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Smithsonian American Art Museum Presents Nationally Touring Retrospective of Acclaimed Photographer Frank Gohlke

Frank Gohlke (b. 1942) is one of the most influential and respected landscape photographers of the last three decades. “Accommodating Nature: The Photographs of Frank Gohlke,” a major mid-career retrospective of the artist’s work, will be on view at the Smithsonian American Art Museum Dec. 5 through March 3, 2009. This is the final venue for the national tour.

The exhibition features 79 black-and-white and color prints, spanning the early 1970s through 2004. Gohlke’s photographs reflect how people interact with an environment that can never fully be controlled. Whether photographing his hometown of Wichita Falls, Texas, the grain elevators that punctuate the vast spaces of the Midwest, the aftermath of the 1980 eruption of Mount St. Helens in Washington or the neighborhoods of Queens, N.Y., Gohlke deftly captures the tension between humanity and the natural world. His photographs explore how people adapt to the forces of nature both great and small, even within the confines of their own backyards.

“I am delighted that the American Art Museum is presenting this exhibition of photographs by Frank Gohlke, whose work centers on subjects of deep meaning in American art—what land means, how it is used and the struggle between human control over the land and the power of natural forces,” said Elizabeth Broun, The Margaret and Terry Stent Director at the Smithsonian American Art Museum.

The exhibition was organized by John Rohrbach, senior curator of photographs at the Amon Carter Museum in Fort Worth, Texas. Toby Jurovics, curator of photography at the Smithsonian American Art Museum, is the coordinating curator in Washington, D.C.

“Gohlke’s photographs are part of a complex dialogue about our reconciliation with the modern landscape, exploring the ways Americans build their lives in a natural world that rarely fits within a traditional pastoral ideal,” said Jurovics. “While the austerity of his photographs at first suggests a coolness or remove, his intent is in fact the opposite—to express a personal and emotional

connection to place. His photographs speak with a powerful and deeply affecting resonance that is certain to appeal to the wide range of audiences at the Smithsonian American Art Museum.”

Gohlke’s photographs are quiet, spare and elegant, inspired by the directness of their subjects. He has sought to describe the urban, suburban and rural places familiar in everyday lives rather than romanticized views of wilderness landscapes. “Accommodating Nature” begins with Gohlke’s early photographic explorations of his Wichita Falls childhood—his grandparents’ ranch, his suburban home, the architecture of his community—followed by architectural and landscape photographs he made across the Midwest from Minnesota to New Mexico.

The heart of the exhibition contextualizes two of Gohlke’s most heralded and compelling projects: his depictions of destruction and rebuilding following a devastating tornado that struck Wichita Falls in 1979 and his multiyear investigation of the effects of the massive volcanic explosion at Mount. St. Helens in 1980. These photographs capture how people cope with nature’s unpredictability and raise provocative questions about humanity’s compulsion to continuously reassert itself by focusing on renewal and regrowth rather than on disaster.

A group of oversized color photographs of the Sudbury River in Massachusetts, created between 1989 and 1992, eloquently capture the disconnect between the ideal of a bucolic, pastoral New England and the reality and complexity of an overtaxed river that has been taken for granted. Photographs from commissions and grants from Mississippi to Queens draw attention to people’s active accommodation to nature across wide stretches of the country, in both rural and urban settings.

About the Artist

Gohlke’s art is deeply informed by the climate of North Texas, a land of steady wind, where hot summers and cold winters are punctuated by torrential spring thunderstorms, hail and tornadoes. His pictures take empathetic and, at times, wry visual note of people’s interactions with a natural world that rarely meets their ideals and expectations. Gohlke concluded that he should not be required to go to places of astonishing natural beauty—like those depicted in the work of Ansel Adams—to take landscape pictures. “I’m more interested in what’s outside my door,” he said.

His photographs came to notice in the landmark 1975 exhibition “New Topographics: Photographs of a Man-Altered Landscape” at the George Eastman House in Rochester, N.Y., which redefined how American photographers responded to contemporary landscape. Other photographers featured in this exhibition were Robert Adams, Lewis Baltz, Nicholas Nixon and Stephen Shore.

Gohlke received a bachelor's degree from the University of Texas at Austin in English literature in 1964 and a master's degree in English from Yale University in 1966. While at Yale, Gohlke met Walker Evans; following graduation, he studied privately with Paul Caponigro.

He has taught at the Massachusetts College of Art, the Art Institute of Boston at Lesley College, the School of the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston and the universities of Harvard, Princeton and Yale. Since September 2007, he has been laureate professor of photography at the University of Arizona and senior research fellow at the Center for Creative Photography, both in Tucson, Ariz.

Gohlke is represented in many private and public collections, including the Smithsonian American Art Museum, the Amon Carter Museum, the Museum of Modern Art, the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the George Eastman House, the Art Institute of Chicago, the Victoria and Albert Museum in London and the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris. He was a Guggenheim Fellow in 1975 and 1984 and was awarded a fellowship twice from the National Endowment for the Arts.

An interview with the artist, videotaped in June 2007 (running time approximately eight minutes) will be available on the museum's Web site, americanart.si.edu.

Free Public Programs

Gohlke will discuss his work and read selections from his catalog essay "Stories in the Dirt, Stories in the Air" Thursday, Jan. 29, 2009, at 7 p.m. in the museum's McEvoy Auditorium. A reception follows. Gallery talks are scheduled for Dec. 10 and Feb. 26, 2009, at 6 p.m. Details and complete program descriptions are available online at americanart.si.edu.

Publication

The catalog, published by the Center for American Places with the Amon Carter Museum, is written by Rohrbach with contributions by Gohlke and Rebecca Solnit, writer and critic. It is available in the museum store for \$35.

Credit

"Accommodating Nature: The Photographs of Frank Gohlke" is organized by the Amon Carter Museum, and is made possible in part by generous support from the Perkins-Prothro Foundation, Exelon Power and the Vin and Caren Prothro Foundation.

The Smithsonian American Art Museum thanks generous friends Charles and Judith Moore and Mark Schwartz and Bettina Katz for their support of the exhibition's presentation in Washington, D.C. The Bernie Stadiem Endowment Fund provided additional support for the exhibition.

Tour

The Smithsonian American Art Museum is the final stop for the exhibition. Previously, it was on view at the Amon Carter Museum, the Addison Gallery of American Art in Andover, Mass., and the Center for Creative Photography in Tucson, Ariz.

About the Smithsonian American Art Museum

The Smithsonian American Art Museum celebrates the vision and creativity of Americans with approximately 41,500 artworks in all media spanning more than three centuries. Its National Historic Landmark building is located at Eighth and F streets N.W., above the Gallery Place/Chinatown Metrorail station. Museum hours are 11:30 a.m. to 7 p.m. daily, except Dec. 25. Admission is free. Smithsonian information: (202) 633-1000; (202) 633-5285 (TTY). Museum information (recorded): (202) 633-7970. Web site: americanart.si.edu.

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Note to editors: Selected high-resolution images for publicity only may be downloaded from <ftp://saam-press@ftp.si.edu>. Call (202) 633-8530 for the password. Additional information about the exhibition is available from the museum's online press room at americanart.si.edu/press.