

BOMB — Artists in Conversation

BOMB 58
Winter 1997

Art: Interview

Emmet Gowin By Sally Gall



Emmet Gowin, Nancy and Dwayne, Danville, Virginia, 1970.
All images courtesy of the artist.

Not only is Emmet Gowin an artist whose work I am always excited by, but he is also one of the few photographers who has successfully, and radically, made changes in subject matter. While being different in content—the early photographs of his immediate and extended family; his later works of aerial views of the landscape—each body of work is similar in emotion. The topographical views feel endowed with a human scale of reference, much like his family portraits. He lovingly approaches all his subject matter, and always from an intimate distance (despite the actual vast spaces in some cases). Perhaps because his work is an act of reverence, Gowin has also managed to make the viewer aware of a variety of environmental and political issues without seeming heavy-handed or overbearing. It is Gowin's willingness to confront mystery head on that draws us into his work.

Sally Gall This is one of my all time favorite photographs. It just embodies everything: love, sex, death, masculinity, femininity, childhood, adulthood.

Emmet Gowin The two children, the boy and the girl, are so simple and so complicated. I remember in the micromoment, I was aware that her hand was whiter than everything else. They were fighting, and they fought long enough that they went from being mad to being reconciled, and then they were tired. And they were in this little moment of catching their breath. I always loved his heel. It's a little bulb of a thing, and his shadow. In any case it's good. It's good in all of its aspects, down to details you could never, ever orchestrate.

SG I'm curious, when did you make this transition from family pictures to landscape? Slowly, I would guess . . .

EG It was slow and it was fast. I recognized it slowly and I recognized it fast, as it were. In 1964, Edith and I were married. Later, we had our own kids and I gained acceptance into her family. I loved that family, and made pictures of their life. And then in 1972, Renée Booher, Edith's grandmother, died. And within that same calendar year, Raymond Booher, Renée's oldest boy, had also died, as had Willie Cooper. Raymond had been the storyteller and the curmudgeon. He was a delicate, bright-eyed, mercurial person. And Willie had been a really good friend. He was an ambulance driver in Europe in the War. And Renée's family was so tender to us and allowed us to come and go. They were the key link in our acceptance everywhere within four or five houses of related people. And having those three elder people in the family die within one year . . . I always knew that it wasn't going to last. You can't be an artist and have your identity reside in only one thing. The thing that you master will become a stranger to you, and you will outlive it or you will need to live into something else. You will always need to be educating yourself to the complexity of your feelings as they grow, and you don't want to do something twice, really. Everything that makes you an artist in a sense is the way things are understood; how they fit together in ways that have not been understood before. How can you discover the inherent value that's hidden in things that you haven't yet seen? It's in that sense that you want to do something new. And you know that it's chance that's going to put those things together. Only chance can bring together new combinations in a way that is revolutionary. No one ever discovered anything really important intentionally.

SG You can't will it into being.

EG If there were no problem there would be no discovery. But also, there has to be the confrontation with something inexplicable, something you didn't intend to do and that has so much presence you say, "Okay, I don't expect you to go away, but I don't know what you're good for." Chemistry and the sciences are full of this kind of thing. And that's what's underneath the creative life for artists, how to grasp the interrelationships that exist in the world in a way that hasn't been done before.

So I was sad for a month because I missed those people, but I'd already seen the seeds of what I was testing and trying to do. The kids had made this little tree house and I climbed up into it and there was this beautiful view. They made it possible for me, because I knew that something in me was being spoken to by the distance between me and those houses. It was like I was backing off, taking on more of a cosmic view of where we were. And I probably had already blurted out to Edith, standing in the driveway or pitching a rock in the water, that if I were to leave here and go as far as I could possibly go, the furthest distance I could go would be to end up back where I had started. And that hit me. Because at that time I was in the Robert Frank, Henri Cartier-Bresson mode. I had seen their books and that was my apprenticeship. I wanted to be just like that. You see you can become successful at something that you've wanted to do for so long when actually being a success at it becomes a failure. The thing which was so desirable turns around and you realize that you have to relinquish your claim on it. One day I made three Robert Frank pictures in the same day and I thought, "You could do this everyday for the rest of your life now. That's not right." They were pictures about something that I would never have seen if Robert Frank and Cartier-Bresson had not shown me how to see it. I would have seen something, but I never would have understood the connection between the experience and the photograph. Nor would I have sensed that in

photographs would be the summations of thoughts that were only impulses until they became a photograph. The photograph gives a physical embodiment to our experience. We're looking for something that puts our unspeakable feelings into a discreet form, so that we ourselves can back off and study what we've done. And in a sense, recognize our own feelings as an object.



Emmet Gowin, Barry and Dwayne, Danville, Virginia, 1970.

SG So, after the family pictures, what was next, chronologically?

EG You know, one risks sounding very coy, as if you understood everything that you were doing, and I wouldn't claim that. The pictures of Renée Booher in the coffin were made in '72, and the pictures from '73 are the still lifes and pictures of objects that become cosmologies. They're a view of life, the space in which life occurs, the local spot from a greater distance.

SG I remember that around the time of the family pictures, or just after, you photographed small inanimate objects, mainly pages of old books in states of decay that seem uncannily similar to your later aerial landscapes, despite the huge difference in scale. Can you speak about these photos?

EG In 1973 we found a nineteenth-century geography book on the ground, in a ruined house, saturated with rain and eaten by insects and nearly gone. The object of the book is not only a storehouse of maps and symbolic terrains, but the book is in such a state of decay that it's becoming a landscape. It is turning into a terrain. If the map can become a territory, it's only because we privilege ourselves, we think of ourselves as being the only creatures, the only beings on the right scale. But on the level of a microorganism, the map was always a territory. And that scale became very important to me. If you circumnavigated the world and came right back to where you started—where you started was already exotic, and would have been more exotic to someone who was a stranger to that place. And I thought, "Ah, now this is a real clue, because I have to become a stranger to my own place. I have to become detached from it so that I can actually observe it for what it is." And the camera was helping me to do that.

Truly, truly you couldn't speak of discovery of the unknown unless you were unknowing. You have to make a room inside your own ego for what you don't yet understand, and hold open the possibility that this is what you're actually looking for. And that then becomes a very personal matter rather than a universal one, because you can't account for what other people don't know. But you can acknowledge inside yourself those things which you did not perceive until the encounter forced you into a recognition. You cannot keep score of that for anyone else, but you can acknowledge transformation of your own perception by experience. When you find something about yourself, you don't throw it away, it's a treasure. It's symbolically very important because it acknowledges a transformation in yourself. The Knopf book of my photographs from 1976 starts

with two pictures—pictures of home. One of black people walking in front of a church in the moonlight, and another of three black men in front of a church, which was just layered with a symbolism that I was not yet ready to confront. But I could accept the pictures and let the pictures wrestle with the symbolism for me.

SG That's an interesting distinction.

EG Yeah, because then the struggle is outside yourself, it's on the paper. Let the picture take care of itself now. Let it make its own arguments and its defenses, let people say to the picture whether this is a true vision of the world or not.



Emmet Gowin, *Newly Mown Alfalfa Disturbed by a Storm, on the Snake River Plain Near the Confluence of the Columbia River, Washington*, 1991.

SG Your philosophy is interesting and so different from most contemporary artists who claim a more intellectual methodology, whereas you're more intuitive and emotional, perhaps.

EG I'm happy for that distinction. I don't see it as an irreconcilable conflict. Those people still have an unconscious mind which is operative in them even though they claim to have a "driver's license."

SG It's interesting the degree to which people want to simply act like the unconscious is not important, or not really operating.

EG Well, they probably would be less interested in my point of view and even threatened by it if they knew that I have a religious background. I had read the Bible several times by the time I was 12 years old. It was expected of me. As a child I struggled with those texts and concepts, and I came to see that for me progress would come not by force of will. I knew too little of what I needed. I would be better guided by my feelings, if I just said in blunt recognition that I never made a picture that was exactly what I intended to make. And anything that was any good was always something of a surprise. If you live in a relationship to your work in such a way that each thing of value comes as a surprise, you stop disliking surprise. You stop having an intellectual argument against that. It's not a question of whether a work is original or not, but who is the origin of it. Identifying very personally with what you make is to accept responsibility for it.

Anyway, after the Robert Frank, Cartier-Bresson period, I started to make pictures that were decisively timed with a view camera. The element of stillness really started to matter to me. So the rendering of grass, the rendering of moisture—the little details of the picture made so much difference. But the big change was that I started to travel, and that was also the same year the elders started dying. The family was changing, and I started to make those symbolic landscapes, the little found object landscapes.

SG Did you have a mentor, someone who helped you through this change?

EG Yes, the photographer Fred Sommer. A great teacher is like a garden. Someone to whom you go and sit and talk, and maybe you don't do anything, yet you realign yourself to the task that was in a sense defeating you. You pick it up, get some courage and go to work on the next task. What Sommer was able to lead me to, and this is why he was such a great teacher, was the world of science. And he did it very simply, he bought me a book, and I started reading Werner Heisenberg's *Physics and Beyond*. And I realized that everything that I had expected from the poetics of the artist's life was in the poetics of the scientist's life—a theology within a conceptual framework. It put me in touch with a foundation that couldn't be easily rocked. I'm interested in the eternal, and somebody who's working in the art world sees themselves focused in the moment, the temporal, the cutting edge, the forces where change needs to be made. But in time you can also see yourself discovering the long view, in terms of what science has done, which also has an element of the cutting edge and still honors discovery. I would read the art criticism, and it made me sad. I felt nothing deeply confirming in it. It was like a little guerrilla warfare undertaking, which is okay. But in science I felt a sense of the durability, that it would be worked out over time.

And about that same time I came into "a deep" appreciation of William Blake. I like that Blake equates evil with energy and exuberance, with life, and places the human task as the reconciliation of these two opposites. The energy which drives us which is good; and the evil which drives us is as much a part of us as the good. It was so clear to me that Blake's personal vision was what he had to create because the world's vision didn't suit him. He would either have to rescind his own intimate vision to the world's vision or make his own. And I thought that's a so much better way to do it. Why give up what is living inside you for something you don't understand or don't feel, when in fact you're already situated in a life that you feel intensely. So the world of science and the world of William Blake let me see.

Fred Sommer's photographs have a very discreet way of expressing inhumanity and reconnecting to the organic, biological world. And if anything was growing in me all those years, it was something that I felt as a child: that I was a piece of nature—I could have been born a duck. I liked that idea. I've known lots of people that I thought were really awful; I've never known an animal that I

thought was awful. I have known a few animals that I thought were evil, but it's different, a wasp stings, it's living out of its sense, out of its nature—its neurological makeup was evolved to behave that way. Much of our nature is evolutionary biology, although we think it's will. I'm sure that the New Testament prepared me to understand that there would be this double-sidedness to things. That a story told in one sense had a double meaning, had its opposite. That life would always embody some conflict.

So, I started to travel, began to make what I call "working landscapes," and in a simple way, I was very attracted to people like Robert Smithson. When I began to travel and look at the landscape, I saw that what I liked about what was being done in galleries worked so much better when it was in the living landscape. Then it wasn't just a pattern across the gallery floor and a symbolic world, but it had all these forces of nature clawing at it, working it, and the human thing that was being made always had to alter itself and accommodate what nature was doing to it. I just love looking at the natural landscape. And I love the hand of the human being on the landscape. The Earthworks people were really collaborative artists with nature. Symbolically I was for what they were for, but in execution the work looked like baby talk. It was on such an unsubtle scale compared to a four or five hundred year old field that's been under constant cultivation. That represents something of tremendous subtlety, and is actually more integrated than our eyes are really able to understand. The point for me in photographing the land was to try to introduce and reassociate myself with that subtlety. Often it would be years after taking the picture that I would realize: that's why I did that. That was not an irrational or an arbitrary move, it's related to the way things are in action on the landscape. And that's a pretty important point, that the living landscape is a field of action, not stasis. It's constantly evolving and adapting. One of the things that was sad for me about art practice was trying to bring the understanding of the natural world into the gallery. I knew that the photo was cut out and separate from the natural process, but it had a proper relationship. It was a time slice out of the natural process. And it had a secondary value, it was a comparative evidence against the changes. A field seen a second time or a third time is not ever the same.

So, travels in Italy, travels in Ireland—I made only one good picture that year, but it was still the year of big, big change. It was the year in which I understood that I couldn't be only a family artist, that I had to take the whole world as a subject. Oddly enough, the picture *Nancy, Danville, Virginia* done in 1969 was probably the key. I didn't see myself with the "key" picture, or a moment of epiphany, but that was a big change. For 15 years I had been watching this family and I loved those pictures. If I thought anything was original in my work, it was accepting the here and now, and then letting it show me what was important. The little child crossing her arms and showing me those two eggs. She just came to me with two eggs and crossed her arms. And I thought, that is the wisdom of the body. To whatever extent that she knows it, it's her body informing her. It's the same kind of intuition that I wanted to work out of. If she could invent that much, the thing that I could do is be open to the invention. And that is, in essence, just how it happened.



Emmet Gowin, *Nancy, Danville, Virginia*, 1969.

SG It's a fantastic picture. Her gesture and the look on her face . . .

EG See, I never thought I did that.

SG Really?

EG I always felt that life did that to both of us. It used her body to teach her, and it used her to teach me. Perception comes out of your own body. We don't have a mind separate from our bodies. I am somebody who thinks that their body knows just as much as any thought they ever had. And I like for my body to listen to my mind when it has a good idea.

SG Tell me then about when you started photographing what we would consider "destruction" elements in the landscape . . .

EG That was abrupt in a way, and prepared for in another way. I'd taken this commission in 1980 to be part of a small group doing a survey of the state of Washington, and I thought I was going to photograph agriculture, and probably Seattle and maybe the coastline. Then Mount St. Helen's erupted, which held great mystery for me. At the end of six weeks I was there, and I worked every day for another six weeks and made four or five hundred negatives of the landscape, of which I thought two were interesting. But in a two and a half hour flight I had 18 pictures of Mount St. Helen's that I thought were interesting. In the airplane, because I was moving so fast . . . it was just right for my style. I couldn't control where the airplane took me, how the elevation came up to me and away from me. It happened so fast that it was out of control. And the quickness with which I would experience this loss of control was the creative element. I had to just accept what was there. But again, it was a gentle transition because already people had been saying, "This photograph is taken from an airplane." And I'd say, "No, it's just from a hillside." It felt like instead of photographing the whole body of the landscape, feet and arms and toes, I was photographing the stomach or the heart, the organs of the landscape. I was trying to show what the beating heart of the landscape was like. Not the extremities, not the horizon line. Now I wish I had been more sensitive to the horizon. I wish I could have been two people at once: the person who was looking for the heart, and the one who could have seen and recorded the extremities. But you get ferociously focused on something, and that's the limit of what you can see. On the other hand, if you didn't have that drive, you would atrophy into despair and think you could see nothing.

SG You went to Jordan in 1982, and photographed Petra, a site unavailable to most Westerners.

EG Well, a former student of mine at Princeton—we had connected on this spiritual level, and she never forgot that. She became the Queen of Jordan. She was starting an arts festival, and she called that summer I was working at Mount St. Helens and said, "Wouldn't you come out and then you could just look around and see if you like anything here." And I saw Petra. And it connected for me in a very deep way. Like something I had seen in my father's Bible, something that I had always known, something about the first century. The life that had been lived before us. Whereas with the Bible, I had shrugged my shoulders and said, "What does this have to do with me?" Among those stones I felt very living. I felt like, Yeah, this is what it's like. Two thousand years from now people will look at what we've left and see it in the same way. And that's a powerful thing; to empathize with a race of people whom you can never really see. And hear them talking, see something out of their lives, just in the inanimate debris.

SG I'd love to hear you talk about the most recent topographical photographs. The combination of the abstract quality of the image and the literal quality of what the thing itself is, plus the unearthly color, the warm and the cool creates an amazing sensation of space; simultaneously flat space, deep space.

EG I like how you're saying that, the sense of: How do we stand in relationship to this world? Is this really in this world, are we really in the world that also holds this? Because many of the topographical photographs are of things and places that are contaminated or represent practices that are ultimately destructive, non-sustainable. We don't have to know that it's non-sustainable to nonetheless feel the impending threat. When an agricultural pivot is pumping away in the middle of summer in Kansas, when 20 of those pivots use as much water on an August day as a city of two million people . . . we don't have to know that fact to feel uneasy about the relationship. It feels like it's stretching the skin of living things too far, right to the edge. It doesn't take too much imagination to think back on the long anguish of the nuclear age. A thousand missiles buried inside the body of our mother earth, ready to be sent to the other side of the world to destroy, supposedly our enemies, who were ready to do the same thing to us. And the by-product? Mutual destruction of everything on earth. That we came to such low culture, to such poor solutions to the problem, that our theology of difference was so great that we could see no other path . . . That governments would allow a theological dispute to bring them to the brink of disaster is the way the human mind works, and it is why it is to be feared. But getting in an airplane, and looking back at the landscape, you look at what we do to the earth and you realize that we have written, symbolically, on the ground in such a way that people with feeling and eyes can recognize the destructiveness of the hand that's doing the writing.



Emmet Gowin, Abandoned Titan Missile Solo, Mountain Home, Idaho, 1987.

SG It's interesting you say that, because the photographs look calligraphic, as if something has been written on the earth.

EG They're drawings. I am totally enthralled with the idea that for every action there is a trace, and to unfold the traces was to re-experience, to be reacquainted with the action. Everything which human beings do, every activity, leaves its mark. This is as true psychologically as it is physically.

SG In many of your pictures you get the trace of the land moving, the actual geological upheaval of the land in addition to the trace of what human's have done to it.

EG I have no choice but to try to reconcile opposites, because I respond to what used to be referred to in the nineteenth century as "the sublime," the feeling that something sparks an almost chilling recognition of mortality, of the irreversible arrow of time. Time is leaving us where we are, and if we don't embrace it while it's here, it cares little. The energy which is driving the world cares little whether we take time for our intimacies. Whether we take joy in the living of those moments which were ours. Geological time scours away, tears the world apart and lays it back together; moves a mountain down to the ocean floor, builds a mountain where there was none.

SG It's incredible isn't it?

EG It's wonderful, and it's no wonder that it was Darwin, on a voyage around the world to set straight in his own mind the defense of the grandeur of a creative God who had made the world by hand, found that his theory didn't fit the evidence. The beauty of his discovery is that he would not let his theory interfere with the evidence. He accepted the world as it is, even though emotionally and psychologically, it took him some getting used to. It wasn't exactly what he had intended to show. When I said that it was the reading of science that brought me into this arena, it's just so. In that material I found a way of understanding myself in nature. Nature is another name for the reality of the world of which we are a part. It's not a stage on which we can perform any play we like. This is a world that carries its scars for millennia.

The picture of Hanford, the city-site where thirty, thirty-five thousand people lived, it's a desert now, but it was an orchard and garden area. They were using water from the Columbia to irrigate. Along the Columbia is where they had placed the first nuclear reactors. Later the entire city was dismantled. At first I thought it was because it was contaminated. Later, informants told me that part of it was contaminated, but if it wasn't too contaminated, if it passed these standard measurements, you could build a new house with that material. And in a way, that is in part the picture of the dilemma. Everything we eat is somewhat contaminated, everything we touch is somewhat contaminated, how much more of this can we have? A pilot in Washington state told me that he and a contractor had gone out into a field and bought 15 miles of chain link fence. And they took a Geiger counter and measured the radioactivity in the field along the fence. It was no higher than background radiation, standard, ordinary, basic radiation. Then they took the fence down and rolled it up in great coils and loaded it on the back of a truck. And when they came to the gate a guy says, "I know this has passed, but I have to check it." And so he runs the Geiger counter over the fence, and of course you know what happens, in this new configuration, it's hot. It's highly radioactive because the form has changed. You've put a quarter of a mile of fence into one roll and now the combined radioactivity measure is potent and serious. That's an image, an understanding we very much need.

SG That's amazing.

EG For us to say what things truly are, we have to understand the form of these things in their context. To the credit of postmodernism, one of their chief arguments has been that we have to

understand things in their context. I think a rather spiteful, elitist language was used to make that point, which is too bad, for it could have been said so simply. But that's another issue. I didn't intend to use this issue to comment on postmodernism. Except it's part of the atmosphere we live in. Thank goodness those battles are being fought by many people in many local, simple human ways. And the most important battles are being accomplished not as battles, but as acts of tenderness, of reconciliation or accommodation.



Emmet Gowin, Mining Exploration, Utah, 1988.

G I love these topographical photos. These are sublime. I remember walking into the gallery and seeing these, and I got a shiver. They were so beautiful and creepy at the same time.

EG The thing that makes us ill goes the distance to make us well. It contains, as it were, some of the alleviation of the malady within itself. I'm not quite sure what I mean by all of that, except to say that the natural order has to be honored. Even in destroying the earth, we have to observe the natural order. Gravity still works, water still runs downhill. The comprehension that allowed us to grasp that is the same wisdom, the same understanding which is going to help us, so that we will not be guilty of bad behavior towards the earth, towards nature.

SG Do you say, I want to photograph this uranium site in Nevada? How do you choose where you go?

EG Last year I received a Pew Artists Fellowship that allowed me to do things that I'd only had hopes of doing. I wanted to take photographs of the aftermath of the war in Kuwait, and I wanted to photograph the Nevada test site. I'd been turned down very nicely when I first asked them, some eight years ago. At the time, I was told there was not one chance in a million of ever being able to do that. But since then so much has changed.

SG But isn't it interesting that you're now allowed to go to this place? Maybe it is a collective thing that people are willing to look at what we've done.

EG I don't think we improve our health by denial. And it is an amazing thing itself, miraculous, that landscape is like none other on earth.

SG Your topographical photographs, for lack of a better word, also have an edge between being real and completely surreal. You cannot believe these exist in a real place, in real time. It looks like somebody's scientific experiment in a petri dish.

EG We know that the earth is like our body. It has a circulatory system, it has a skin, it has its energy, has bowels deep inside and has this driving force. *The Hammer Codex* contains a beautiful passage by Leonardo da Vinci, in which he says exactly this: the trees are like the hair on our skin. He talks about the deep, sulfurous energies within the body, and the rivers of circulation like the bloodstream carrying the waters of life to the whole.

SG Can I ask you, are there artists and photographers working somewhat contemporarily that you care about? That move you?

EG Sally, that could be a long list. But let me say first, that writing about nature and science have meant more to me, as I've aged, than art criticism. I'm turning your question slightly to say that there is a growing literature and a growing art that is taking seriously our connectedness to nature, and our responsibility to the future—writers like Wallace Stegner, Wendell Berry, and Terry Tempest Williams. In photography, Robert Adams, Thomas Joshua Cooper, John Pfahl, and Patrick Nagatani are a few of the many contemporaries for whom I feel a special kinship. Early on, I thought I might become a painter myself, so I continue to look at painting and sculpture with admiration. Painters like Lucien Freud and Anselm Kiefer come to mind. I have also felt a long and special affection for Mondrian.

SG Oh, that's not what I would have guessed.

EG And Cézanne . . . However, I have already mentioned the two artists who have given me the most guidance, and perhaps courage, William Blake and Frederick Sommer. Frederick Sommer who is 91 this year and still extremely vital, has been a friend for almost 30 years. William Blake is with us only in his work; but I am grateful every day for the gift of the work and the thoughts of artists that I will never meet. Blake, who came to me more slowly, tells us that the task of the artist is to serve the creative imagination. Wisdom and a proper relationship to one's art, he says, emerges from the care and attention given to the "minute particulars." Blake's art is a cosmology of the heart, and the story of the mind's war with the heart, between reason and feeling. Frederick Sommer says that "the important thing is quality of attention span, and to use it for acceptance rather than negation." I think he says this because he knows that even art can easily deteriorate into business, and because he understands that our world view, spiritually and psychologically, is unavoidably linked to the quality of our own behavior. That's why he can say, "It's what we do every day, in the simplest way, that counts." These are straightforward ideas that emphasize perception, and the individual's dedication to the quality of acts. They also help us to realize that all our feet are

standing on the same Earth, that our lives are endlessly interrelated. Thinking in terms of Sommer's "quality of attention span," and Blake's "minute particular," helps me to see the work of the artist in a more personal sense; using their ideas of what an artist is, you can see that the World could never have too many artists.

—*Sally Gall is a photographer who lives and works in New York. Her book of photographs, The Water's Edge, was published by Chronicle Books. She is represented in New York by the Julie Saul Gallery, and by Texas Gallery in Houston.*