

The Buffalo Jump Called Chugwater and an Irrigation Pivot near Wheatland, Wyoming, 1991

Emmet Gowin (b.1941)
toned gelatin silver print on paper
H. 9.5 x W. 9.5 inches
Collection of the Bucks County Intermediate Unit #22



Biography

Even when the landscape is greatly disfigured or brutalized, it is always deeply animated from within. When one really sees an awesome, vast, and terrible place, we tremble at the feeling we experience as our sense of wholeness is reorganized by what we see..... This is the gift of a landscape photograph, that the heart finds a place to stand.
-Emmet Gowin, April 1994

Emmet Gowin is a famous photographer who was born in Virginia. He went to school to study art. Early in his career, he began taking photographs of his family, including his wife and his children. Later in his life, he heard about the eruption of the volcano, Mount St. Helens in Oregon, and wanted to photograph it from above. Since then, he has been taking pictures from an airplane that shows the land. He has traveled to many different countries to take these photographs. His photographs show how people using machines and pollution change the landscape. These pictures help us to understand what can happen to the earth when we damage it. Today, Gowin teaches photography at Princeton University in Princeton, New Jersey. Gowin lives in Newtown, Pennsylvania.

It is hard to understand what I am seeing in the Emmet Gowin photograph. What is it?

Emmet Gowin took this photograph while looking down on the earth from an airplane. One of the first pictures Mr. Gowin made from a high place was from a tree house that his nephews made. There was a hole in the floor of the treehouse through which he took a photograph. He liked the idea of the different point of view. The treehouse was not very high, but it gave him many ideas for using photography as a way to show the world in a different way. Since 1980, Emmet Gowin has mostly taken aerial photographs.

If we were to look at the subject of Emmet Gowin's photograph from the ground, we would only see the fields of wheat growing in Wyoming. We would not be able to see even a trace of the irrigation pivot shown in this photograph. He took the photo from the air to show us what is happening to the earth. Seeing the land from the air in an aerial photo gives us a much larger view of an area, and includes things we would not have seen from the ground. It also makes real life objects that we could recognize up close appear more abstract.

This photograph records the actions of human beings. There are no people or animals in the photo, but we can see their impact on the earth. Gowin wants us to pay attention to



how we are changing the earth. Sometimes we are doing things that seem good for the Earth in the present, such as irrigation, because it helps bring water to the land to grow things. In the future, however, the irrigation systems we construct and the materials they are made of may permanently harm the planet. Emmet Gowin wants us to think about these things when we look at his artwork.

What do you think the very long title means?

Buffalo are large hairy mammals with hunched backs and wide horns. They are also called bison. Many years ago we had a lot of buffalo in our country. The American Indians used the buffalo meat for food. They used the skins for clothes. The Buffalo Jump was a place where the Indians caught the buffalo. They chased the buffalo over a cliff. The buffalo made a noise that sounded like *chug*. They fell from a cliff into a river. The Indians called it *the place where buffalo chug*. The people who lived there later put the two words together. They called the place Chugwater.

The irrigation pivot is used by farmers to water the land. It goes around in a circle and sprays water. Farmers are trying to bring water to their land. If the land has water, more crops can grow. In titling his work *The Buffalo Jump Called Chugwater and an Irrigation Pivot near Wheatland, Wyoming*, Emmet Gowin wants us to make a connection between the environmental impact of modern irrigation systems with the rituals and lifestyles of Native Americans.

Is Chugwater a real place?

Chugwater, Wyoming was once the central headquarters for the 500,000 acre Swan Land and Cattle Company. It was the biggest Wyoming cattle concern for the better part of the late 19th century west. It was also an important stop for the Cheyenne-Deadwood Stage Coach. John "Portugee" Phillips, of Fetterman Fight fame, became the first postmaster here, and opened the Chugwater Ranch in 1876.

Chugwater is also the source of an important geologic term called a Chugwater Formation. This formation is a combination of red gypsum and shale, discovered in this area of Wyoming. Its presence in rock indicates a connection to the Triassic time period, the time during which the land masses moved from one big land mass called Pangaea to forms that somewhat resemble the earth today. While Pangaea was breaking apart, mountains were forming on the west coast of North America from Alaska to Chile. The rocks that make up the cliffs are from that period. This occurred about 200 million years ago.

Today, the town has one elementary school, one middle school and one high school. In the 2000 census, the school system had 129 students and 244 residents. The town is noted for its delicious chili! Learn more about Chugwater Chili at www.chugwaterchili.com.

This photograph has two separate parts. Why did Emmet Gowin take a photograph that includes both?

The buffalo were a good source of food. The buffalo jump was an easy way for people to get their food. Today, farmers grow a lot of our food. They need water to grow the food. The picture shows an old way of living and a new way of living.



The picture reminds us to be careful. There are very few buffalo alive. The people who lived in the west killed more buffalo than they needed. Originally there were twenty to thirty million buffalo in the West. In 1889, there were only 1,100. Now, because people have worked to save them, there are about 500,000 buffalo.

We need to be very careful where we are growing food. Some places are good places to grow food. Other places do not have enough rain. We still grow food in these drier places. We do this by bringing water to those places by irrigation. The water often comes from rivers that need to be shared with other people for drinking water. We can use up the water in the rivers. This would mean that people would not have drinking water. Gowin wants us to realize that we need to balance the way we use our natural resources.

Do you think that artists can influence how we think?

Artists create artwork for a variety of reasons. Some artists choose to paint beautiful pictures. Some artists create large scale, interesting sculptures. Some artists want to remind us of history. Some are interested in the family, a special place, geography, or special people. Some artists have the power to change our minds, create controversy, make us happy, or even upset us. Artists can open our minds, and help us think about things we may not have considered. Still other artists are activists, that is, they want to encourage us to think hard about important issues and take action.

Artists like Emmet Gowin can be considered activists too. He wants us to look at his artwork, think about our environment and how we are harming it, and then do something about it. He wants us to take a careful look at how we are caring for the Earth. Do you think he is successful in his goal?

Learn More

Learn how to analyze a photograph with the below activity, “Critical Analysis of a Photograph.”

Explore abstract images in photography with the activity below titled “Explore Abstraction with Photography.”

Emmet Gowin wants his photographs to encourage people to think more about the environment. Can you create a work of art that would also encourage people to think about how they care for the earth? One way would be to create a poster, using a famous quote or personalized message to make people think about the earth. Another way would be to use only images – no words – to convince people to care.

Many artists care about the environment. They are called environmental artists. Look at their work on the following websites:

The Green Museum at www.greenmuseum.org

Treehugger at www.treehugger.com

Groundworks at 3r2n.cfa.cmu.edu/groundworks, an environmental collaboration in contemporary art

John Dahlson at www.johndahlsen.com, environmental artist and contemporary painter



There are many things you can do to help our environment. Educate yourself about a variety of different environmental concerns. Global warming, nuclear weapons, endangered species, destruction of the rain forest, land and water pollution, air pollution, nonrenewable resources, and clean energy are some current environmental concerns in the news. Get involved! Start an Eco Club at your school or in your neighborhood, church or youth group. Encourage adults to help you in your efforts to raise awareness about environmental issues and make a difference.

The following books are a good place to start.

Boursellier, Phillipe. *365 Ways to Save the Earth*. New York: Abrams, 2005.

Gramfors, Bo. *Earth Facts*. Denver, Earthbooks, Inc., 1990.

Loeb, Paul Rogat, ed. *The Impossible Will Take a Little While*. New York: Perseus Books Group, 2004.

Create a drawing, collage, photograph, painting or print from a different point of view. You may not have an airplane or helicopter to use for your work of art, but there are many ways to approach art – from above, below, the side, even macro, that will change the image you create.

Have you ever had a bison or buffalo burger? Bison are now raised like cattle are raised. They have less fat and calories; so dieticians say that the meat is better for you to eat than beef.

Read more about bison in the wild at www.defenders.org.

Learn more about the art of aerial photography at photo.net.

Related Images

Look at more of Emmet Gowin's aerial photography at www.geh.org.

Watch an interview with Emmet Gowin at www.pbs.org.

The Michener Art Museum shows work by many artists interested in aerial views, including Emmet Gowin, Charles Child, and Diane Burko, at www.michenermuseum.org.

Some aerial views show us the history of an area. Look at what the area of the Michener Art Museum looked like while it was still a prison at www.michenermuseum.org.

Related Links

Learn more about bison and listen to the sounds they make at the website of Wind Cave National Park, www.nps.gov.



Learn about endangered species on the Defenders of Wildlife website, www.defenders.org.

Learn more about the modern town of Chugwater, Wyoming at www.city-data.com.

See aerial photographs from the United States Department of the Interior at edcsns17.cr.usgs.gov.

See maps and satellite images from all over the planet on google.earth.com.

The first Earth Day was founded by Senator Gaylord Nelson on April 22, 1970. Since that time, the message of Earth Day has spread around the world. In recent years, growing concerns about the environment and climate change have motivated politicians and citizens around the world to take action. There has also been research that connects these environmental concerns to wildlife around the world. As a result, several advocacy groups for endangered species have become powerful and effective organizations. In recognition of the needs of these animals, use art to promote their causes, to help animals not only in remote corners of the world, but also in your own backyard. Create animal t-shirts, animal note cards, and organize an animal parade or an animal art show to celebrate your love for animals. Adopt an animal, an animal family, support a zoo, or volunteer at your local SPCA. Take care of the animals in your own back yard by creating an animal habitat just for them. Learn more by contacting any of the following organizations:

Defenders of Wildlife at www.defenders.org

Earth Day activism and involvement around the world at earthday.net

Heifer International at www.heifer.org

Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals at www.sPCA.com

World Wildlife Fund (WWF) at www.worldwildlife.org

