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Review of *America's 100th Meridian: A Plains Journey* Photographs and text by Monte Hartman

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America's 100th Meridian: A Plains Journey. Photographs and text by Monte Hartman. Essay by William Kittredge. Foreword by John R. Wunder. Lubbock: Texas Tech University Press, 2005. xxi + 113 pp. Maps, photographs, notes, index. \$39.95.

Photographs come in many guises: tools of advertising, personal mementos, scientific data, reportage, self-expression. A tree can be photographed as a representative of a specific species in a field guide, a casualty of a lightning strike in a newspaper, a symbol of strength for an insurance company, or an object of beauty interpreted by an artist. Each manner of photography reflects a different relationship the photographer has to both subject matter and form. The photojournalist, for example, has an obligation to appear neutral, to be the unbiased eyewitness to the subject matter depicted, which is usually an editorial assignment. The selection of the artist photographer's subject matter, on the other hand, is guided by intuition

and can be depicted with whatever degree of verisimilitude the photographer wishes.

The photographs in *America's 100th Meridian: A Plains Journey*, the result of several excursions Monte Hartman made in the midnineties to the six states crossed by the 100th meridian, suffer from a lack of clarity of intention which can be summed up by Hartman's description of them as falling "on a continuum between conventional photojournalism and art photography." The photographs throughout the book suggest Hartman's subject matter selection is guided more by a formal preoccupation than an attempt to provide any insight into the uniqueness of the geographical area he is photographing. The photograph on page 17, for example, shows typical prairie buildings so spatially compressed and rendered with such strong contrast and saturated color that they are read as elements of a design rather than particular buildings in a specific locale, a reading reinforced by the title "Composition in Orange and Blue." Obviously a photographer is under no obligation to replicate the visual world faithfully, but Hartman's repeated distortion of space with either wide-angle or telephoto lenses and his use of color and tonal altering filters undermine the journalistic component of his stated ambition, homogenizing the places he photographs and rendering them generic in the way *National Geographic* photographers often give the most remote corners of the world a superficial gloss, robbing them of their exoticism.

Historically, photographers like Timothy O'Sullivan and more recently Robert Adams managed to make beautiful photographs of unique landscapes by keeping form and subject matter in balance. Occasionally in Hartman's work, when form doesn't overwhelm subject matter but instead complements it, as in "Hot Night" on page 50, the results can be beautiful in a meaningful way; far too often, the photographs are merely pretty.

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