



# ART REVIEW: Gursky Landscapes Offers View of Man's Paltry Place in Nature

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by Charles A. Riley II

The view of terrestrial life *sub specie aeternitatis* (“under the aspect of eternity”) is a philosophical ideal made commonplace by flight and satellite imagery, yet it remains persistently transcendent. When the monumental landscape photographs of Andreas Gursky hit the mark—most of the time in the focused exhibition of more than 20 examples currently on view at the Parrish Art Museum in Water Mill—they offer a thoughtful view of man’s paltry place in nature. When they miss from such a height, as in the last two to come from the studio, they belly-flop embarrassingly.

It is odd to say that the essential statement of mammoth prints that are 10 feet tall by 7 feet wide is embedded in the details, but the eureka moment of a good Gursky landscape is the apprehension that the seam of brightly colored marks perforating the lower third of the relatively early work *Engadin I* (1995) is an immense procession of cross-country skiers. This is one of many races featured in “Andreas Gursky: Landscapes,” all of them from such a distance that the “thrill of victory, the agony of defeat” are reduced to minuscule, nearly indecipherable and clearly inconsequential proportions.



“Engadin I” by Andreas Gursky, 1995. Inkjet-print 81 ½ x 140 ¼ inches. Andreas Gursky. © 2015 Andreas Gursky / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York / VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn. Courtesy Gagosian Gallery.

In *Tour de France* (2007), the viewer is defied to find the all-important yellow jersey and stirred to mirthless chuckling by the spectators’ bikes lying on their sides on an embankment. An indifferent guy in red with his back to the action walks away to relieve himself. The poor schlub pedaling way back of the peloton, perfectly centered on a white T marking, is solitary in his last-place indignity. This is the sort of absorption in the inner life of the scene that justifies Gursky’s outsize reputation.



“Tour de France” by Andreas Gursky, 2007. C-print, 121 x 86 ¼ inches. © 2015 Andreas Gursky / Artists Rights

Society (ARS), New York / VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn. Courtesy  
Gagosian Gallery.

Humanitarian and environmental issues are raised by a figure shrouded in white plastic inside a Bond-like golden chamber (the interior of an oil storage tank in Qatar) in [Katar \(2012\)](#); farm workers bending to their task alongside long blue rows of plastic in [Beelitz \(2007\)](#); and depraved indifference to animal life in the stockyard panorama entitled [Greeley \(2002\)](#), which will enrage vegans.

Gursky is not the first to use scale to reduce man to entomological inconsequence. Chinese landscape painters of the Tang and Song dynasties were adroit at camouflaging their exiled poets among the bamboo, pine and plum trees of a towering mountainscape. Mark Innerst conjured tiny picnic parties with a few flecks of paint in the midst of the Great Lawn in Central Park in brilliant if small tableaux of anonymous urban life. It is emotionally as well as intellectually rewarding to escape into the Parrish for a lesson in humility.

Like Thomas Struth, a fellow German uber-photographer with whom Gursky is often compared, there is art historical meditations on view, especially in Gursky's *Turner Collection* (1995) that forgoes crisp focus for an atmospheric take on atmospheric paintings. The tones are surprisingly unappealing, missing the cadmium yellow of the original Turner which, in the print, too closely corresponds to the gold of the frames.



“Turner Collection” by Andreas Gursky, 1995. C-print, 87 ½ x 125 1/8 inches.  
Andreas Gursky. © 2015 Andreas Gursky / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York /  
VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn. Courtesy Gagosian Gallery.

Meanwhile, the deep blues and greens of *Ocean VI* (2010) and the Barnett Newman zips of a river polluted by plastics in *Bangkok IX* (2011) use full-color printing to achieve velvety blacks (look closely for the seams where the paper joins for deviations in this tone).



“Bangkok IX” by Andreas Gursky, 2011. C-print, 121 x 87  
inches.

Gursky was born in Leipzig in 1955, and lives in Dusseldorf. A certified star, Gursky's work is ubiquitous, hanging in museums from Tokyo (National Art Center) to Madrid (the Reina Sofia), from Paris (the Pompidou) to Stockholm (Moderna Museet), Moscow (Ekaterina Foundation) and New York (MoMA).

The show was organized by Terrie Sultan, director of the Parrish, and installed with the artist present. Sultan astutely related the landscapes to the historic strengths of the museum.

"I was thinking of how the remarkable Hudson River School painters, like Frederic Church and Albert Bierstadt, as well as the photographer Carleton Watkins, were Gursky's aesthetic and philosophical forebears," she noted in a statement, "and how his images could be contextualized in a new way as reflected in the Parrish's permanent collection of remarkable landscape images."

Moving through the permanent collection galleries at the end of the building, visitors will find that Sultan has cannily deployed her collection as context. The photographs of Tria Giovan, Susan Meisel, Clifford Ross, and Julia Oshatz and a superb April Gornik seascape offer a choral complement to Gursky's star turn. Even the black marks on a Mel Kendrick sculpture respond to the black switchbacks of the race car track of Gursky's [\*Bahrain I\* \(2005\)](#).

A cavil to conclude: What a precipitous falling-off is offered in the last two (chronologically) works in the show, one of which foregrounds Superman, pensive as Rodin's Dante on a rock wall in a planetary debris field, the other a cardboard-stiff version of Ironman gauchely embraced by a Teutonic blonde (he can't even get his metallic arms up) before a boring sunset amid comatose palm trees. Both these large but weak works, dutifully, are cloaked with copyright acknowledgments.

The other problem with the superheroes is the obvious positioning and scale of the figures. Gursky loses points not just for sucking up to DC and Marvel comics, but for the insipid way in which he punts on the serious tone set by his better work by sending the worst of pop culture upstage.

It is a troubling portent that these two unfortunate blemishes mar the most recent work, leaving one shuddering with trepidation regarding the comic lapses to come (Snoopy and the Red Baron over a poppy field?). These are not the days when curators can afford to edit the stars—there could be no loading of the superhero works *SH I* and *SH II* back on the art mover's truck once they were in Water Mill. Be kind and overlook Gursky's gaffes.

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**BASIC FACTS:** "Andreas Gursky: Landscapes" remains on view through October 18, 2015. The Parrish Art Museum is located at 279 Montauk Highway, Water Mill, NY 11976. [www.parrishart.org](http://www.parrishart.org).

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