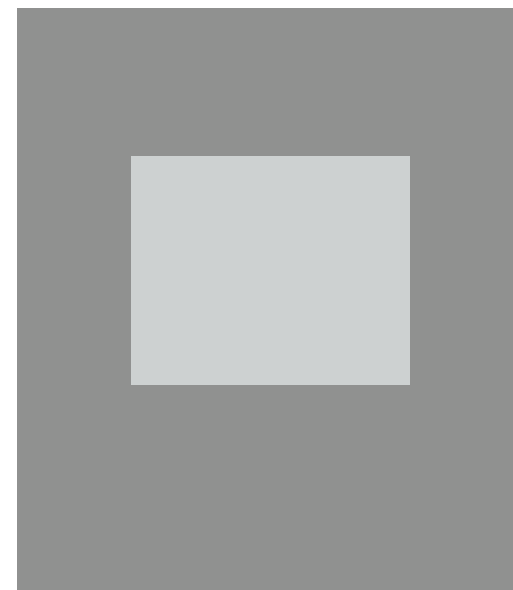


JOHN GOSSAGE

The Pond

This year marks the twenty-fifth anniversary of the publication of John Gossage's *The Pond*—recognized as one of the most influential photo books of its time and celebrated by its reissue in a second edition. While the title recalls the work of Henry David Thoreau, his aphorism “In wildness is the preservation of the world” finds little sympathy here. Photographed along Gossage's commute between Washington, D.C., and Queenstown, Maryland, this pond is rather grim. Abandoned furniture and old tires rise from its surface, and the surrounding landscape appears chaotic. We could not be any further from Thoreau's serene and pensive Walden. By binding together these two bodies of water, however, Gossage makes a claim for their equal importance and quietly reveals the beauty to be found in the landscapes that surround us every day.

This is the first installation of the complete sequence of *The Pond*. All photographs are gelatin silver prints made between 1981 and 1985. The portfolio was a gift to the museum from anonymous donors and Michael D. Abrams. The museum's Bernie Stadium Endowment Fund supports this exhibition.



Unnamed and unmarked, with no particular history, the pond is of little real note. It is neither dignified nor picturesque, and there is just enough debris strewn about to make things feel worn around the edges, enough muck to ruin our shoes. Not all of these photographs are easy to understand or necessarily even likeable. Some in fact seem to have been made just to make sure we are paying attention—frame and focus shift rapidly, and we find ourselves trying to understand what we are looking at, and why.

The Pond is not simply about a place, but about the larger act of how we engage the world around us. Stepping across fallen branches, ducking through the undergrowth, pausing to turn and look behind us for a moment before we continue on, we find ourselves standing at John Gossage's side as he makes these photographs. Stepping off the pavement, a narrow path defines itself, and we follow him into the brush.

In its narrative approach to landscape, *The Pond* belongs to a tradition of American photography that reaches back to the nineteenth century, including A. J. Russell's 1869 volume documenting the construction of the transcontinental railroad and Timothy H. O'Sullivan's and William Bell's images for the geographic surveys of the West in the early 1870s. A century later, photographers including Edward Ruscha, Lewis Baltz, Robert Adams, and Lee Friedlander returned to the survey format. In the intervening years, however, photography's view had shifted from the mythic landscapes and horizons of the West to the commonplace, to the world just beyond our front door.

John Gossage was a key part of this dialogue. His work helped to define a new approach to landscape photography, marked by a visual reticence and a stubborn refusal to meet our expectations of what constitutes acceptable scenery. While many believed this emergent style to be implacably bleak, there is also an undercurrent of concern, affection, and even delight to be found throughout these photographs. They reveal the elegance that can be found in the world at our fingertips if only we take the time to look carefully enough.

Reaching the pond, we find ourselves surrounded by a familiar late-twentieth-century landscape: neither nature nor culture, it is too damaged to ignore, but too mundane to prompt much affection. Yet as we sidestep around the mud and debris that fill our path, we discover small revelations. A branch laden with blossoms arcs overhead. Sunlight shimmers on the surface of a creek. We stop to gaze upward as a flock of birds wheels across the sky. Gossage also allows these moments that are unapologetically graceful.

Finally making our way back to the road, through backyards, and down the street, we open the door and arrive home, not so much relieved, but satisfied. A carefully mown lawn is comforting, but far less interesting than the place we have just come from. Gossage seems to be telling us that this pond—rough around the edges—is as democratic, as truly American, as Henry David Thoreau's *idea* of a pond carefully preserved and tended. We are reminded that no one place is any better, or any more worthy, than another and that the only limitations are in what we choose to see.