

Aeration Pond, Toxic Water Treatment Facility, Pine Bluff, Arkansas, 1989

Emmet Gowin, b.1946
toned gelatin silver print on paper
James A. Michener Art Museum,
Museum Purchase



Biography

“When I was fourteen, fifteen years old, growing up in Chincoteague, Virginia, I realized that nature was a more interesting classroom than the classroom. Watching eagles build their nests and watching the ducks gather their resources to start a new life, that was just so much more interesting than what I was learning in school. It was at that moment I realized I wanted to be an artist, whatever that was. An artist, I thought, was someone who spent most of their time experiencing real, living things, firsthand. An artist’s task, then, was to report on what they experienced.”

Emmet Gowin, *Changing the Earth*, p. 151

Emmet Gowin was born in Danville, Virginia, in 1941. He received his B.A. from Virginia Commonwealth University in 1965 and his M.F.A. from Rhode Island School of Design in 1967. He began photographing in 1961 while he was in college. His prints have been widely exhibited, and they are in museum and gallery collections all across the United States and other parts of the world. He lives in Bucks County, Pennsylvania, and teaches photography at Princeton University in Princeton, New Jersey. He has written four books on his photography. Early in Gowin’s career, his subjects included his wife, children, and extended family members in Virginia. His more recent work includes aerial photographs of Europe, Mount St. Helens, mines, toxic-waste dumps, nuclear test sites, and massive agricultural projects.

This looks like eggs being fried in a pan! What is it really?

This photograph looks like an abstract series of shapes at first glance, but look a little closer. What do you see? Emmet Gowin took a picture of a toxic water treatment facility in Pine Bluff, Arkansas. This is a place where poisonous water is cleaned and returned to the earth’s water cycle. This toxic water is forced up into the foul-smelling air. Once the poisonous chemical contents have been removed from the water, it is returned to the river from where it was taken. Pine Bluff, Arkansas, is also known as a town that stores 12 percent of the country’s chemical weapons. If there happened



to be a chemical accident, people who live in the town would have about only 2 minutes and 30 seconds to get to safety in shelters several miles away. Do you know of any other areas where chemical weapons are stored? How do you feel about chemical weapons?

How did Emmet Gowin create this photograph?

Have you ever been in a plane before? What did the world look like to you from the sky? Emmet Gowin took this photograph while he was up in a plane looking down on the earth. He has given us a different perspective on the landscape, very different than the traditional landscape paintings you see by the impressionists. He has taken a picture of the landscape showing how a bird would see it. He takes pictures of the changing earth, and images of an earth that might not be very familiar to us. He has been taking aerial photographs of the landscape in the United States, Mexico, Czechoslovakia, Asia, and the Middle East for more than 20 years. In the United States, Gowin has taken pictures of places such as military test sites, missile silos, ammunition-storage facilities, toxic-water treatment facilities, mining operations, pivot irrigation agriculture, and off-road motor traffic.

Why did Emmet Gowin think it was important to create this photograph?

Gowin says that every picture is environmental and that it requires us to reflect on the world and its beauty. He also states that when he looks at the landscape in the United States, he is sad because people are destroying it. Perhaps this photograph is the artist's way of telling us that we are harming our environment by dumping hazardous materials. Perhaps the photograph is getting us to think about what we use and throw away and how that will affect the earth in the future. What is great about a work of art is that not everyone interprets it the same way. We know that Emmet Gowin is very conscious about his environment. Gowin also admits that early on in his photography career, he didn't think that dumping his darkroom chemicals down sewage drains would do any damage. He didn't seriously consider the effects of water and land pollution. He also states that when he looks at the landscape in the United States, he is sad because people are destroying it. We are experiencing the consequences of our actions, such as global warming. What do *you* think is Emmet Gowin's message with this photograph?

What does it mean that Emmet Gowin wants to "honor the world as it is?"

Gowin says that not everyone sees the same world. We all look at the world differently, even at different times in our lives. We all have things that we value or think are more important than others. Gowin says that he may see something now that he values, but when he was younger, he may have thought it was unimportant. With this photograph, he wanted to create a new perspective of the world and capture it the way it really is, without altering the photograph in any way. Seeing the landscape from the air was



new to him. He was drawn to taking this photograph, but he was stunned to see the world from this perspective too. He is showing that people are harming the earth. The composition he makes with his photograph invites us to reflect and contemplate on the land. This could be considered a beautiful abstract image, yet the subject of it is quite disturbing. What do you think?

Can a work of art have the power to tell people to help the earth?

Artwork in all forms has the power to change our minds, create controversy, make us happy, or even upset us. Artwork can open our minds, and make us think about things we may not have considered. Artists like Emmet Gowin can sometimes be considered activists too. This artwork might make you think about our environment and how we are harming it. You may ask yourself, what can I do to help the earth? There are lots of things you can do to help our environment. You can start by educating yourself on the many different environmental concerns, such as global warming, nuclear weapons, endangered species, destruction of the rain forest, land and water pollution, air pollution, nonrenewable resources, and many more. See if there are ways your school can become involved in raising awareness of an environmental concern and can help the environment. Also, look at your actions at home and think about what you and your family can do to help.

Learn More

Learn how art can be related to controversy in the activity below, “Look Closer: A New Perspective.”

What does the work aeration mean?

Aeration means that air is mixed with, or dissolved in something. In the case of *Aeration Pond*, it is with water. The important part of the air used in the process is the oxygen it contains. Oxygen helps the good bacteria live and gets rid of the bad bacteria. It combines with elements and turns them into sediment, something solid that will stay on the bottom of the water tanks. We use aeration in everyday things like in decorative fountains and in fish tanks.

Related Images

Look at many examples of Emmet Gowin’s aerial photography at the George Eastman House Still Photograph Archive, www.geh.org.

Watch a 2002 interview with Emmet Gowin in the PBS Photo Essay, *Changing the Earth*.

Related Links

Why is it important to clean the water? We have a lot of it in my area, and it seems to be always raining.



Even though that might seem like a lot of rain to you, we use so much water every day that we need every drop of it! Did you know that you use between 80 to 100 gallons of water in one day? How many people live in your house? What amount of water does your family use? Even a small family uses a lot of water. Remember, we cannot use the salty ocean water. So we need to find ways to save water for the future and to share with places that do not have enough water.

What happens to all that rain?

What happens to it depends upon how fast the rain falls and how much falls. Some rain will just soak into the ground, and some will run off into lakes and streams. If it is in a city, though, there is not much ground for the water to soak into. Roads, pavements, and parking lots have surfaces called impervious where water can no longer soak into the ground. These areas often flood and the water gets very dirty. The water has to find a way to a storm sewer. The storm sewer carries the water to nearby streams. Since it is dirty, it then pollutes the streams.

Where does our water supply come from?

The biggest supply of fresh water is in the world's glaciers. They have 75% of the water we need in frozen form. Can you imagine what would happen if the world's glaciers all melted at the same time? For one thing, the seas and oceans around us would move inland by about 230 feet. Learn more about our natural water sources at the website of the United States Department of the Interior, U.S. Geological Survey, ga.water.usgs.gov/edu.

Glaciers, a source of fresh water, are in trouble right now. Watch the 2009 PBS video *On Thin Ice* to see an up-close look at a glacier and related environmental problems at www.pbs.org.

My water comes from a well. What about the other water in my area?

Only about 16% of people in Pennsylvania get their water from their own wells. Some townships dig very deep wells and connect the residents to the well. Other places get their water from rivers and lakes. Remember, it can't be salt water from the oceans.

Would you like to know more about water in your particular area? The place to look is the Environmental Protection Agency, also known as the EPA. You can also contact them to ask a question at www.epa.gov.

What are chemical weapons?

Chemical weapons use the dangerous properties of chemicals, such as burning, to harm or kill an enemy. They do not explode like a gun or a bomb, but can be just as dangerous. Generally we say that the first chemical weapons were used during World War I. It was a gas called mustard gas, but it is not the kind of mustard we put on hot dogs. Today, there are a number of treaties among nations of the world to be sure that we are kept safe. These are called Chemical Warfare Conventions.



The Federation of American Scientists is a good source for information about the history of chemical weapons, current dangers, and chemical warfare treaties and legislation. Learn more at www.fas.org.

