

TERRY EVANS

Born 1944 in Kansas City, Missouri
Lives and works in Chicago

Education

1968 BFA in painting, University of Kansas

Awards

2006 Anonymous Was a Woman fellowship
1996 John Simon Guggenheim fellowship
1983 National Endowment for the Arts fellowship

Selected Publications

2005 *Revealing Chicago: An Aerial Portrait*. Harry N. Abrams
2002 *From Prairie to Field: Photographs by Terry Evans*. Chicago: The Field Museum
2001 *In Response to Place: Photographs from the Nature Conservancy's Last Great Places*.
Boston: Bulfinch Press/Little, Brown and Co.
1988 *Disarming the Prairie*. Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press
1998 *The Inhabited Prairie*. Lawrence, Kan.: University Press of Kansas
1986 *Prairie: Images of Ground and Sky*. Lawrence, Kan.: University Press of Kansas



Terry Evans,
Grasses, 1993.
Archival pigment print, 37 x 37 in.
Courtesy of the artist



Terry Evans,
Becky with Boyfriend, 1997.
Archival pigment print, 26 x 26 in.
Collection of the artist

MATFIELD GREEN

became a subject of interest for Evans shortly after her friend Wes Jackson, director of the Land Institute, introduced her to the town in 1990. Fifty or less people call Matfield Green home. It is nestled in the Flint Hills of Eastern Kansas, a stretch of land within what remains of the once vast Tallgrass Prairie in the midsection of the continental U.S. The Land Institute acquired property in the town, and Evans states that she quickly became entranced by the place and its inhabitants. With grandparents who grew up in a Missouri small town, the setting and way of life resonated strongly, and Evans embarked on a photographic project to reveal and reflect this setting. The project engaged her from 1990 to 1998, during which time she set up a dark room and briefly owned property in Matfield Green. It drew her back from 2008 to 2010 to complete her project.

The nature of Evans' investigation in the context of photographic history fascinates me. Many models exist for how a photographer enters a place and then captures masterful images that get under the skin to tell about that setting. One famous model in photographic lore involved Walker Evans. In 1936 he and writer James Agee spent three weeks in Hale County, Alabama. They lived with and recorded the lives of three families of rural sharecroppers. The project resulted in the 1941 book *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, an American classic with searing images of rural poverty during the Great Depression. The artists were wholly foreign to their subject and gained access to its reality through a full-immersion experience. Many photographers now follow this work practice. Evans' ambitious project in Matfield Green clearly adheres to a different track, because she isn't an outsider to her subject. Photographer Eugène Atget provides a more meaningful example and tradition within which to appreciate Evans' Matfield Green project. Atget lived at the turn of the 19th century in Paris, and for decades he documented the transition then taking place as ancient Paris faded and a modern metropolis emerged. Atget's revered project reflects his keen eye for poignant detail, strong humanism, and stunning photographic talent as he conveyed a remarkable story about place.

Matfield Green is Evans' Paris. The portrait of this tiny community knits within a larger and lifelong project for Evans. She isn't a carpetbagger or roaming photographer seeking the exotic who will be gone tomorrow. The artist knows the locals' reverence for the land and relationship to it intimately, because she shares it. As a native who knows the vernacular, Evans gives a poetic reading to the commonplace. Kansas has blistering heat in summer, and the viewers can virtually smell the fierce temperature in the bleached, cropped image of the side of the white house. Young love and religious fervor exist in small towns, and Evans respectfully conveys these moments in the town's lived experience. Importantly, Evans relates the quirky as well as the wholesome—and a full picture and not a greeting-card illustration results. The viewers' grasp of the prairie story that Terry Evans tells is additive. Upon viewing image after striking image, a narrative of sorts emerges.

The protagonist in this tale is the land. One chooses to live in a small, rural community for multiple reasons. Evans clearly suggests that the rugged, exquisite beauty of the prairie landscape is high on the list. Picture upon picture of the inhabited earth surrounding Matfield Green demonstrates Evans' well-honed talent. She succeeds in recounting the psyche of certain town residents, and she also expertly evokes the emotional tenor of distinct encounters with the land. A turnpike rest area, freight train and wind turbines interrupt the view, and cattle stare back from pastures that also punctuate the prairie. Such sights are now integral to the prairie experience, and they complete the picture Evans has knowingly crafted.

Photography historian Andy Grundberg stated, "As artists know intuitively, the most universal meanings often emerge from the most personal of subjects." From Terry Evans and her Matfield Green project, we learn about an unrelenting pride of place and rewards of life closely tuned to nature. Evans offers the Kansas prairie as a chapter—a tale within a larger opus—to the continuing and richly complex relationship Americans have to place and nature.

—PATRICIA MCDONNELL

Director of the Ulrich Museum of Art, Wichita State University

TERRY EVANS: MATFIELD GREEN STORIES

AUGUST 20 – NOVEMBER 27



ON THE COVER

Terry Evans, *Watering Hole*, 2009. Archival pigment print, 38 x 38 in. Collection of the Ulrich Museum of Art, Wichita State University, Wichita, Museum Purchase
Terry Evans, *Toots Conley*, 2009. Archival pigment print, 37 x 37 in. Collection of the artist
Terry Evans, *Sunset Burn*, 1994. Archival pigment print, 38 x 38 in. Collection of the artist

MUSEUM HOURS

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Saturday – Sunday, 1–5 p.m.
Closed Mondays and major/university holidays

FREE ADMISSION



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TERRY EVANS

FEW VERITIES are monolithic and finite. At the start of the 21st century, we appreciate that realities are conditional, impacted by the influence of history and perspective. How we grasp most things at 20 changes when we consider them again at 50 or 70. How we develop a firm understanding of place is no less complicated. Any effort to fully know a place is nuanced and fraught with false leads. It has been photographer Terry Evans' artistic ambition to reflect the prairie landscape in its many guises as she has come to know and respect it deeply over her lifetime. The Ulrich Museum of Art exhibition *Terry Evans: Matfield Green Stories* presents the artist's most recent body of work centered on the eponymous Kansas small town.

Across American history, the importance of the land has been profound, and conceptions of it—psychologically, economically, politically and artistically—have been ever shifting. A pristine wilderness once spelled opportunity and a vast continent to explore and tame. American art aligned with notions of Manifest Destiny in the 19th century, when an epic and romanticized American landscape of mountains and forests symbolized the staggering abundance in this country

to pioneer and populate. The grand landscape narratives of the Hudson River School painters and their followers acted in no small measure as advertisements to impel people westward.

In photography, early 20th-century artists updated that vision. Early modernists presented nature in American landscape as glorious and untouched, even when the sites depicted were far from undiscovered. For example, Ansel Adams pictured landmarks in Yosemite as virgin masterworks in the natural terrain, carefully positioning his camera to edit out evidence of human presence in this national park. We see no trails, lodges or telephone lines. Similarly, Edward Weston captured arresting images from the California coastline, as though highway #1 along the ocean's edge was not already a considerable tourist attraction. These images and others in the generation carried forward a foundational trope of American identity—that wilderness offers unalloyed natural beauty and a cipher for this democratic "land of the free" and opportunity.



Terry Evans,
Door and Window, 1997.
Archival pigment print, 20 x 20 in.
Collection of the artist.

No one, I discover, begins to know the real geographic, democratic, indissoluble American Union in the present, or suspect it in the future, until he explores these Central States, and dwells awhile on their prairies.

Walt Whitman, *Specimen Days, 1879*

There seemed to be nothing at all to see; no fences, no creeks or trees, no hills or fields. If there was a road, I could not make it out in the faint starlight. There was nothing but land; not a country at all, but the material out of which countries are made.

Willa Cather, *My Antonia, 1918*

Once in his life, a man ought to concentrate his mind upon the remembered earth, I believe. He ought to give himself up to a particular landscape in his experience, to look at it from as many angles as he can, to wonder about it, to dwell upon it. He ought to imagine that he touches it with his hands at every season and listens to the sounds that are made upon it. He ought to imagine the creatures there and all the faintest motions of the wind. He ought to recollect the glare of noon and all the color of the dawn and dusk.

N. Scott Momaday, *The Way to Rainy Mountain, 1969*

It is impossible to contemplate the life of the soil for very long without seeing it as analogous to the life of the spirit.

Wendell Berry, *The Unsettling of America, 1977*

Whenever someone asks why I always photograph in Alabama, I have to answer that, yes, I know there are other places, but Alabama is where my heart is. It's what I really care about.

William Christenberry, *In Response to Place, 2001*

My task as an artist is to tell the stories of the prairie.

Terry Evans, 2001



Terry Evans,
Evie Mae's House, 1996.
Archival pigment print, 26 x 66 in.
Collection of the artist

Terry Evans,
I-35 through the Flint Hills, 1994.
Archival pigment print, 44 x 44 in.
Collection of the artist



Decades later, landscape photographers altered that view, acknowledging the creep of industry and population growth into the raw countryside. A 1975 exhibition called *New Topographics: Photographs of a Man-Altered Landscape* assembled key works and artists in this new vein, and the new tendency gained traction and its name from this show. Robert Adams depicted tract housing neatly fit within the sweeping Colorado vista of an otherwise untouched territory rising to mountain peaks. Frank Golhke similarly captured a single ranch house inching out into the unmodulated horizon of the Minnesota plains. Nature remains in these stark images, yet it is unromantic, wry and conflicted. For some New Topographic artists, an indictment against misguided land-use policies and a sense of loss pervades. This approach profoundly impacted American landscape photography and inspired successive generations to probe the complex relationship between man and nature, human incursions into the land and the once unspoiled wilderness. While earlier chapters in the Western landscape tradition offered heroic beauty and epic grandeur, the New Topographic artists preferred banal, ubiquitous scenes of our commonplace encounters with nature.

Starting out professionally in the early 1970s, Terry Evans inherited this photographic tradition and has carried it forward. She is part of a succeeding artistic conversation and able to picture what others might consider competing ideologies. On the one hand, she finds great beauty and emotive scenes in the understated Kansas prairie, her subject of choice. On the other hand, she worries that this landscape has not fared perfectly from an ecological point of view. While images reflecting decay and waste appear, the inherent judgment and even sense of loss is not shrill. In 1995–98 Evans engaged in a project to record how the prairie was reclaiming an abandoned arsenal site, for example. How does regeneration occur, this body of work questions, rather than offering a harsh indictment about reckless destruction. Evans presents competing interests as 21st-century facts for life on the land, particularly for her native Midwest landscape. She would quickly add, "I am always on the side of the prairie."

A graduate of the University of Kansas, Evans moved to Salina in 1968 and began with black-and-white images of the prairie in 1978. By 1979, she created color, aerial photographs, viewing the grasslands and farmers' fields from on high. These images reveal eloquent patterns and patchworks as agricultural fields abut one another and, perhaps, are bisected by a train track or highway. In some, an incident with the landscape—a tiny, remote cemetery or isolated farmhouse—punctuates expansive pastures. Evans discovered such scenes of land use on the plains by finding them from the sky. Throughout these years, she pictured her world at both the macro and micro levels. She became nationally regarded for her aerial images, yet she also created pictures whose entire composition revealed tussled grasses seen close up. In this work, Evans honed her talent to discover remarkably compelling formal arrangements within the accidents of land formation and human settlement.

Evans selected an incredible subject by devoting herself to the prairie. Years ago I learned that people can be imprinted with a place—its land, sky and climate. As a West Coaster living in the East, I found myself breathing more easily when I returned to tall timbers. In moving to Kansas, I have heard natives talk, similarly, about returning home and relaxing finally when their view of the expansive horizon and vast sky wasn't interrupted by landscape features. My own discovery of the eloquence in the flatlands was not automatic, nor do I think it is for many who visit the Midwestern prairie landscape. The seductive natural beauty of uninterrupted grasslands and moody, immense skies is subtle, refined and an acquired sensibility. Evans demonstrates again and again in her photography that she is a passionate observer of this Kansas land. Like birds who miraculously return to the same nesting site each year following migration, Evans has the prairie in her blood, and she depicts it honestly and with care.