

PHOTOGRAPHY

Behind the Wheel with Henry Wessel

This restless chronicler of the American West was recently the subject of shows in San Francisco, New York and Cologne.

BY MELISSA E. FELDMAN

Henry Wessel has been having solo shows regularly on the West Coast for over 20 years, but rarely anywhere else. The notable exception was his first one-person museum exhibition, in 1973, at the Museum of Modern Art in New York. The next museum show, at the Los Angeles Museum of Contemporary Art, didn't come until 1988, although his work had been a fixture in exhibitions devoted to the western U.S. Last winter one could take full stock of Wessel's output through a survey at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, piggybacked by a small show of early work at his longtime S.F. gallery, Rena Bransten. A separate Wessel survey appeared in Germany at Cologne's Die Photographische Sammlung/SK Stiftung Kultur. In New York, Wessel exhibitions were mounted at two galleries, Charles Cowles and Robert Maan.

Wessel's incisive black-and-white photographs take as their subjects the landscape, architecture and people of the American West. A lone ranger for whom solitary road trips are a mainstay, Wessel came of age with the postwar documentary photography movement and, as one of nine artists featured in the important 1975 exhibition "New Topographics: Photographs of the Man-Altered Landscape" at the George East-

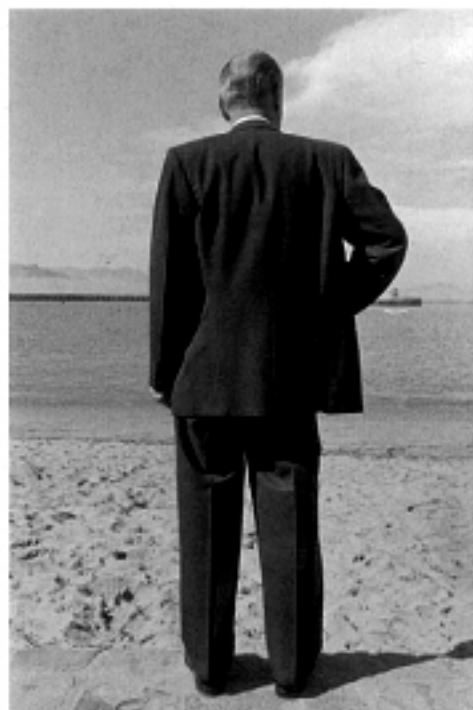
man House in Rochester, helped define it. That exhibition marked a shift in landscape photography from beatific images of untainted nature, in the manner of Ansel Adams and Edward Weston, to casual or clinical pictures of the landscape including its manmade elements by the likes of Robert Adams, Bernd and Hilla Becher, and Stephen Shore, photographers who were indebted to Walker Evans and Robert Frank, rather than Ansel Adams and Weston.

At 16 by 20 inches, Wessel's favored print size is old-school, but the stripped-down style, deadpan approach and offbeat, vernacular subject matter are entirely contemporary. Consider, for example, this pairing from the museum survey: a couple of large buzz-cut, egg-shaped shrubs in *San Francisco, California* (1972) and the equally absurd image (*San Francisco, California*, 1973) of a balding gentleman dressed for the office in a dark business suit; like the shrubs, he fills the frame. Seen from behind, this well-dressed gentleman incongruously stands on the beach. These images possess the combination of comedy and contemplation, striking graphics and mysterious subtext, formality and oddness that gives Wessel's work its distinctive look. Also paradoxical is how convincingly real Wessel's eccentrically framed, frozen-looking subjects appear, the result of his practice of overexposing his film and then under-developing it to achieve a clarity of detail and tonal range rivaling that of the naked eye.

Some of Wessel's most stunning pictures are his minimalist landscapes. One of the first is *New Jersey* (1967), in which only a pair of blurry headlights and a line of receding telephone poles interrupt a low-slung gray sky. Such stark, unreflected scenes appear again and again throughout his career, as in *Midwest* (1969) and *San Francisco* (1969), which made a nice set at SFMOMA. In the San Francisco picture, the city skyline on the distant horizon is nearly as crisp as the expanse of rock and rubble that fills the foreground.

Frequently in Wessel's photos, telephone poles, traffic lights or palm trees intersect with slanting electrical wires, strip malls and road markings, usually against platinum skies or bleached-out pavement. The resulting compositions are angular and constructivist. In architectural studies such as *Los Angeles* (1976) and *Tucson, Arizona* (1973), midcentury middle-class housing becomes a white-on-white study of layered form, pattern and space.

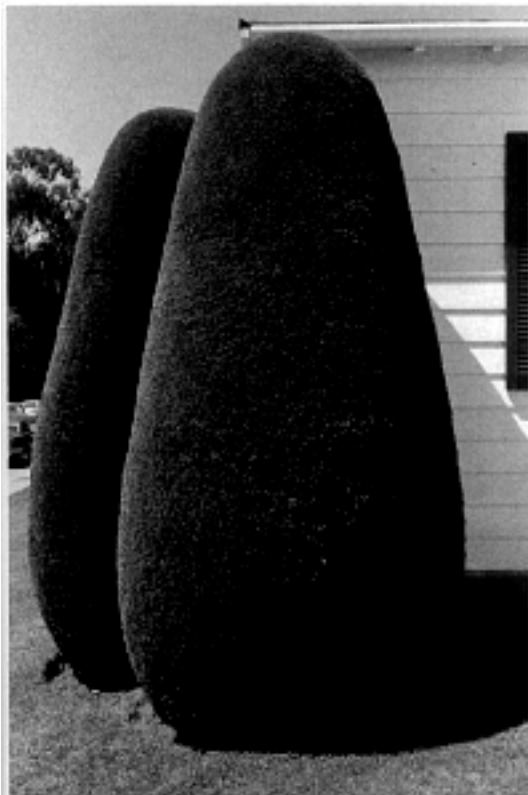
In his tendency to serialize subjects, both banal and sublime, and in his stripped-down style and wry, deadpan tone, Wessel nibbles at the edges of conceptualist practice. Nowhere is this more apparent than in his abstract architectural compositions and minimalist landscapes. If contemporaries such as Ed Ruscha and Lewis Baltz are more systematic and idea-driven in their approach, clearly they and Wessel alike were struck by the West's landscapes and roadside developments, with their manifest social and environmental implications.



San Francisco, California, 1973, 13 1/2 by 10 1/2 inches. San Francisco Museum of Modern Art.

Wessel's landscapes of the 1960s and '70s also parallel other artistic investigations of the day, such as Dan Graham's "Homes for America" (1966-67), which depicts houses as hard-edged abstraction or minimalist sculpture. And in northern California, where Wessel has long resided, photo-realist Robert Bechtle painted urban scenes that could almost be handmade, more compositionally balanced versions of Wessel's pictures. Driving was integral to all these artists for the unique perspective it gave: roads cutting through swaths of open country, the monotony of the highway and repetitious housing tracts. The L.A.-based Ruscha, for instance, got the idea to photograph gas stations along Route 66 for his first artist's book, *Twenty-six Gasoline Stations* (1962), during his frequent drives back home to Oklahoma.

Arrayed in a row of three modest-sized galleries, the SFMOMA exhibition consisted of 80 rather densely hung works that included the artist's more recent forays into color and bigger print size. The first room focused on the stark black-and-white landscapes and doubled as a travelogue of the New Jersey native's cross-country road trips—at least 15 between 1967 and 1971—from rural Pennsylvania, where he lived briefly after attending Penn State, to the Midwest, the Southwest, New Mexico and California, where he ultimately settled in the San Francisco Bay Area in 1971. The



San Francisco, California, 1972, 11 1/2 by 8 inches. San Francisco Museum of Modern Art.



Henry Wessel: New Jersey, 1967, 16 by 20 inches. Courtesy Charles Coules Gallery, New York. All works, unless otherwise noted, gelatin silver prints.

No. 44, 1995, from the "Night Walk" series, 20 by 24 inches. Courtesy Rena Bransten Gallery, San Francisco.



It's the combination of comedy and contemplation, striking graphics and mysterious subtext, formality and oddness that gives Wessel's work its distinctive look.

show begins with *Boalsberg, Pennsylvania* (1967), a shot of a parked pickup truck pointed away from the camera toward a vista of farmland and endless spongy vegetation. The beautiful monotony of this rural landscape suggests what would soon attract Wessel to the West and its deserts.

Like Baltz and Lee Friedlander, Wessel is interested in the awkward interface between nature and the built environment. But he avoids those artists' serious, often bleak mien, instead hitting theatrical high notes that border on the vaudevillian or, at the other extreme, the Brechtian. In *Arizona* (1969), a forked fluorescent streetlamp—the only vertical in the otherwise flat terrain—stands lonely as a cloud and lovely as a Dan Flavin sculpture. In another Southwestern image, *Tucson, Arizona* (1974), giant reeds threaten to overtake the bungalow partly concealed behind them. Tourism, a by-product of the nature/culture issue, is another of Wessel's recurring subjects. In the surrealist *Lake Louise, Canada* (1968), the imposing snowy mountain range in the top half forms an unlikely backdrop to the bathers in the arched pool area below.

The photographs of people from the late '70s to ca. 1990 that dominate the second room of the survey seem more laid-back, perhaps due to the influence of Garry Winogrand, Wessel's friend and, after Winogrand's move to Los Angeles in 1978, occasional working companion. In *Venice, California* (1990) young people splay across the grass in a sloppy human patchwork; in *Hānikiki Beach, Hawaii* (1975), people of all ages jog or lounge in bathing suits.

Moving from the out-of-doors to interior spaces, Wessel photographs a young woman wrapped in a towel and bent over, Degas-like, to blow-dry her long hair (*New*

Orleans, 1982); a young girl seen from above lying face up on a bed talking on the phone in a pose that is reminiscent of Cindy Sherman's "Untitled Film Stills" (*Williamsburg, Virginia*, 1987); and a nude reclining on a bed, a glass held up to her mouth and striped pillows draped against her torso covering everything except her Farrah Fawcett hair and great legs (untitled, 1982). The woman's pose and the clashing patterned sheets, tacky curtains and wall hanging give this picture, and a few others like it, a seamy, Nan Goldinesque feeling. Intent on objectifying his often solitary subjects, however, Wessel, unlike Goldin, assiduously avoids making eye contact with them. The people in his photos are always too far away, or wearing sunglasses, or seen from behind, or shot with their faces cropped out—even kissing turns into a way to cover up faces (*Baker Beach*, 1987).

The final room of the show focused on architectural work from the last 15 years, including the Cibachrome "Real Estate" pictures and some recent Las Vegas hotel interiors, along with an achronologically installed smattering of curbside views of houses and a couple of landscapes from throughout his career. A highlight here was the "Night Walks" series (1995-98), nighttime shots of suburban homes illuminated only by existing lighting (street and porch lights, a lamp visible through a window, etc.) that suggest the viewpoint of some predatory stalker. Slightly larger in size (20 by 24 inches) than is his custom, this series adds new depth to Wessel's ongoing study of light and architecture. By contrast, the "mug shots" of 40 modest homes archived in the "Real Estate" series (1990-91; 7 by 10 inches each) have little to add to his obsession with the vernacular, besides color and a rather hackneyed presentation in a grid. Nearby, a few 20-by-24-inch color prints from the "Las Vegas" series included a glitzy hotel corridor

(No. 15) that is something of an optical puzzle, and a less successful interior shot of a tacky wedding chapel (No. 17) slightly askew and topped by a fluorescent-tube ceiling fixture. The uncharacteristic informality and feigned amateurishness of these images can only be explained as expressions of their ersatz subjects. Some earlier works are also plagued by visual clichés, such as *Southern California* (1985), a view of a blond lifeguard type in sunglasses in front of an apartment building named Ocean Sands.

The recent color photographs felt tacked on to the rest of the show. Perhaps, rather than grouping them all at the end, it might have been better to integrate them throughout the exhibition with kindred earlier works, such as those of seedy or kitschy interiors. These linkages, in turn, might have given the oddball (and



Untitled, 1982, 16 by 20 inches. Courtesy Rena Bransten Gallery.



San Francisco, 1993, 16 by 20 inches. Courtesy Rena Bransten Gallery.

sometimes less successful) images that pepper the selection more purpose. Yet in the midst of his iconic subjects and enduring themes, some of these non sequiturs—such as the disarming portrait of a woman in a bikini (*Hānikiki*, 1979), which is unusual in its psychological frankness and unaffected sensuality—show secret sides and untold depths of his oeuvre. Inclusion of these images not only enriched our sense of his work, but also kept the exhibition from becoming too predictable. While absorbing elements of Conceptual art, Minimalism and geometric abstraction, Wessel's work is closest to the documentary esthetic, to recording what Lee Friedlander calls "the American social landscape." But at the same time it remains true to Wessel himself, to his experience as a transplant to the West, a loner and a maverick. □

"Henry Wessel: Photographs" was on view at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art (Jan. 27-Apr. 22). A separately conceived survey of Wessel's work was seen at Die Photographische Sammlung/SK Stiftung Kultur, Cologne, Germany (Feb. 2-May 6). Coinciding with these exhibitions, a monograph on Wessel, edited by Thomas Zander and with essays by Sandra S. Phillips and Georg Im Dahl, has been co-published by Steidl and both museums. Rena Bransten Gallery in San Francisco mounted a show of Wessel's early work (Jan. 18-Feb. 24). Solo exhibitions were also on view in New York at Charles Coe Gallery (Jan. 11-Feb. 17) and Robert Muen Gallery (Jan. 16-Feb. 10).

Author: Melissa E. Feldman is a writer and independent curator based in the San Francisco Bay Area.

No. 15, 2002, from the "Las Vegas" series, chromogenic print, 20 by 24 inches. Courtesy Rena Bransten Gallery.

