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## INTERVIEW

# ART AND THE PROMISED LAND

A Conversation with John Telford,  
Terry Tempest Williams and Royden Card.



*John Telford, an adjunct professor of art and manager of Photographic Services at the University of Utah, has been photographing the canyons of the Colorado Plateau for more than ten years and has been exhibited and published both nationally and internationally.*

*Terry Tempest Williams, naturalist in residence at the Utah Museum of Natural History, is the author of several books on natural history including Pieces of White Shell—A Journey to Navajo Land.*

*Royden Card, a woodcut artist and part-time BYU printmaking instructor, cut and printed the illustrations for a fine press book Dale L. Morgan's Utah published by the University of Utah.*

*This interview with three Utah Mormon artists was prompted by two events: the publication of a book of Williams's short stories and Telford's photographs entitled Coyote's Canyon (Gibbs Smith Publishing, \$14.95) and an art show, "Canyons," at the Courtyard Gallery in Salt Lake City in April featuring photographs by Telford and woodcuts by Card.*

### ALL OF YOUR WORKS RELATE TO THE LAND. WHY?

WILLIAMS: Spiritual people need to have a place they can call home. Brigham and Joseph established a land ethic and I think as Mormons we have removed ourselves from that land ethic and have become more economically based. I would love to see us return to those original tenants of what it means to have a place to call home. If they look, I think every person has their own sense of place where their spiritual needs are renewed. It's an individual relationship with place, wherever that may be. If you asked an individual to talk about his or her spiritual autobiography, there would be connections to the natural world—houses, streets, gardens, trees, smells, light, and weather. Think of Christ in the wilderness and the Garden of Gethsemane, Joseph Smith in the Sacred Grove, and you could go on with every person—their spiritual memories are strongly connected to the land.

Think of Abraham, the twelve tribes, and the promised land.

TELFORD: For Utah Mormons, their place is Utah. For Korean Mormons, Korea, and so on. But it's still this planet, and in that sense, their place—land—is what they ought to be understanding, what their life is based on.

### WHAT ROLE DOES THE SPIRIT PLAY IN YOUR ART?

TELFORD: There is a spiritual nature to the work. I respond emotionally to the desert which I guess is another way to say I respond spiritually to the desert. My desert photographs are on that emotional level. Other works of art are on a more cerebral level. But when I'm working in the desert and when I'm working in the landscape, I respond very emotionally, very spiritually, and I try to communicate those feelings basically spirit to spirit—artist to viewer.

I deal so much with landscape because it has been part of my upbringing. The intermingling of environment, culture, and religious upbringing is what I am. When I express those things photographically, I don't try to depict a spiritual nature specifically, but that comes through. I like the concept that I am depicting the creations of deity as opposed to the creations of humans. And in that sense, it may be spiritual. So, there is a spiritual interpretation but not necessarily a religious interpretation of the landscape.

CARD: To me all art is spiritual. If it is not dealing with a spiritual concept, then it's not really art. One of the Mormon tenets is that the earth has a spirit, is alive. Going to the desert is a spiritual pilgrimage for me. I'm always in awe of the landscape. I'm drawn to the flat ocean of sagebrush that some people consider boring. I love driving through Nevada, all of those wonderful barren hills. I celebrate the ongoing creation, the cycle of life—coyotes, kangaroo rats, lizards, horned toads, rain, sun, wind.

Sleeping under the stars, waking up, watching the fire, looking at the land, feeling cold in the morning, feeling hot in the afternoon, being in touch with all of those environmental aspects, that to me is a spiritual experience. That's why most of my work tends to be rocks, trees, desert things. Part of my religion is going to the land. My art springs from my spiritual-emotional response.

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## HOW DOES THIS RELATE TO COYOTE'S CANYON?

TELFORD: I feel this work describes a desert which does not fit into the stereotype that most people have. When a person says that the desert is hostile, uninviting, a wilderness that is not meant for humans to experience, that person has never *experienced* a desert. They may have driven through a desert and felt that, but they have not truly experienced the desert. I think the person needs to first of all get out into the desert away from the vehicle. Away from the qualities that people have placed on the desert, and go and truly experience the desert. The book breaks down a lot of those stereotypical ideas. There are sections depicting the green grottos, water, life, and emotion found in this so-called dry wilderness and wasteland. That comes through very strongly in the book.

The desert's very accessible for people to come and experience those qualities. I think people can experience that through the book. But they can't go to the desert in their great big motorhomes with satellite dishes on top of them and drive through Utah's national parks and experience it. They have to stop that vehicle, get away from it, and go and feel it. At that point I think they begin to sense that this is not a land that is owned by contemporary human beings. This is a land that has been lived in by other human beings, either contemporary or ancient, who do not have a feeling of ownership of this land, but one of stewardship. The land is there to provide for them the things that only a creator could provide for them. Our contemporary culture looks at land as something to be owned, to be numbered in our portfolio of possessions, and to be exploited for the financial gains that it might provide for us. I always remember the feelings that I had when I first went by myself to the desert and walked into that country and felt like I was in someone else's domain—that I was only a visitor. As strong and warm and positive as I feel about that country, I've never felt that it was mine. I've always felt that it was someone else's and that I was intruding on *their* land. I think that as long as I feel that way, my respect for the land will be very high and I will never do anything to abuse that land any more than I would abuse someone's living room where I am a guest.

WILLIAMS: I understand what you're saying, John, about people in Winnebagos and satellite dishes, but I'm not so sure they don't have

a relationship with the desert, too. It's just different. I think of my grandparents who have enormous affection for red rock country and their experience is largely sitting on the porch and watching sunsets or taking small walks. On the other hand, every time my husband goes into that country he's convinced that he's the first person there and takes climbing ropes and harnesses and questions my relationship to the canyons. There are many levels on which the desert can be experienced. That's part of its charm. It can be hostile, and I do think that ringing silence is unnerving. It's bare-bones country and there's no place to hide. I find I cannot work in the desert. It's too distracting. If I'm going to write, I go to Jackson Hole where I feel safe and nurtured. The desert is much more dynamic and full of tension.

I hope *Coyote's Canyon* will ask Westerners to rethink their homeland, to see it with new eyes, and to realize their obligations to that country.

## WHAT'S THE BOOK ABOUT?

TELFORD: The book, which is primarily about the Colorado Plateau area of Utah, is not so much about the physical description of the landscape, but a description of the emotions of the landscapes. We're dealing with images both in story and photographic form which do not necessarily depict reality but are based on reality. They are suggestive of other things and it's up to the viewer to decide where reality departs and where imagination comes into play. Based on that playful concept we call the book *Coyote's Canyon*, the coyote being the mythological trickster figure of the Navajo people.

WILLIAMS: John and I wanted to do something innovative and to create a landscape of the imagination. Certainly John's photographs reflect that and I hope the stories also reflect the sense that nothing is as it appears in this landscape of red rocks and ravens. There are seven stories, all true, which come from Southern Utah. They've been white-robed a bit to give them a mythic sense, they are creative nonfiction—as all good myths tend to be. They have to do with the mysteries that surround us when we're in the desert.

One story, "The Bowl," has its roots in anarchy—the sense of breaking away from traditional roles—about a woman who leaves her family and her children. She looks into the mirror and sees the power that comes when everything is going out and nothing is

coming in. She decides that her life and the lives of those she loves depend on her leaving. And she retreats to the landscape of her childhood, to a desert wash. She sheds her clothing and creates a bowl. I think it's very symbolic how humans have to replenish themselves in order to keep giving.

There's another story about a couple who creates a spiral out of river stones. It's symbolic of the creation in which a man and a woman participate. Another story is about hearing Kokopelli's flute in Keet Seel and addresses the question of what is real and what is imagined.

## WHAT'S THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THE PHOTOGRAPHS AND THE STORIES?

WILLIAMS: Our attempt was not to have the photographs illustrate the stories nor the stories illustrate the photographs, but to have both of them go down parallel roads along their own line. There's a story called "A Woman's Dance," about a woman who dances in the desert and suddenly she has an unexpected audience. The abstract image that John placed alongside the story is this wonderful dance of rock, the sandstone is fluid. I think the images strengthen the stories and the stories hopefully give new light to the images.

TELFORD: The photographs stand alone visually and the stories stand alone literarily. For one to try to describe or support the other would be wrong. But together they weave an image that is stronger than each individually.

One of the magical things that has happened here is that while our intent was not to illustrate each other's work, the fact that they weave together in describing the emotional feelings that we have about the desert indicates that both of us are in tune with the same desert. There are photographs that you would think were placed there to illustrate something, and they do, but there's a quality of the words being brought out in the photographs and the photographs being brought out by the words.

## HOW WOULD YOU CRITIQUE THE STATE OF ARTS IN THE CHURCH?

CARD: There's a lot that I think is overtly sentimental or that draws on a historical sentimentality such as the paintings that you see inside the covers of Church magazines—two

obscure figures in the landscape of Far West or standing on a bluff overlooking part of England. Put a title with it and it serves a purpose. I think it gives Church members a tie, something somewhat beautiful to look at. But it stops short. It is an illustration: after you've looked at it a few times there doesn't seem to be anything else to draw on. Then there's art which is more rooted spiritually in love and the grandeur of God's creation: people, landscapes, ideas that are purely visual and abstract but which carry an innate love of creation.

TELFORD: One of the things that always discouraged me with art in the Church is that we seem to place so much emphasis on performing art and so little on visual art. As I look at the art that is typically represented by the Church magazines, my first impression is that they are tied completely and totally to reality. The art is meant to depict reality in the sense of either sacred buildings, experiences, or happenings that took place for the most part in the nineteenth century. Much of the current depiction is done with an impressionistic look: We are now at a level to appreciate what was happening in art 100 years ago but we're not able to appreciate what is happening in art today. Ironically, much of the religious rites that we experience are highly abstract and symbolic, but we as a people are unable to appreciate the symbolism because we are so totally tied to reality. When we can look at things that are not representational and see the symbolism associated with them and feel the spiritual experience, then I think that we can better appreciate the symbolic rites that we experience so often in the Church. As we progress in our ability to appreciate art, we progress to a higher level of expressionism, a higher level of emotion.

## HOW CAN WE IMPROVE THE ARTISTIC VISION OF MORMONS?

TELFORD: Well, to say that Mormons are appreciating impressionistic art right now and therefore Mormons are 100 years behind is false. The American culture in general is about 100 years behind its artists so that's not an indictment against members of the Church, it's an indictment against our whole culture.

I don't see a problem with exhibiting impressionist paintings. But, let's keep impressionism in its time frame. I do have problems when contemporary artists make pseudo-impressionistic paintings, because impressionism isn't what's happening right now.

They're living in a time one hundred years ago.

CARD: We need to examine what we expect art to do. We need to get away from buying a \$19.95 K-Mart reproduction to match the \$3,000 sofa and approach what Joseph Smith said about a person being saved only as fast as he or she gains intelligence. We need to emphasize the importance of getting visual intelligence.

TELFORD: The "sofa-sized painting" concept has nothing to do with a vision that will elevate the human mind. And the fact that it's inexpensive means that five years down the road when our interior designers have come up with a totally new color concept, then that



work can be thrown away and we can bring in another piece that matches our new sofa. That's not the reason we should have art. Art is meant to elevate the human mind and the experience of being human. If we can bring that into our environment and experience that on a higher level, be it spiritual or cerebral, then we're approaching what art really has the ability to do for us.

## WOULD IT BE CONSTRUCTIVE FOR THE CHURCH OR WEALTHY PATRONS TO COMMISSION ART FOR CHAPELS AND TEMPLES?

TELFORD: When that happened during the renaissance, art was basically restrictive because the patrons determined what was

art—artists merely executed their ideas and wishes. The answer is for people to realize that they are placing a restrictive criteria on what they think art is. If people will simply realize that there are a lot of differing ideas about art and then explore someone else's idea they would grow in their ability to appreciate and understand the art that is out there. Instead, when they don't understand a piece immediately the typical response is "That could be done by a monkey" or "My child could do that" and therefore they reject it instead of saying, "This is probably done by a gifted person and I don't understand it, maybe I should try to understand what this is about."

CARD: In the late 1970s and early 1980s when neo-expressionists were being shown, I was ready to dismiss it as junk. As time passed, however, I looked at more and more works—some on the cutting edge—and I realized I didn't understand what was going on. I had some artists walk me through their work so I could start understanding some of their personal symbols. Now I can look at some of these paintings and say, "This one speaks to me." My effort to understand has increased my ability to discern.

## DOES MORALITY AFFECT ART?

TELFORD: Yes. The morals of a particular artist come through in the work. I've seen some very interesting interpretations where psychoanalytical critics have come up with a correct interpretation of the artist's psychological make up—morality. I don't know that I agree that morality can be seen immediately, on the surface. But, I've seen a lot of examples where a person's character comes through the work.

A National Geographic approach to photography is meant strictly to communicate information about what is happening some place else in the world. But when you put a camera in the hands of a gifted person who has the ability to express emotion, and express artistic ideas, then the camera is every bit the tool as a canvas, brush, or knife. The important thing that people need to realize is that the hands do not create. Nothing that the hands do is particularly creative, be it with a brush, a knife, or a camera. It is the mind that creates and the tools are merely the things that the artists use to express what goes on in the mind. ☐