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**Delving into the worlds of  
of the west face of Mount Maxwell,  
Salt Spring Island,  
through experiential photography**

The west face of Mount Maxwell is dry and cliffy rising out of the narrows that separate this ridge from Vancouver Island. A cultural landscape stewarded by millennia by

Cowichan communities, the oak woodlands and remaining savannah along with the forests of old-growth Douglas fir have been sculpted by a jumble of human forces from aboriginal burning and digging to settlement-era sheep grazing, predator suppression, hand-logging, and invasive plants, most notably broom, *Cytisus scoparius*. With one of the mildest climates in Canada, with a long dry season and mild winters, Mount Maxwell is a refuge for a host of rare and vulnerable living things. It is also a good locale for the quiet of sun-bathing; for relaxing, reflecting and photographing. And in a time of environmental crises, Mount Maxwell is a good place to re-imagine better relations between humans and biosphere.



Mount Maxwell has been my favourite location for my visual musings for over three decades. I first visited the mountain in 1978, was involved in conservation and restoration of its habitat for a few years, and then through a succession of arts and research grants in subsequent decades have watched quietly and listened. The west face of Mount Maxwell has been my 'Point Lobos'<sup>1</sup> but for a very different time in photographic, and in deed, cultural history. Weston's portrayal of Point Lobos, through so-called "straight photography," was linked to broader movements for social justice, often associated with dialectical and historical materialism, that were pre-occupied with a fairly narrow kind of social realism for portrayal of human relationships (that extended to associated ecosystems). In contrast, my work on Mount Maxwell has been during a time of

proliferation of approaches to portrayal of landscapes and human relationship with them – and materialist methods increasingly linked to questions of unresolved legacies of First Nations along with questions of planetary life support and environmental conservation for sustainability. And the wondrous ecosystems and spaces of Mount Maxwell have remained vulnerable though today much of the west side is in protected designations. So for my photographic practices, Mount Maxwell has been a space for re-envisioning how to re-conceive and describe, to create a new vernacular perhaps, for describing ecosystems visually at a time when the legacies of early people and First Nations continue to be largely overlooked and the speed of global environmental change makes 'baseline' areas such as Mount Maxwell increasingly important and, paradoxically, more difficult to decipher.

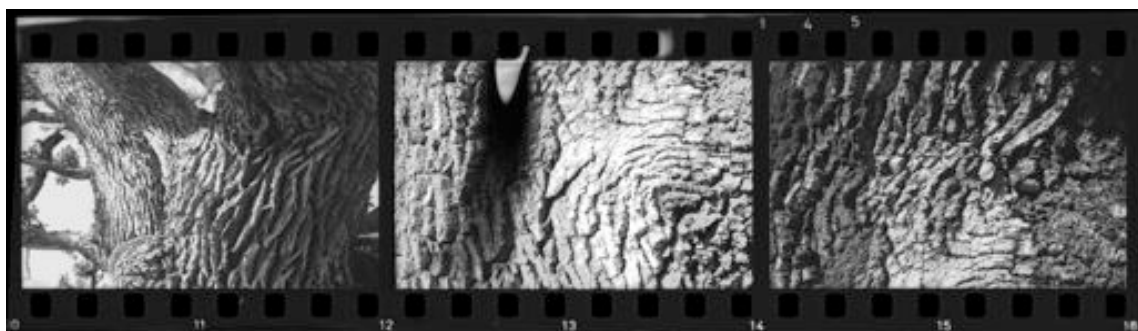


At the core of my photographic work on Mount Maxwell has been a tension between the straight landscape photography that best coalesced with the California Left eight decades ago and the many of the experiential or subjective approaches to photography and landscape portrayal that have emerged in recent decades. In some ways, my visual conversations from Mount Maxwell, have been oppositional, to the kind of "Vancouver School" photoconceptualism that for two decades has been flogged by a small group of West Coast Canadian photographers<sup>2</sup>.





Some of my work on Mount Maxwell have been preoccupied with re-inscribing the gay male body especially through some of the vernaculars of the contemporary, psychedelic preoccupations with plant forms. Other work is more concerned with creating visual language for confirming and acknowledging ecological (and cultural) change. Much of this work distills an unresolved relationship to these culturally formed, Garry oak ecosystems. While I grew up in these ecosystems a few miles away and was introduced to some local Salish land use and conservation practices as a child in a mixed, Métis family, my relationship to these landscapes remains tentative and scientific rather than rooted in any relationship to ancestral culture. And some of my other work on Mount Maxwell harkens back to the environmental liberalism of the Sierra Club of the nineteen sixties with its axiom that through celebrating wild places, visually, we can garner enough social support to fully protect and manage them. And I am sure that other themes will emerge and other practices applied in coming years.



On the 14<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> of June, 2009, 7 hectares of the west slope of Mount Maxwell were burned in a suspicious fire. Curiously, the area that was alit was some of the last

remaining oak grassland, or savannah, that had grown in with fire suppression. Because this part of the west side of Mount Maxwell is largely a fire-dependent ecosystem, this particular fire brought only limited ecological damage (though the area remains highly vulnerable to a 'hot' apocalyptic fire). Sadly, a few oaks were cut down, in the fire-fighting, for a helicopter land pad. It will be good to witness and photograph this renewal in the coming decades.



## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> In the 1930s, Edward Weston (1886-1958) was part of a group of mainly California photographers who called themselves "f/64" and developed a style of crisp, highly detailed portrayal of natural objects and the human body, what John Szarkowski referred to as "organic sculptures," often relying on large format cameras on tripods with long exposures. Weston's major photographic location for these studies, and adjacent to where he lived for many years, was Point Lobos on California's central coast. Weston's major publication that described the visual explorations of Point Lobos is Book II on California of *The Daybooks of Edward Weston* (photographs by Edward Weston foreword by Beaumont Newhall, New York, Aperture Books, 1973).

<sup>2</sup> Kenneth Baker. 2008. Photography with an eye for social relevance. *San Francisco Chronicle* (9 January, 2008): E1.

