

# Heaven's



*Ask the Dust: Easy Rider (1969-89), 1989, colour photograph, 12 1/2 x 23".*

## The Filmic Geographies of

# Gaze



If the pictures look familiar, they are meant to, at least to a certain generation of movie-goers and late-night television watchers. Cindy Bernard's *Ask the Dust* (1989-1992) draws from a repertoire of cinematic images conceived and fixed in the collective memory between 1954 and 1974. Bernard chose one movie from each one of those years, and found and then photographed its abandoned location. On the basis of a few reproductions, I had become very interested in this series. By the time I got to see it in Los Angeles this spring, I felt Bernard had been photographing my life from birth to the age of majority.

This personal *Bildungsroman* also belongs to a nation. Life begins in innocence on May 17, 1954, with the American Supreme Court decision, *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas*, that disallowed state segregation of schools. It ends in corruption on August 9, 1974, the day that Richard Milhous Nixon waved goodbye to the presidency of the United States. Twenty-one views of a make-believe American landscape are pegged to that line, not a flat and wide open road, like the featureless meeting place in *North by Northwest* (Hitchcock, 1959), but rather what that road becomes when a plane begins to dust "where there ain't no crops," and our reluctant hero, Roger Thornhill, soiled from the earth and poisoned from the sky, runs for his life from enemy agents. This is no Yellow Brick Road, though the dust storm whips up in Kansas and ends in an Emerald City. Bernard's atlas is a mess of tire tracks on the virgin plain. Her coordinates are Dirty Harry's shooter's—cross hairs on a desolate rooftop pool. **by Martha Langford**

# Cindy Bernard



**Critical Reading, Take 1:** "I see this work as autobiographical." Bernard hastens to correct me, "I wasn't born in 1954." Ah yes, I thought, but I was and I have a sister who would have been the age of that little girl. Did she also have braids? Was she wandering alone in the desert after the giant mutant ants have eaten her family, the little girl who breaks her terrified silence with a single word, "Them." In *Them!* (Gordon Douglas, 1954) the ants leave their native mound near the atomic test sites of the New Mexico desert and fly to Los Angeles where they hole up in cavernous storm drains. The first photograph in Bernard's *Ask the Dust* is the mouth of the Los Angeles sewer system, a study in concrete whose anachronistic graffiti lies quiet, bled of its colours. *Ask the Dust: Them!* (1954 to 1991) returns to us in her photograph as it was filmed, in glorious black and white.

Over the rainbow, at the end of the cycle, is another artificial river, once flowing, now turned to dust by the diversionary schemes of Southern California land developers. In *Chinatown* (Polanski, 1974), a private detective, J.J. Gittes, traces graft and incest to a single source. Water is the key to this mystery. Against the desert, toward progress, prosperity and civilization, water is the single most important thing. Water—the \$200.00 worth he needs for his cattle—also drives a quiet farmer to risk his life in *3:10 to Yuma* (Daves, 1957). The stolid farmer and the charismatic stagecoach robber spend the day together waiting for the train, a day of torment for the farmer who is offered more and more to let the robber go, and whose life under another man's gaze dries down to failure. Honour prevails. It is, after all, 1957; the education of America has barely begun.

This spring, I am watching all the films quoted in *Ask the Dust*. Most are available from my local video store, with the exception of Russ Meyer's *Faster Pussycat! Kill! Kill!* (1965) a sex and hot-rodding cult classic from the California desert. I'll find it eventually. I have seen *The Wild Angels* (Corman, 1966) from which Bernard extracted her long flat piece of celestial highway. Bernard's *Ask the Dust: Easy Rider* (1969 to 1989) rolls out another two-lane road where the rider's fate will be the same, but whose killing field sprouts boulders and natural stones.

Finding the shot and making the connections—within the films, between the films, and between the films and their historical context—is one way to consider *Ask the Dust*. Television makes it a bit difficult since Bernard's scrupulous adherence to the cinematographer's aspect ratio is not duplicated for home viewing. Most troubling is the affect on the dusters. When a Western hero, anxious and armed to the teeth, scans the CinemaScope horizon, his video audience sees only a portion of the wide screen. Here, as in the desert, markers are of practical value. The giant rock formations of Monument Valley can be read as signposts as well as American symbols. Following Bernard, we marvel at John Ford's promiscuous use of this landscape: in *The Searchers* (1956) as a natural fortress around a vengeful Comanche's last stand; in *Cheyenne Autumn* (1964) as the site of a sacred native ritual on barren land destined to become the Oklahoma Territory. The Cheyennes, of course, are not marvelling. They are appealing to the spirits to be allowed to leave.

Bernard's refilmography jumps back and forth between acclaimed films and more idiosyncratic choices. The artist who studied and lives in Los Angeles is close to her material, but *Ask the*



*Ask the Dust: The Searchers* (1956-89), 1989, colour photograph, 12 1/2 x 23".

*Dust* is no homage to Hollywood. While Bernard's choice of films draws from the mainstream, her picture of the year matches the Academy's only once: Francis Ford Coppola's abject family saga, *The Godfather* (1972). Bernard eschews the period's most flagrant escapism: no *Around the World in 80 Days* or *Ben Hur* for her. The finish line, the pot of gold, that she depicts is what remains of the dream in *It's a Mad, Mad, Mad, Mad World* (Kramer, 1963). Remember how the character played by Jimmy Durante sews the seed, tells the witnesses to his highway death of the buried treasure under the "W." What can it mean? The race is on, ruthless and frenetic, until the comedians converge under the W-shaped planting of palm trees, the beginning of the end of all that money which will be scattered to the wind. In 1991, Bernard photographed what was left of Camelot's mad, mad World: one palm tree, one upward stroke of the pen.

Bernard's choices are illuminated by her exclusions. Hitchcock, for example, is quoted twice, starting with *Vertigo* (1958), the much revisited shot of the Golden Gate Bridge, and *North by Northwest*. The Hitchcock film that is not cited, not literally anyway, would



seem an obvious choice. *Rear Window* (1954), as every media child knows, is about looking and specifically about a filmic device that Bernard has assimilated in her work: the point-of-view shot, the director's window into the character's visual experience and state of mind. Unreconstructable, that steamy Manhattan cloister, but the basic premise of Hitchcock's film holds in *Ask the Dust*. Bernard transfers it from the urban hive to an unpeopled, open field. She herself takes the part of the scopic hero, substituting the symbolic for titillation and suspense. My vantage point is hers.

And who is she? A traveller, first of all: *Ask the Dust* sets restlessness as a basic condition. To Kansas for the quarry (the make-out spot where the character played by Natalie Wood eventually attempts to drown herself) in *Splendor in the Grass* (Kazan, 1961). Actually, the audience will go to Kansas and Bernard will go to upstate New York where the shot was actually made. There are many more fictional geographies on the programme, often confessed somewhere in the film's credits. In addition to painted backdrops, Anthony Mann used Jasper National Park for his Yukon mountain passes in *The Far Country* (1955). Such liberties are

expected in films, though impermissible to Bernard whose selection of fictional locations ironically was limited by their existence in fact and on the record. Thus described, *Ask the Dust* may come across as programmatic. Cinema to photography is a smooth, mechanical transition, or Bernard has worked hard to make it appear so. Her photographic views are accurate, declarative and transparent. Indeed, they are doubly transparent as references to both real and imagined sites. As documents, they tell us that these filmed locations actually exist. They promote comparison with what can be remembered. In this, they are similar to other American rephotographic projects that have revisited the sites of 19th-century topographical surveys or updated the reports of the Farm Security Administration—projects that have cultivated their own photographic legends. But for all the mythologizing of her precursors, Bernard's *Ask the Dust* appeals more powerfully and directly to the poetic soul. In spirit and content, it is a direct descendant of 19th-century Romanticism.

By this I mean more than the tarnished romantic image of the American West. Bernard's treatment of the genre is both ambiguous





*Ask the Dust: Bonnie and Clyde (1967-91), 1991, colour photograph, 12 1/2 x 23".*

and incisive. Even at the Alamo, she borrows carefully, honouring dead heroes with all due respect and bitterness. The settlement of the West is the American Exodus. Corruption of the dream through greed and violence has been portrayed in many Westerns. If Bernard quotes John Ford, she also takes a page from Sergio Leone whose *Once Upon a Time in the West* (1968) begins with the slaughter of a family homesteading in the path of the railway. In Bernard's second view, the beauty of Monument Valley is blotted out in shadow.

**The History of America, 1954 to 1974:** The overarching structure of Bernard's project is a real-time chronicle of false hope and disillusion. Each metonymic landscape represents a year and a tear in the fabric of the American Dream. The natural elements of her views are richly symbolic—deserts, mountain passes, shallows, intersections, bridges, rivers and roads—emblems of trial, crossing and transformation. These messages accrue even before the site is identified with the film.

Haunting these landscapes are its absentee heroes: lonesome cowboys, biker outlaws, little girls lost, teenagers kidnapped, programmed women drowning in a societal pool. I know these people, of course, as I know myself. I've lived the on-screen moments of their lives. Things that happened to them happened to me—not like things, but the actual things. Abandonment, and fear of abandonment; restlessness turned rebellious that brought pain; deaths, of certain kinds—things given to Bonnie Parker only by proxy. Archetypal and psychoanalytical readings have

expanded the terminology for the basic attraction of cinema—spectatorial surrender and absorption into the fictional other. Watching a film intertwines with the so-called realities of life, inseparably as a form of temporary madness. Film and life are mutually inflected, pathetically so. Jack Kerouac, for one, was keenly aware of this phenomenon. His novels are strewn with references to places and situations that remind him of a scene from a popular film.

Collective memory is the conceptual framework for *Ask the Dust* and a fruitful line of investigation, but for now, I want to return to the essence and singularity of Bernard's work, to the Romanticism at its roots. Loss and yearning, passion, historicism and exoticism are Romantic themes, but there is no Romanticism without the palpable presence of the creator—the corporeal threshold between sublime chaos and Me. Bernard's is that body and it becomes mine through the convergence of pictorial convention and cinematic device.

The main protagonist of Romantic landscape painting is the emblem of contemplation, Friedrich's *Rückenfigur*, the figure who turns his back to the viewer, the possessor and director of the original gaze. The direct cinematic equivalent of this convention is the point-of-view shot in which the spectator passes through the dissolving body of the character, absorbing her visual and psychological perspective on the scene. The entire architecture of *The Searchers* hangs on this device. From the black field of the opening vignette, "Texas 1868," the film opens on a *Rückenfigur* (Martha,

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the mother) who is filmed from behind as she opens the door of the cabin and the bright "Texas" sunshine spills across the screen. The cabin functions like a *camera obscura*, imprinting the wilderness on our minds. Following the mother's gaze, we see the lone figure of a soldier riding across the plain. It is her brother-in-law, Ethan. Later, in the advent of the Indian attack, Martha's look turns inward, at her home, her children and her rising fear. She chastises her eldest daughter for lighting the lamps: "Let's just enjoy the dusk." We are drawn into the helplessness of her husband as we look through his eyes at the sun setting behind the formations. It is Martha's last sunset; we know it because she knows it and has spoken her fate through her stiffened back and steadfast gaze.

The younger daughter is spared. Her kidnapping by an Indian warrior sets off the five-year search that will end at another cabin door as the girl, now a teenager, is recognized and rehabilitated by her people. Who is watching her homecoming from the shadows of the interior? We are, through the haunting presence of the mother. In the last shot, the cabin door swings shut on the framed figure of the misfit saviour. Perfect symmetry. In *The Searchers*, as in *Rear Window*, the gaze of a key character is an overt and determining device. But the fusion of narrator and spectator is operant in any cinematic frame, whether focussed through the vision of a single character or abstracted in omniscience. Bernard captures *The Searchers* with another liminal view. She pictures the staging point of the cavalry patrol's last raid on the Indian campsite. What a morning lies before them! Trial by sword and gun, and resolution of Ethan's dilemma—whether to kill his niece, the defiled captive, the object of his long search. The *Rückenfigur* watches from heaven as a latent image. She is Martha, the emblem, the spirit of the house. She is me.

In *Ask the Dust*, Bernard is the surrogate and the solitary traveller. Her images of the fictional are not appropriations; they are real. It is essential to the meaning of this work that Bernard has visited these sites in the flesh. Like Cindy Sherman, in her early and best work, the *Untitled Film Stills*, Bernard's production is performative. As spectators to her recreations, we absorb and are absorbed instrumentally through her eyes and body. Screen memories, flashbulb memories and the experience in the moment are totally confounded. We stand with Bernard at the edge of the scene, the screen, the frame. Our minds click on the icon. We enter. No, that's wrong. We tumble in, one by one.

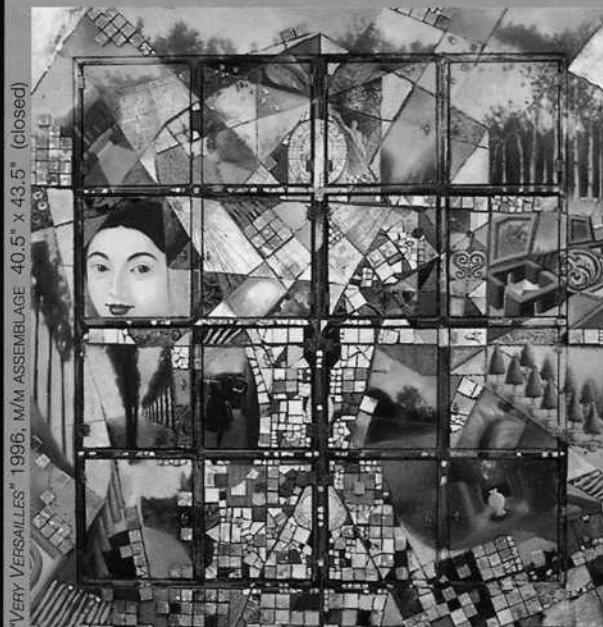
Collective memory, yes, but the power of "Ask the Dust" is its tentacled grip on the personal. Bernard's pretext is conceptual and her methods are cool, but the spectatorial experience is a sweaty, vertiginous climb. The Romantic landscape, by design, sets the soul apart on the sill of seductive illusion. Desire flows past and present.

Image after image, "Ask the Dust" recasts spectatorial experience: others are in this American theatre, but as Bernard reminds us so forcefully, we watch our movies alone in the dark. ♦

Cindy Bernard's "Ask the Dust" will be presented as part of a thematic exhibition on space, metaphor and memory, being organized by Martha Langford for the 1997 Mois de la photo à Montreal.

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