic image. Most photographers approach this landscape looking for atypical qualities, anomalies rather than the common.

Joe Deal is not one of those photographers. In West and West: Reimagining the Great Plains, Deal focuses his camera directly at the land. He breaks with the conventions of shooting with early morning or late afternoon light, using filters for dark skies and dramatic clouds, and looking for something unusual or unexpected to contrast with the emptiness. There is no romanticizing or glorifying. It is what it is.

Joe Deal came to prominence in 1975, when a number of his photos were included in the exhibition New Topographic: Photographs of a Man-Altered Landscape. Although Deal’s earlier work focused more on how man has altered the landscape, and West and West is mostly devoid of human presence, the style remains the same: stark black-and-white, carefully composed images rendered on film with an almost unsettling clarity.

In his introduction, Deal mentions the original geographic surveys of the mid-nineteenth century and how the land was divided into townships six miles square, then subdivided into one-mile-square sections. “The reductiveness of the grid,” he notes, “not only brought the Great Plains down to scale; it also imposed a wearying monotony of identical squares over broad expanses of the plains, implying that one section is more or less like any other.” One cannot help but wonder if that observation influenced his choice of camera formats, the square over the more typical horizontal rectangle.

Deal abandons the rule of thirds and usually places the horizon directly in the center, understanding that earth and sky share equal importance. When there is a break in the horizon, like a tree or mound of dirt, it is often placed directly in the middle of the frame. This formalistic composition emphasizes the subtle and delicate balance that defines this landscape.

In the 1970s, black and white was the preferred choice of “serious” photographers because it was seen as honest (color being romantic), but probably, and more importantly, because color prints were prone to fading. This issue was resolved by the turn of this century, and black and white now seems almost old fashioned. One wonders if these same images could hold more or less power rendered in color.

There is no mistaking Joe Deal’s contribution to landscape photography. West and West is an important record of his style and vision.

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