



Cindy Bernard, *Ask the Dust: Vertigo (1958/1990)*, 1990, color photograph, 11½ x 23".

CINDY BERNARD

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Cindy Bernard's latest series of photographs, collectively entitled "Ask the Dust," focuses on the cinematic mediation of the American landscape. Bernard has chosen one film from each year between 1954 and 1974 in which the landscape plays an important contextual, political, or allegorical role. Using production notes or information provided by each film's director or unit production manager, Bernard has returned to the original film locations and photographed the landscape in accordance with the exact mise-en-scène and aspect ratio of the original movie. Thus Alfred Hitchcock's *Vertigo*, 1958, is represented by a view of a foggy Golden Gate Bridge taken from the Presidio, the location of Madeleine's (Kim Novak's) attempted suicide and Scottie's (James Stewart's) subsequent rescue. Similarly, *Chinatown*, 1974,

is reduced to that dried-up section of the Los Angeles River where Jake Gittes (Jack Nicholson) first associates Hollis Mulwray's death with the dumping of water.

Bernard's strategy entails a two-way deconstruction. By draining the original film's mise-en-scène of all narrative and semiotic connections, Bernard familiarizes the filmic through repriviling the landscape as a "neutral" site. But landscape isn't a neutral site; it is a constructed representation. We read into it all sorts of mediated, cultural, and ideological connotations, reflecting various frames of historical discourse as well as those of art and popular culture. Thus Bernard's additional filmic parameters act as a paradigm for this tendency to mythify and historicize. The Western mesa landscape is not only a symbol of the wilderness as a frontier of 19th-century migration, it is also a signifier of the John Ford Western. It is impossible to see Monument Valley, for example, without thinking of John Wayne in *The Searchers*, 1956, or *Stagecoach*, 1986.

Bernard moves beyond stating the semiotically obvious by tying each film to a slippery political context that undermines simple signifier-to-signified reference. Thus *The Searchers* is contextualized through the 1954 *Brown vs. Board of Education of Topeka* Supreme Court decision that declared "separate but equal" to be inherently unequal and took the first step on the road to school desegregation. Thus Ford's narration of the rescue of a kidnapped white girl from the defiling Comanche and her restoration to the law of white society becomes an allegory of white racism against blacks. Significantly, Monument Valley is also the image Bernard uses for Ford's *Cheyenne Autumn*, 1964, which may be seen as the director's answer to his critics on the issue of his own racism.

The interest of Bernard's project thus lies

in the ideological ambiguity of the readings one overlays onto the landscapes. This is reinforced by a parallel set of images in which Bernard presents a series of 20 snapshots taken by her grandfather, William Adams, which documents family vacations between 1950 and 1979. Dominated by images of roads disappearing into the vanishing point, the photos appear curiously unexpressive, as if you really had to be there in order to understand the personal significance of each shot. We are reminded of a similar image in Bernard's own series, in which a two-lane prairie highway is equally inscrutable, until we realize from its title that it is the famous locale of Hitchcock's *North by Northwest*, 1959, where Cary Grant is attacked by the crop duster. Without the filmic framework, this image would slot seamlessly into William Adams' holiday collection.

Such semantic ambiguity underlines the literalness of the show as a whole, although the problem seems to be one of presentation rather than concept. By tying each image so closely to a specific film, Bernard enforces a specific association that is impossible to escape. By withholding this information, or at least reducing it to a set of generalized parameters, and allowing us to read in from our own back catalogue of references, the photographs would be encoded through the act of reception, not simply through concrete acts of appropriation and artistic selection.

—Colin Gardner