

## A Conversation with Joel Feldman

by Michael Beam

The images in Joel Feldman's *Annotated Landscapes* series respond to mundane elements that create and code the visual landscape of contemporary America. Feldman finds both humor and cause for concern in the ways Americans mark public spaces and, by marking, define themselves and their communities. He draws attention to the telling commercial, governmental, institutional, and private signposts that we usually fail to notice in our daily, distracted encounters with our visual environment.

**Michael Beam:** We generally think of "annotation" in reference to texts and of "landscape" in reference to a specific genre of art images. Your work does not appear to be "textual" in a traditional sense, even though it often focuses on signage, nor does it seem to fit comfortably the traditional conventions of "landscape"? How did you decide on the title for the series and what, if anything, does it indicate about the logic of your approach?

**Joel Feldman:** I think of images as texts or close analogs to texts. Really, when all is said and done, our experience of landscape is so culturally determined that images of landscapes function like texts and, consequently, can be annotated in a similar way. I say this thinking of the use of landscapes in cinema, painting, literature and advertising. In all these instances landscapes are employed in descriptive ways; they function to locate and characterize what is being shown. In this body of work, I take the opposite approach. What I do is to present an image of a landscape that offers certain interpretive possibilities. I then try to couple that image with elements that provide a cue as to how I see it. This is not dissimilar from noticing and pointing out a scar left behind an ear after the nip and tuck of a facelift. In many respects, all I am doing is saying, "Look around. What do you see? What does this mean to you?"

**MB:** How do you choose the landscapes for your images? Is there a specific logic that guides you?

**JF:** My immediate environment, one that I travel through most often and which is therefore the most convenient one to respond to, is the Midwest, more specifically Southern Illinois. Southern Illinois is an area with relatively little

political clout. It has a population for whom issues of "taste," as represented by mainstream purveyors of "good taste" such as Martha Stewart, IKEA, and the like are not at all that relevant. It is also an economically depressed region where prisons mean jobs. This results in a landscape in which institutions, personal decorative statements, and advertising gimmicks often exist in bizarre combinations. These combinations or juxtapositions are very telling and seem indicative of the American culture at large in ways that may not be quite so obvious in more sophisticated, affluent environments, even though there too one encounters such "glitches" in the visual choreography.

**MB:** You grew up in Washington D.C., went to school at the Carnegie Institute of Technology and Indiana University in Bloomington, have taught in Georgia, Ohio, and, for the past thirty years, in Illinois at the School of Art and Design at Southern Illinois University in Carbondale. You are an artist, a printmaker by training, and a university professor. What is your relationship to the landscapes you comment on and the communities that produce them? Do you consider yourself a member or an outsider?

**JF:** I am not sure "outsider" is the right word, but I am also not sure I am a member either or, perhaps more to the point, that I would be recognized as a member by the locals. The answer to your question depends on how you define a community. One could say that insofar as Southern Illinois is concerned, in certain areas recent transplants outnumber people with deeper local roots. For instance, Carbondale is a university town with a nomadic, diverse population, but it is surrounded by small towns and rural communities that are very different in character.

I work in Carbondale, but I have always chosen to live in the small surrounding towns. Does that make me a local? I doubt, but is that relevant to what I do? Whatever my status may be, I am definitely someone who approaches his surroundings, no matter what they are, with a critical eye. Art simply gives me a license to present my observations in a socially acceptable way.

**MB:** Do you see an artist as someone who has a privileged vantage point as a social critic and a certain responsibility to comment?

**JF:** Not necessarily. I look at visual evidence; something catches my eye and becomes an opportunity for commentary. When I travel, I often find myself seeing something and thinking, "Wow! Is that for real? What were they thinking

when they put this thing up? Doesn't anyone notice what is implied here?" My images attempt to give viewers a way to notice messages imbedded in their everyday surroundings. For instance, recently, I saw a sign on a church billboard in my neighborhood. It said: "Give God what's right, not what's left." The sign was probably straightforward and literal. Whoever wrote that text probably did not intend to make a pun on right and left wing politics. Frankly, it is irrelevant whether they did or not. What is important is that this was a public message visible to all. The political implications were there, intended or not. All one had to do is notice them.

**MB:** Is that how you find most of your source images, by chance?

**JF:** At first I did. For instance, I always noticed the outrageous juxtaposition of the Rend Lake College and the Big Muddy Correctional Center at mile marker 81 on IL Hwy. 57. That is where the first set of images in this series came from. After that, I began looking for other similar sites where prisons and colleges were closely adjacent. I found three in Southern Illinois and made images about them. Through the process of looking for other similar sites, I became increasingly aware of the underlying logic of what I was doing. What I tend to do is to identify a problem and then figure out how to present it. This is the same logic I apply when I acquire objects for my collections. When I go to flea markets and junk shops, I look for things that are good examples of their genre. I collect categories of objects: sharp things, toys that make typical adults a bit uncomfortable, and ethnographic stuff. I think in a way this is a type of control - a way to relate while remaining effectively detached.

**MB:** Are the objects that appear in the foreground of your images taken from your collections?

**JB:** Not always. The materials for my sets come from a variety of places. Some I already own, others I buy specifically for a particular image. The Hobby Lobby is one of my favorite places to shop. I think it works for me because it uses "Art" logic to create kitschy craft stuff for people to use to enhance their own "artfulness." In some ways it is like going out to buy ready-made and completely un-ironic Jeff Koons-like props. When I arrange elements, I try to create interesting visual and conceptual relationships in order to prompt a response. What that response will be, ultimately depends on the viewer.

**MB:** Several images in the series, including *Trust Jesus* (2003) and *Neighbors*

(2003) are about much more than advantageous arrangement of elements. They deal with potentially sensitive subjects - religion and race. How did they originate and do they work on a different logic from the other images in the series?

**JF:** I found the source image for *Trust Jesus* on a visit to Mount Vernon, Illinois. I really liked the look of the somewhat defunct parking lot and the orangey yellow transformer box with a fluorescent bluish "Trust Jesus" graffiti; it was a great image on its own. When I was in Saint Louis, a bit later, I saw in a window of a store catering to the African-American middle class the two "Last Suppers" that appear in the final image; the white and the black, right next to one another. I have a feeling that someone who would approve of the message, if perhaps not the form of delivery, in the "Trust Jesus" graffiti photo, would find the alternative "Last Suppers" equally unproblematic. For me, the image is not about religion *per se*, but about intersections and slippages between consumer culture, religion, class, and race.

The Cabrini Green piece came about after a recent trip to Chicago. Driving downtown, I saw luxury town houses being constructed directly across the street from the remnants of the notorious Cabrini Project high-rises. The town houses had a sign advertising the fact that they were starting at the rock bottom price for Chicago of only \$264,900. Status is status; I thought it might be interesting to juxtapose a new pair of "commemorative" Air Jordans, a much sought after commodity, with this visual scenario. I find it interesting that one can use goods, be they shoes or housing, to identify stereotypes we commonly use to characterize and evaluate particular populations.

**MB:** You are primarily known for your woodcut prints. Why did you decide to switch to photography?

**JF:** I always took photographs, though I rarely exhibited them as "finished" work. *The Annotated Landscapes* grew out of experiments I started in the mid 1980s. I used to build simple stage sets into which I placed cutouts from *National Geographic*, which I then photographed using an SX70 Polaroid camera. Because of the depth of field peculiar to this technology, the images looked surprisingly real. The limitation of the work was the image size of that Polaroid film. In 2001, I decided to see if the logic of the SX70s would work on a larger scale. That is how the *Mile Marker 81* (2002) pair, the first set of images in the series, came about.

**MB:** In your photographs the visual "stitching" between the foreground and the background is very apparent. The obviousness of the "seams" between the background source photo and the annotative foreground defy the tendency in contemporary photo-based work towards high production values and seamless, simulacral presentation. Why did you choose to go the low-tech route, to use "straight" photography and a cumbersome process to produce images that could have been easily made with the current digital technology? Why not simply rely on Photoshop?

**JF:** Quite frankly, it is easier to get the "look" I want in this low-tech way than by using programs like Photoshop. My images are not meant to be seamless. One should always be aware of the original source photo and the artifice of the created juxtaposition. The rough edges are part of my aesthetic and logic. They stress the artifice of the presentation. It is important to me that the depicted or rather selected landscape does not turn into a mythic place identified and coded solely as Art. It must always refer back to the actual location. I want the viewers to enjoy the work, but also to come away learning a technique of sorts, one that can be applied in daily life. I guess the bottom line is that I would like people to pay more attention, to be much more aware and critical of their visual environment. The consequences of not paying attention are simply too great.

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**Michael Beam** is the co-curator of Joel Feldman, Annotated Landscapes exhibition and Collections and Exhibitions Curator at the Castellani Museum at Niagara University.