The land - a new topographic study of home

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In partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of
Master of Fine Arts
in
The School of Art

by
Jacob Croft Botter

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B.S.,Texas A&M University – Commerce, 2003
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My boy went to college down in Baton Rouge
  He came back talkin’ bout the ol’ bayou
  He’s sure the fish don’t bite like they used to
    Since the industry came to town.

        Sun’s settin’ on Louisianne
        The sun’s going down on the promise land
        I’ve given you everything I can
        I’ve got nothing else to lose

-Zachary Richard-
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# Table of Contents

Acknowledgements.................................................................................................iii

List of Figures.............................................................................................................vi

Abstract.....................................................................................................................vii

Part 1 – The Beginning and the History.................................................................1

Part 2 – The Land and Me.......................................................................................5

Part 3 – The Land and the Pictures.....................................................................11

Images.......................................................................................................................17

Vita............................................................................................................................27
## List of Figures

1. Frank Rodgers Cabin ................................................................. 17
2. Bucks Blind ................................................................. 17
3. Farm Road 2625 ................................................................. 18
4. Deer and Taw Taw’s Truck ......................................................... 18
5. Uncle Clinton’s Camp House ..................................................... 19
6. Perky Power Plant ................................................................. 19
7. Maw’s House ................................................................. 20
8. Oak Grove Duck Blind ............................................................. 20
9. Abandoned Drilling Pad ............................................................ 21
10. Maw’s Pond ................................................................. 21
11. Dad ................................................................. 22
12. Dad’s First Deer Stand ............................................................ 22
13. Pipeline Stand ................................................................. 23
14. Baron’s Blind ................................................................. 23
15. Taw Taw’s Blind at Hut’s ........................................................ 24
16. Buck’s Corn Feeder ............................................................... 24
17. Old Home Place and Waldron Ferry Road .................................... 25
18. Old Farm Land ................................................................. 25
19. Uncle Bill’s Spot on the Land .................................................... 26
20. The River – Self-Portrait 7 ........................................................ 26
Abstract

The photographs in my thesis sit between these two movements, leaning more towards the contemporary ideas that were generated by the New Topographic Movement. On one hand, they are similar to the traditional photographs of the landscape, in the way they depict a place of organic beauty. They present a panorama that serves as a poignant reminder of the natural world that demands our respect and appreciation for what it has to offer. At the same time, this cannon of imagery contains man, or a visual representation of man, and his efforts.

My pictures are not an outsider’s observation of man’s influence on the topography, they are all directly related to me and my experience on this nearly 500-acre space. This is a study of my family’s home, of my family’s existence, of my family’s influence and of altering the land. Moreover, it shows how the land tilted our actions. It is meant to suggest the idea of man and nature coexisting in some kind peace. These photographs are new topographic landscapes that document the history of my family, our land, and how the two, like a river winding, have organized the treatment of the other
Part 1

The Beginning and the History
In the late 1800s my great-great-great-grandfather, Ben Waldron, left Attica, Indiana and headed south for Texas. He climbed aboard a small boat on the Wabash River that met up with the Mississippi River. Along the way he stayed at boarding houses located at sawmills. Here he could rest and work to finance his long trip south. For the last leg of his journey, he abandoned his boat somewhere east of Monroe, Louisiana where he chose to walk or catch rides on wagons. When Ben finally arrived in Harrison County, Texas, he took a job working for his half-brother Frank, who owned a sawmill. Ben eventually began to purchase land in the area, which he used for many things, including the farming of cotton and sugarcane, the production of syrup and for hunting.

Known for his industriousness, Ben eventually opened his own sawmill that provided him with the necessary tools to build a massive white farmhouse — known as the Big House — on the family land outside of Hallsville, Texas, in 1907. The two-story home was built from handpicked heart lumber and accommodated Ben, his wife Carrie Jestin Rogers and their 10 children, including Rosannah and Henry Clinton. Just before the construction of the Big House, Ben built a small 16’x14’ schoolhouse that served as the first in the area. Later it became the Henry Croft Store. The county built a second school, called the Waldron School, also under Ben’s direction. This school stayed in operation well into the 1900s, during which time Rosannah Waldron married George Henry Croft. After their union, Henry Croft built an addition on to the original structure and this became known as the Henry Croft Home Place.

Through the years — beginning with Ben Waldron — additional tracts of land were acquired by my family, bringing the total acreage to around 900 acres. Located some 10 miles south of Hallsville, the land rests on the east side of the Sabine River. In
the early days, one would have to travel by wagon south out of town, down Waldron Ferry Road, and through the piney woods to reach the Henry Croft Home Place, which sat on the northwest edge of the property. From the Home Place, one could continue south along a maze of trees, covered in blankets of red dust. From there, the road moves downhill until its end at the Sabine River.

A slow-moving river with logs, sand bars, turtles, alligator gar, perch, bass and so on marks the southern edge of the property. Where the road meets the river, a ferry owned and operated by Ben Waldron, shuttled people and their belongings across the river into Camden, Texas, later known as New Easton. In 1883, the railroad missed Camden by one fourth of a mile, and Camden dwindled away. The ferry, as a means of river forging, passed into memory. Today, the only evidence that remains of Waldron’s Ferry is the thick iron cable that joined two pieces of land divided by a river.

Henry and Roseannah had one child — my grandmother, Carrie Nelwyn Croft. Years later Carrie married Emmett Reeder Botter from Buffalo, Texas. They would produce three children: Nelva Rose, William Emmett and my father, Henry Croft Botter.

It was the mid 1900s: The family occupied two homes and owned a store, a vast quantity of land and cattle. Shortly after his marriage, my grandfather Emmett (known to me as Taw Taw) hitchhiked to Texarkana to look for work. He was picked up by a worker from Shell Oil Company and was given a job there. My grandfather’s job required him to move his family around the country, living for a time in New York, New Jersey, Georgia, Houston and eventually, New Orleans. Here, my dad would graduate from McDonough High School, and then LSU. Still, no matter where they lived, they would return to Hallsville every summer to spend time with the family. It was here my
dad as a boy and my Uncle Bill learned the ways of the farm, and how to hunt for deer and ducks. They built forts and sometimes picked cotton.

In 1967, a fire swept through Harrison County — and along with several acres of land — the Big House and all of the family’s belongings, burned to the ground. My dad can recall walking onto the porch of a friend’s house, seeing the smoke miles away and knowing it was the Big House. By the time he arrived, the house was no more. Its hallowed halls would never be walked again. In a single afternoon, half a century of labor, love and history vanished.
Part 2

The Land and Me
My father married Cynthia Claire Killgore in 1971. Five years later, in the warm month of July, my mother gave birth to me. They gave to me the name of my father and of my great grandfather. My earliest memories of the land are of following my father relentlessly through the woods in search of who knows what — a property line, a pothole for duck hunting, or a new tree to engineer a deer stand. At the time, I remember these father-son journeys as terribly boring and overwhelmingly exhausting. When my father and I trudged through the woods, I can remember trying to put my foot exactly in the place where my father stepped. I’m not exactly sure what kindled this youthful action, but I like to think that I was already becoming aware of my father’s connection to the land, and my connection to him. What he did, I should do. I see now that my father was acquainting me with the woods and instilling in me, not only a passion for the woods in general, but for our woods, for place, for family, for home, for the land.

I spent most of my childhood engaged in various activities for which the land provided a platform: building forts, playing war and other made-up games, like "Deer", with my cousin Brand. “Deer” basically involved running through the woods and jumping over logs, like a deer would. The land also provided me with a place to hunt, as it did the rest of my family. Unlike the days of old, when certain areas were designated for farming and others dedicated to hunting, today the land is almost entirely dedicated to hunting. I make this point because hunting is such an intricate part of my family heritage. Knowledge of hunting is passed down through the generations like a family heirloom. I don’t know a family member, past or present, that has not at some time camouflaged themselves, picked up a gun and moved into the woods in search for game. Like most of my family, I
learned to hunt at a very early age. For me it was 4. I killed my first deer when I was nine, and my first duck shortly thereafter. Both memories are as sharp as any I possess.

While the geographical positions of both our land and Hallsville have obviously remained the same, it is the current route that vividly contrasts the path of days gone by. In the late 1960s and early 1970s Interstate 20 was built, linking West Texas and the Atlantic Ocean; and severed the connection that Waldron Ferry Road made between town and home. Then in 1983, the county built Farm Road 2625, an asphalt road that made the old Shreveport/Camden Road defunct and sliced through the land, connecting Hallsville and Highway 43.

Swepco began buying up all of the land surrounding my family’s property in the late 1970s. Shortly after, they began leasing the properties to Sabine Mining Company, who in turn strip-mined the land for lignite. The lignite was necessary to fuel the nearby Perky Power Plant already under construction. The reality of living on a small island in the middle of an enormous mining facility, and under massive shadows of earth-altering cranes, seemed to be nearing. So with much haste my family complied and sold nearly half of the property to the mining company. This brought about the draining of two ponds, the relocating of buried pets, the tearing down of my grandparents’ house and also what had been the Henry Croft Home Place and Waldron School, and was at this time, my Uncle Bill’s house. It also marked the exodus of my family from the old ranch to the west side of the miserably muddy path that would soon be Farm Road 2625 — severing for all time almost all of our access to that part of the land.

It was also at this time that several oil and gas companies began buying up the mineral rights below the surface of our land. Although the original paperwork promised
only one well per unit would be drilled, over 32 have been developed since the mid-
1970s, with more on the way. The process of drilling a gas well begins with the clearing
of 2-5 acres of trees — trees that would have heard Ben Waldron’s ferry glide through
the river or witnessed the hammering of my dad, 14-years-old and building his first deer
stand. Next, tons of gravel is brought in to build a drilling pad. Then the sound of
pumping machinery, crushing through the earth and tapping into the resources buried
deep below the surface, fills the would-be stillness.

Growing up with all of this around me, I did not see these developments as
something foreign. A gas well did not stand out to me any more than a deer stand or a
duck blind would. An abandoned drilling pad vacant of forestry growth seemed no
different than land that had been cleared to attract deer or to plant crops for harvesting.
To me, it was all simply part of the land.

As I got older, however, I encountered pieces of land that were free of such
things. In fact, I visited places that were protected from any such possibilities.
Discovering places of wondrous natural existence — national wilderness areas, national
and state parks — I began to ponder our land in a new way. I started asking myself
questions I had never considered. What was our land like before all of this human
intervention? What was it like to live at the end of a dirt road many miles from the bustle
of town? What was it like to live in a space unmolested by metal equipment singing a
song of “pump pump hiss, pump pump hiss?”

Then it happened. I came to despise the change that I so naively overlooked
growing up. The whole scene became appalling. I hated to drive by the Mining Company
and see its smokestack bellowing. I hated venturing past gas wells that now littered this
once pristine existence. I searched desperately for a single speck of family-owned soil that was free of any manmade trappings and the dreadful sounds they made. I found none. Where could I find such aloneness in this predominantly built-up culture that is the West?

Perhaps I could find the answer deep in the interior of Yellowstone National Park. It would be in the winter and during the week, when the roads are not congested with recreational vehicles; camera-toting tourists reluctantly trying to approach wildlife that sit atop the food chain; screaming kids, wrapped in freshly ironed high-dollar outdoor gear saturated with color, tucking into cartoons and corndogs (anything but the vistas around them), Park Rangers policing and yelling at both to stay in their vehicles, and not swim in the thermal water gently bubbling at 212 degrees.

Perhaps in a gorge pushing down into the tundra some 300 yards under a towering waterfall, emptying thousands of gallons of swirling wetness every second into the foaming river below, while wearing a $32 beanie made in China by an American company who produces outdoor gear under the name “North Face”, not only to keep my tender pinkish ears at a temperature somewhere north of freezing, but also to muffle any remaining possibility of industrious sounds bouncing off my ear drums; perhaps here I will find this solace I so think I desire.

Of course this is an outrageous rant, but hopefully its ridiculousness will help clarify my greater point and the small epiphany that occurred to me so many years ago. Today I see a deer stand or duck blind representing as much human influence as a gas well or drilling pad. Although a deer stand does seem more natural to me than a power plant, they are both infractions on the landscape. By now I know that the things I desired when I was
younger — the silence, the untouched landscapes, the uninhabited space — is not what I
want. I want a balance in the treatment and experience of nature.
Part 3

The Land and the Pictures
A 12-year-old boy lay in bed with measles, watching mornings turn to nights, when his father presented him with a Brownie box camera. The father shared with his son his transcendentalist ideas of life, highlighting the point that God was to be communed with in nature, and not in the interior of a holy-walled business operating and missioning under the name Church. The boy was Ansel Adams. In 1927, he made his first photograph of Half Dome in Yosemite National Park. A few years later, after presenting an underwritten portfolio to Alfred Stieglitz, he was given his first exhibition in New York City at The American Place Gallery. Although he was not the only landscape photographer of his time, Adams, in many ways, embodies the landscape genre of that time. I will use his work to contrast the New Topographic Movement to my work.

In 1975, an exhibition entitled *Topographics: Photographs of a Man-Altered Landscape* was organized at the George Eastman House in Rochester, New York. Among the photographers shown were Robert Adams and Nicholas Nixon. The exhibition, and the New Topographics as a whole, was in response to landscape photographs — free of man’s presence and even experience, exemplified by the work of Ansel Adams, whose photographs depicted an untouched landscape that was in actuality being built up. These photographs were not necessarily presenting an absolutely false reality of the American West as much as they were denying man’s inhabitance of the land. In contrast, the New Topographics consisted of images that not only captured man literally in the landscape, but his influence on the land as well. Images in this movement took a step back from the vista and included a wolf pack of cars and masses of people fumbling to gape at mountainous views. Other images would include ruts in the soil produced by cars, whole
industrial complexes — anything that shows that man most certainly inhabits the land and has harnessed it and altered its aesthetic values for all time.

The photographs in my thesis sit between these two movements, leaning more towards the contemporary ideas that were generated by the New Topographics. On one hand, they are similar to the traditional photographs of the landscape, in the way they depict a place of organic beauty. They present a panorama that serves as a poignant reminder of the natural world that demands our respect and appreciation for what it has to offer. At the same time, this body of work contains man, or a visual representation of man, and his efforts. Some show an industrial alteration to the geology that prompt awareness of the sometimes delicate and permanent ordeal of mingling with nature. All are a documentation of my families history in the land.

Although this thesis is similar to the vision of traditional landscape photography and parallels the groundwork of the New Topographics, these images are certainly mine. This is a study of my family’s home, of my family’s existence, of my family’s influence on the land. Moreover, it shows how the land tilted my families actions. It is meant to suggest the idea of man and nature coexisting in some kind of peace. My images are not unlike the early landscape photographs, where nature is presented as something we should long for, or perfection that we should maintain and indefinitely protect. However, they also mirror the New Topographics where such a negative conflict in our treatment of nature exists. In short, this project is meant to move us away from the idea of “damn us if we do, damn us if we don’t.” I certainly believe that there is a line that we should not cross in our exploitation of nature, and perhaps pieces of this line have become smeared and some parts even erased.
Based on my worldly knowledge and unworldly faith, in the end, I believe that the natural resources in and of the earth are meant to benefit our lives. We have sold parcels of our land for the production of lignite to fuel a power plant that sends water and energy to various parts of Texas. We have constructed deer stands and nestled them along the tree lines of our property. We have hunted animals and eaten their bounty for over a hundred years. We have planted the earth and reaped crops and income from it for generations. My pictures are not an outsider’s observation of man’s influence on the topography, they are all directly related to me and my experience on this nearly 500-acre space. I do not want to live in the epicenter of an over-developed industrialized complex dedicated to devouring all natural and organic characteristics of the country. And I do not wish to live at the bottom of that gorge in Yellowstone, with my pricey parka and protective head ornament, tucked away from civilization, fooling myself into wisdom. I want Ansel Adams’s beauty and Robert Adams’s inhabittance.

My work to date has rarely been conceptual and has almost always been a response to a particular environment, a direction determined by mood, or simply a shaft of light and the photographs produced in that moment. This project prompted me to utilize qualities including light, mood, perspective, depth of field, etc. For the most part, I knew the subjects I wanted to address going into the project. Still, on location, I would study them morning and evening, cloudy and clear, to find the mood that best suited the story I wanted to tell. Each called for an individual approach, some in the morning, some in the evening; some in spring and others in winter. The decision-making was tiring; it was wonderful.
It is an unusually cool day in October. Tree limbs create a natural canopy far above my head and the leaves have begun to fall. I watch as they give in to gravity and slowly descend toward the forest floor, where the approaching winter winds arrange them into a crispy blanket covering their ancestors. The breeze wraps around my face and pushes strands of spitty hair across my forehead. I shift my gaze from the leafy ceiling to the abundance of trees. Pines, Oaks, Birches, Cottons, Sweet Gums, and Hickories climb vertically, with arms praising the shafts of sun that have pushed through the fauna above. As I move toward the light of the open pasture, a landscape of tall grasses and flowers, although limited in number, still dot the woods and brush across my blue jeans decorating them with *hoopie doop* and *gradu*. It is almost fall and for the most part, the woods are going dormant — but it is very much alive with purpose. Soon I pass an old deer blind engineered from old metal parts constructed for me by my father many years ago. Only now it rests on the ground instead of in the tree that it originally occupied. The blind was placed here by gas well workers, I presume, out of the way of the drilling pad that lies many yards behind me now. “Awfully nice of them”, I think to myself as I step away and continue to move forward. The woods begin to thicken, and I come upon a stretch of struggling saplings squandering for their share of heavenly nutrition. A bit farther, and I have to pick my way through a stand of prickly briars. I quickly remember something my father used to say to me about this type of briar: “These things will take your clothes off.” I produce something like a laugh and wonder if we ever walked here on one of those journeys so long ago. Then I think back to so many memories, my first gun and my first deer, Brand, the big green truck and that snake…
I realize only now I have stopped walking. I take a breath, duck my head, close my eyes, push through the edge of the woods and step freely into a vast field painted with warm evening light. I have reached what my family has always called the Old River, and what I have always thought of as the heart of the land.
Images

Figure 1 – Frank Rodgers Cabin

Figure 2 – Buck’s Blind
Figure 3 – Farm Road 2625

Figure 4 – Deer and Taw Taw’s Truck
Figure 5 – Uncle Clinton’s Camp House

Figure 6 – Pirky Power Plant
Figure 7 – Maw’s House

Figure 8 – Oak Grove Duck Blind
Figure 9 – Abandoned Drilling Pad

Figure 10 – Maw’s Pond
Figure 11 – Dad

Figure 12 – Dad’s First Deer Stand
Figure 13 – Pipeline Stand

Figure 14 – Baron’s Blind
Figure 15 - Taw Taw’s Blind at Hut’s

Figure 16 – Buck’s Corn Feeder
Figure 17 – Old Home Place and Waldron Ferry Road

Figure 18 – Old Farm Land
Figure 19 – Uncle Bill’s Spot on the Land

Figure 20 – The River – Self Portrait 7
Vita

Jacob Croft Botter was born in 1976 at Willis Knighton Hospital in Shreveport, Louisiana, just outside of Texas. After abandoning the University of Texas at El Paso, Jacob enrolled at Kilgore Junior College just before the turn of the century. Here he entered his first photography class under the tutelage of O. Rufus Lovett. After graduating from Kilgore, Jacob continued to work towards his bachelor’s degree at Texas A&M University-Commerce. After receiving his degree in photography, and giddy with the idea of attending his father’s alma mater, Jacob headed south for LSU — the home of his beloved Fighting Tigers. He presently occupies one of the two bedrooms at the Violet House, also home to The Backyard Gallery. Jacob makes nightly donations to Mr. Brooks and the High Life and is championed by Blue and his darling Penny.