

Gregory Conniff

Twenty Years in the Field



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Exhibition Curated by Stanley I Grand

Essays by Tom Bamberger and Stanley I Grand

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GREGORY CONNIFF

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Gregory Conniff is difficult to put on the art-map. As a matter of course and principle, he has ignored the ongoing 20th-century debate about art's grammar. He is not working out the loose ends of a lineage or crawling to the top of the conceptual art heap. Conniff is a documentary photographer who tries to make sense of our attachment to the world.

I would rather locate Gregory Conniff on a detailed topographical map. "Where am I?" How does one locate oneself physically, intellectually, and emotionally? The answer is really simple – Conniff is trying to be just where he is, on a spot of land. His pictures are about standing somewhere and looking, in an existential moment between destinations, when the beauty of the world is enough.

The afternoon light is usually at Conniff's back, gently layered across the landscape. His photographs are warm, fluid, and modest. The pictures feel round even when the subject is stretched linearly across the frame. The wind flows through. And the earth absorbs all the light, yearning, and romance. His photographs are knowing and serene without suggesting anything larger than the accumulation of details, the harmony of facts, and weathering of the senses.

There are no voices from outside of the frame insisting that the photograph is important. No pressure. The pictures are too gracious for that. And no conceit. Conniff doesn't know any more than we do. But his pictures are not found, nor merely poetic – they order experience. Being somebody somewhere is an intelligent act that requires something of all of us, perhaps more than we know.

It is a relief, the world. Paused for our attention, its creases and contradictions are harmonized by our affections. Conniff's images exist, as we do, when we let go of all those things that are rattling around in our brains and realize our experience.

Finding one's place is not just a matter of stopping long enough for the present to reach the moment. Conniff's photographs are soaked with fondness for the way one instant bleeds into another, the way experience congeals time. And then the pictures seem like dreams – fanciful and delirious drawings of a world poised for sensation. They are the "indecisive moments" that clarify without specifying.

The expanse of Conniff's work is remarkably consistent. Conniff has had only one self-ascribed project that has deepened and ripened over time. His values, his grip on his subject have been unyielding. I can't think of many photographers who have changed less to greater effect.

What has evolved, however, is how Conniff expresses himself. The younger Conniff was more worried about the edges of the frame, the constructive aspects of picture making. The later pictures are more relaxed and euphoric, and unabashedly romantic. Conniff's photographs begin flirting with the forbidden zone of modernist landscape photography – the idea that our delight and emotions make sense of our experience of the world.

This awareness, of course, is the flip side of "knowing where you are." Being some place in particular is impossible without being something in particular. Conniff's journey to the moment is not about losing one's

Self, but rather reclaiming it. He is not afraid of who he is. Delight is not only intrinsic to what he sees, it's intrinsic to the seer. It is just such an admission that makes the world possible.

Human beings make the world they live in with their hands, minds, and their hearts. No sustaining truths come to us passively from art or nature. Making is finally an act of will. There has to be an exchange of energy. The heart of the seer has to reach out and touch the subject.

In the art world, this kind of picture making has produced an intellectual framework that asks more questions than it answers. The idea that a photographer can faithfully describe the world, make a photograph that gains its force by representing something "real" from an artistic personal point of view, has been debunked and then debunked again. Postmodernists, who have problems with any claims of "reality," would point out how laden images are with political and personal ideology. Modernists might be troubled by Conniff's affections, and want something more schematic and reductive. And since there has been so much mushy musing about nature and beauty, who can blame them?

But there is no satisfying and consistent intellectual justification for acting like Gregory Conniff, or anyone else for that matter. When we inhabit our bodies and the world, questions go unanswered, we feel the slippage between ideas and experience, and accept that knowledge will never explain who we are. Apart from the experience of a Self in the world, there are no good arguments for a photographer who believes in art and that beauty and truth share a deep and abiding relationship with each other.

This is not to say that Conniff is an anti-intellectual. He is as full of ideas as any thinking person. His photographs suggest a way of thinking and living that appreciates over time into values, and finally into a world view. What becomes apparent is known in the way we know the sea-

sons – in the present and retrospect. And after an accumulation of seasons, we become where and who we are.

Conniff's subjects, relatively old and used, have lived along with us. Everything is old enough to know something. Character is arresting – the way a building changes winter after winter, a backyard grows like a garden, a field combines work and nature into a future. Conniff's pictures are not childlike, enchanted. They have the grace of an adult. His subjects have matured, been scarred and healed, and survived. Having survived brings clarity to the cycles of decay and renewal. Survival makes this moment possible.

Beauty is earned and slips away. We never resolve the questions that haunt us, the affections that bind, the overwhelming sense of belonging to the nothingness of space. Beauty is about loss, a mournful reminder of our finiteness. And then we die, maybe even a little in each moment of seeing.

This all sounds very experiential, even solipsistic, but there is an implicit socio-political position that comes with the accumulation of Conniff's photographs. We choose to "be," and where to "be." There is work to do. Conniff's pictures are not a passive appreciation of the seen world. We are responsible for where we are. Conniff's cultured subjects are folded into the fabric of nature, invested in the world, and then these attachments are passed from generation to generation. It ends up being a place we can call and know to be home.

There is a difference between somewhere and nowhere. We are that difference. For Conniff, somewhere is where our intelligence, passions, values, and even fallibilities collect over time. The places we love, will be flawed, but not for lack of affection and wisdom. The places we love are like the people we love. To understand that people and places are related is, well, the moral of the story.

ORDINARY BEAUTY: THE PHOTOGRAPHS OF GREGORY CONNIFF

Stanley I Grand
Wilkes University

For twenty years Gregory Conniff, a lawyer turned photographer, has traveled the country making straightforward black-and-white photographs of the landscape. Typically, his destinations are those shunned by the tourist, the seeker of the unusual, the noteworthy and sublime. Conniff is the consummate antitourist who avoids the mainstream in favor of the edges: the backyards of his home town, quiet southern sloughs, rust-belt industrial sites, the Upper Midwest, the arid northern plains. As he has observed: "I am drawn to places that have no one overwhelming point of interest, but which seem to glow from generations of human presence."

Although subtitled *Twenty Years in the Field*, this exhibition is actually more preview than retrospective; it is a progress report on an ongoing project Conniff initiated in his 1985 book *Common Ground: An American Field Guide*. In that book, Conniff sketched his vision and rationale for a projected four-volume series. After noting that "the subject of *An American Field Guide* is physical America, the places of daily life [he continued] The finished project will reveal an America that I see, framed by the interconnection of people, things, and landscape, the knowledge of specific objects, and the community of being that comes from sharing a particular place. This series of books has at its heart the desire to make this invisible place visible and valuable once again."

Unlike conventional guidebooks, which "choose to avoid most of what is out there [in preference for] the easy task of drawing attention to distinguishable phenomena," Conniff has designed the *Field Guides* to disclose subjective interconnections among people, places, and things. He

thinks of the Guides as "tools" for revealing and understanding "the mysteries that lurk in the most familiar places." These most familiar places were to include yards and gardens (*Common Ground*), "American workplaces and water in America" (Volumes 2 & 5), and finally *Figures in the Landscape* (working title). The last will complete and recommence the cycle.

Linking the *Field Guides* together is a commitment to what Conniff calls "ordinary beauty," an expression that captures well the contradictory essence of his photographs. "Beauty" evokes the exceptional. Either in itself or in its ability to inspire a receptive viewer, beauty is transcendent. "Ordinary," on the other hand, implies the usual, the commonplace, the quotidian – something that lacks exceptional or outstanding qualities. Thus the words seem ill joined and mismatched. Yet "ordinary" is inextricably linked to the concept of order; both "order" and "ordinary" are born of a common Latin root that once described the warp in weaving. Conniff's photographs employ the laws of order – structure, clarity, harmony, and balance – to articulate the beauty of the ordinary. What transforms the everyday into art, however, is his empathy for the places themselves, which strictly speaking, he does not find to be ordinary.

Taken together, the *Field Guides* aspire to provide a methodology for ordering information, for transforming facts into ideas, and ideas into arguments. Building his case, as it were, one step at a time, Conniff employs a linear approach that tends to avoid extremes while paying careful attention to the details. Despite the fact that he ceased practicing

law in the late 1970s, his legal training is apparent: “Both photography and law have at their center an understanding that the ‘truth’ of any fact or situation lies amid a potentially infinite number of points of view, all of which exist simultaneously and independently of one another. [In his view] photography and the law are machines for examining facts. They are not witnesses to truth: they make truth *possible*.”

The earliest photographs in the exhibition date to 1977. Conniff had enjoyed some earlier success as a photographer – his portraits were included in a number of regional shows – but he felt that he had reached an impasse. A self-imposed proscription against photographing people led to a period of uncertainty and discovery in which he adopted the medium-format camera (previously he had used 35mm film) and searched for a new subject. Working intuitively, he began to photograph the landscape of a local gravel quarry. In *Madison, Wisconsin* (1977), a large, centralized mass is silhouetted against the sky (Figure 1). Form and subject are hard, blunt, stripped down. With narrative eliminated, purely formal issues of texture, line, and light predominate. One notes how light defines sloping gravel edges or the sinuous line, reminiscent of a sine curve, that undulates across the surface. The flow of the curve is analytical and mathematical; it shuns the sensuous, poetic, and lyrical qualities found in Edward Weston’s dune photographs.

The following year, Conniff began an increasingly complex series of photographs that moved from a reductive to an additive aesthetic. These works, which culminated in the publication of *Common Ground*, focused on the most obvious – and therefore unseen and mysterious – landscape: “the space around American homes...the yards we knew intimately as children, and the yards from which we leave and to which we return in the dailiness of our adult lives.” Carefully composed and framed, his images of this landscape are mobile, not stationary; they are part of a visual continuum, not an ideal “picturesque” view.

Wandering through familiar neighborhoods, looking over fences that both enclose and define (as well as exclude), Conniff recorded singular, abstract patterns of great beauty. Especially important were those in which private spaces opened up to public gazes. His pace and viewpoint are those of the pedestrian, that is of one who comes to know a place over time from eye level. Although the earliest recall Paul Strand in their clarity and design, in time they became increasingly complex. Conceived as an abstract surface pattern, *Wildwood, New Jersey* (1979), represents the antipode of this early phase (Figure 6). Here the shallow space contains a host of diagonals controlled by rhythmically deployed vertical members. Within the rectangles created by these uprights, interlocking triangles – some formed by the stairs, others by cast shadows – fit together like jigsaw puzzle pieces. Similarly, he has taken care to maintain the separate identities of the center vertical and right staircase banister or the manner in which the shadow falls on the stairs. The searing light of the full sun emphasizes the lucid, architectonic order and highlights the ordinary beauty of what is basically an insignificant back entryway.

Whereas *Wildwood* exalts the rational, *Madison, Wisconsin* (1979) introduces a note of inchoate chaos (Figure 7). Although geometric, linear patterns tightly control the surface design – the horizontal siding of a low-roofed, single-windowed garage; the top rail of a pipe clothesline support, a rhythmic-edged picket fence and gate, a cylindrical wire basket and trash burner – the lively calligraphic branches add a disturbing element of the irrational and the unpredictable. The light is softer than in *Wildwood*, the shadows less distinct and more generalized. Like the modulation of values, time and season have become ambivalent.

The shift from clarity to ambivalence represented by the juxtaposition of *Wildwood* and *Madison, Wisconsin* is typical of *Common Ground*, a visual tool with a musical rhythm. Indeed the book can well be compared to a five-part musical composition that alternates between lively allegro steps and pensive andante footfalls, punctuated by sudden

reverses and discordant notes. But the Concertmaster is always firmly in control and prefers the clarity of Bach to the passion of Chopin. We hear the harpsichord not the piano; the notes are plucked not pounded.

Two other photographs from *Common Ground* further illustrate the poles in Conniff's emotional-logical landscape. In the immediate foreground of *Madison, Wisconsin* (1980), a snow fence whose sinuous line and visual penetrability define rather than block, we again see an abundance of simple geometric shapes – the cylinder of the oil drum, the triangles of the roof lines, a swayback barrel roof of the tin Quonset hut – and a wealth of repeating patterns (Figure 9). The scattered leaves, bare branches, and cold light suggest late fall or early spring. The yard itself appears uncared-for, disordered, melancholic, and desolate. Once loved, the abandoned car waits and rusts; it will never know the road again. Nor will the foreground tree know another summer: someone has deliberately girdled its trunk with an ax. In the far distance, a hint of the industrial provides a contextual setting and serves as a class identifier.

In *Oneonta, New York* (1982), we also look over a fence, but the view is of a small-scale bucolic environment where civilizing and natural forces exist harmoniously (Figure 11). The carefully mortised joints of the gate, the precisely placed shovel handle, the balanced sunflowers – one in bloom, one not – the delicate pattern formed by chicken wire, and the overall silvery glow unifying the image all contribute to an aura of quietude that is somehow contradicted by the rambunctious plum branches that break free from the ordering impulse of the arbor and reach irrepressibly for the sun. The concluding photograph of *Common Ground, Oneonta* bursts off the page, wildly subverting the book's carefully constructed logic. The story had already ended, satisfactorily, in the penultimate image of dark shadows falling on an indifferent, impenetrable barrier. We pause and then turn the page to an apotheosis of energy, of life, of faith. A special place for Conniff, this garden of endings will conclude the second *Field Guide* as well (Figure 12).

The second *Field Guide* was originally conceived as an exploration of the American workplace, which Conniff calls the “landscape of adulthood.” He nevertheless found that “the honorable landscapes of work eluded me [partly] because in my photographic travels I did not stay in one place long enough to allow local patterns of life to overcome whatever preconceptions I carried with me.” The photographs from the Brier Hill Steelworks in Youngstown, Ohio, remain as a visual record of Conniff's decade-long effort to record one such landscape of work. *Youngstown* (1989), the culminating image from this series, is an elegy to a superannuated industry (chronicled so ably by Charles Sheeler) and the generations of workers who daily passed through its gates (Figure 5). Photographed from below, the basilica-like structure with clerestory windows is dwarfed by smokestacks that once belched plumes of steam or smoke. Nighttime has set in; the last remaining Youngstown mill is now gone; a new mirror of reality is reflected in the stagnant, contaminated pool; we recall Ozymandias's vain boast.

Field Work, as the second *Field Guide* will now be titled, continues Conniff's movement from private to public spaces, from domestic settings to landscape proper, from particular details to large views. Moreover, it marks the actualization of a concept, dealing with visual thinking that he had argued in *Common Ground*. In “The Pursuit of Beauty,” one of his essays for *Field Work*, he confesses that “What I failed to notice while it was happening was how the act of looking, the work of seeing, had changed me.” Responding to the power of the landscapes where he was working – the rural Deep South, the Great Plains, and the Upper Midwest – Conniff altered his preconceived plan for the second *Guide* and began to listen to what he was feeling.

The South has long held a fascination for Conniff. In the 1960s, he studied law at the University of Virginia and subsequently worked as a VISTA volunteer in Atlanta. Not only did the University of Virginia train his mind legally, it also reinforced physically his belief in the significance of the places in which we live: Thomas Jefferson laid out the grounds of the

University, after all, as a didactic model of ordered beauty. Jefferson's Palladian architecture, wherein the components are clearly ordered and logically articulated yet subsumed to the whole, reflects the Enlightenment ideal of rationality.

Yazoo County, Mississippi (1993), has the stark beauty and elegance of a Brunelleschian sketch demonstrating orthogonal convergence at the horizon (Figure 16). Unlike the Renaissance masters who employed single-point perspective to establish relative scale and situate figures and horses, dwellings and triumphal arches convincingly within the composition, Conniff is interested in the structural beauty of a ubiquitous occurrence in the Mississippi Delta. Nonetheless, the mounds of soil rising up from the spring deluges recall a Biblical parable. Although the waters still lie (and lie still) upon the land, they are now tamed and ordered. In the emergence of structure from chaos is the promise of a covenant renewed, evoking Alexander Pope's observation: "Order is Heaven's first law."

The unrestrained growth suggested in *Madison, Wisconsin* (Figure 7), comes to full maturity in *Lafayette County, Mississippi* (1992, Figure 18). This image of kudzu in the early spring before the leaves bud out resembles scribbling, blurring the contours of the trees and sitting on the ground like a dense primordial nest. Indigenous to the Orient, kudzu, along with other natural and technological marvels so adored by the era's positivists, made its popular debut at the Philadelphia Centennial Exposition. For the next half-century or so, it was a benign shade vine on porches, pergolas, trellises. In the Dust Bowl years of the 1930s, when soil erosion and conservation became serious public concerns, the federal government encouraged farmers to plant kudzu as a ground cover. Freed of the gardener's discipline, kudzu bolted; today its ever-expanding network of tendrils covers millions of acres. A stark reminder of the folly inherent in attempts to control nature, kudzu is a monument to the unpredictable. Yet even in anarchy, Conniff finds

structure: like the slanted lines in Jackson Pollock's *Blue Poles* (1953), the verticals of the trees control the allover pattern.

Whereas linear pattern seems to overrun the fecund South, like the complex plot of a Faulkner novel, the Great Plains are arid and spare, exhibiting many of the qualities found in a gravel quarry. We move from Pollock to Mark Rothko when large tonal fields replace insistent arabesques. In *Merrill County, Nebraska* (1990), Conniff has placed his camera among the windblown grass overlooking a desolate landscape (Figure 22). A notch in the hills and a sliver of water are the only landmarks. Bands, large forms, and a silver streak of reflected light give the composition a simplicity and elegance appropriate to the understated beauty of the Plains.

In contrast to the South and Great Plains, the landscape of the Upper Midwest is gentle. Cultivated and bountiful, it exists like a garden wrought large. It is a landscape of rolling hills, where sensible farmers practice contour farming, while in the distance, the hills of *Sauk County, Wisconsin* (1995), rise up (Figure 21). Not much appears to have changed in the intervening years since John Steuart Curry completed his famous painting, now in New York's Metropolitan Museum, of this same geographic area. Today, however, places like these hills are where the battle between the forces of preservation and those of development are joined. The outcomes remain uncertain.

The third *Field Guide* will engage in a sustained meditation on water. Both as a photographer and as a writer, Conniff's interest in this subject is longstanding and profound. The subject is timely: we can already see that the allocation of this resource will be one of the most significant issues of the next millennium. Ironically, although the earth's surface is mostly covered by water, only a small percentage of the total is potable. In the Western states, where water is scarce, disputes have defined the region's landscape, character, politics, economics, and density. Water

management and control dictate which desert valleys will bloom, which cities will dominate their regions, which economic models (ranching and tourism or development and urbanization) will prevail.

In Conniff's aerial photograph of a tiny artificial oasis – a stock tank actually – in the vast Sand Hills of Nebraska, the fragility, vulnerability, and preciousness of water seem to be the underlying subject (Figure 14). Few of his photographs are of turbulent water, swirling eddies, torrents, or deluges (perhaps such images will appear in the third *Field Guide*): we are more likely to see a meandering meadow stream whose measured pace is echoed by the sinuous curve of a farm road that leads our eye to a placid cow (Figure 25).

Clearly, Conniff loves still water, the water that reflects the sky and the drift of clouds. In *Bayou Pierre Port, Louisiana* (1989), the reflective qualities of water integrate the earth, flora, and atmosphere into a consummate example of linear surface design (Figure 25). Yet a disturbing element has crept in, the mirror is not quite true: the trees and rushes are present but the white trailer has become a boat. We have reached an interlude of unfinished business when all the players – except for an indistinct actor, concealed behind a screen door – have momentarily walked offstage.

Figures become explicit in the final *Field Guide*. In *Mt. Horeb, Wisconsin* (1980), Conniff has returned to our common ground, the world of yards and gardens, the places where we live and work (Figure 27). The tableau is quiet, dignified, and revelatory: a modern *Et in Arcadia ego*, the moment when Death makes his still appearance. Done is the work (kill the pig, spill the guts, boil the water, scrape the skin). The scene now moves from process to comprehension. To the left, the body of a gleaming sacrificial pig, glowing with a preternatural light, sprawls on a carefully spread sheet. Not a trace of blood appears along the slit-belly ragged edges of flesh. The actors, especially the seated women, recall

Georges Seurat's *The Bathers* (1883-84). In the foreground right, a man with knife in one hand, beer bottle in the other, is forever frozen in mid-quaff. He might be a figure by the elder Bruegel, except that there is nothing of the buffoon about him. This is not a genre picture.

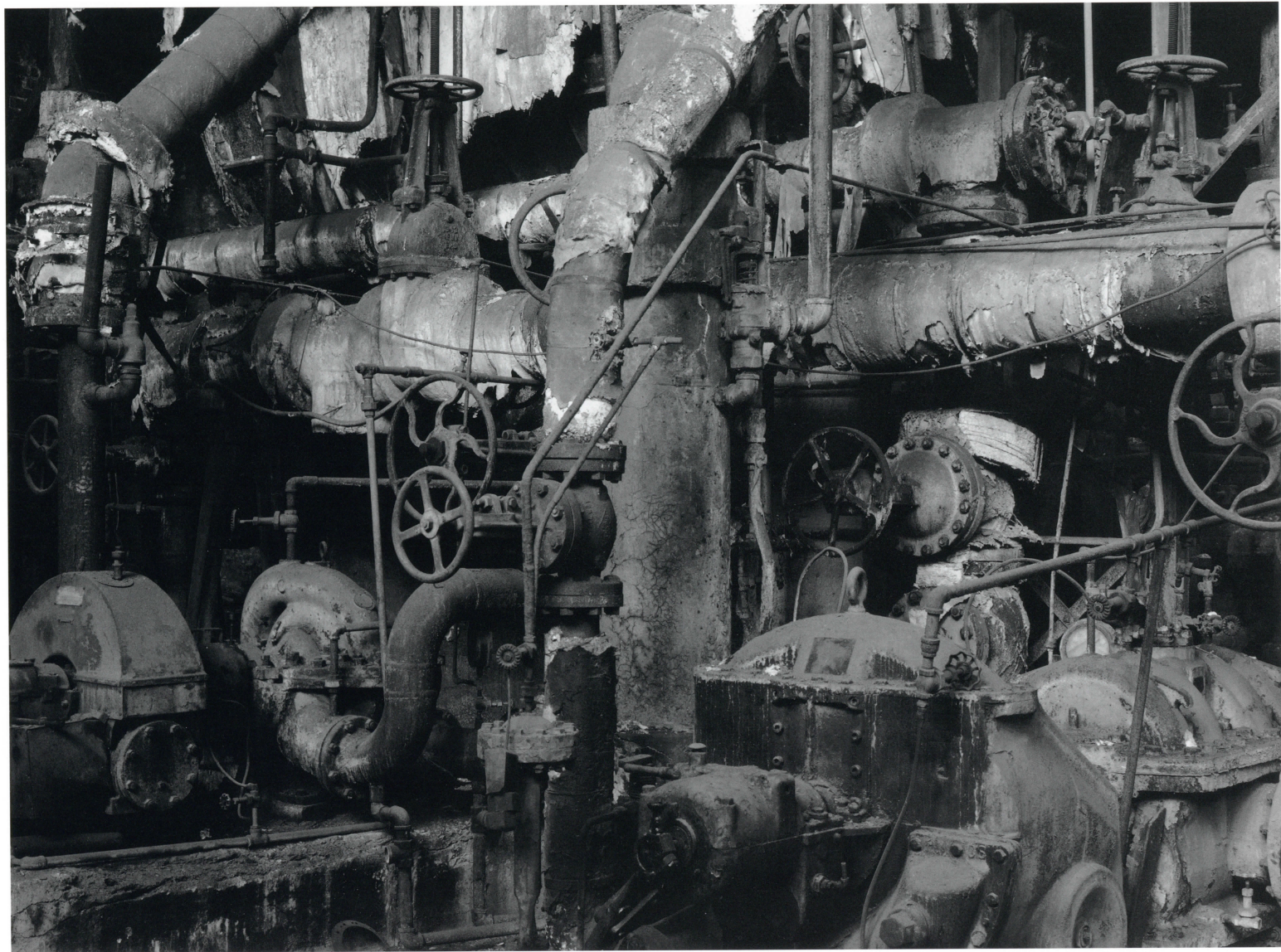
The polarities of cerebral art and poetic vision have alternated throughout Conniff's work. Conniff's desire to actualize objects and places that have become "invisible" is part of a long chain reaching back to fifteenth-century Netherlandish painters and draughtsmen, a debt which he readily acknowledges. Like them, he is concerned with depicting a reality that he loves in all its particularity. Eschewing ideal, symbolic, or romantic landscapes in favor of the innate, modest beauty of the world at hand; Conniff has reconciled the mathematical and analytical with a more organic and wilder concept of order. Now the mystery of facts, the realm of ordinary beauty, suffices.



1 *Madison, Wisconsin, 1977*



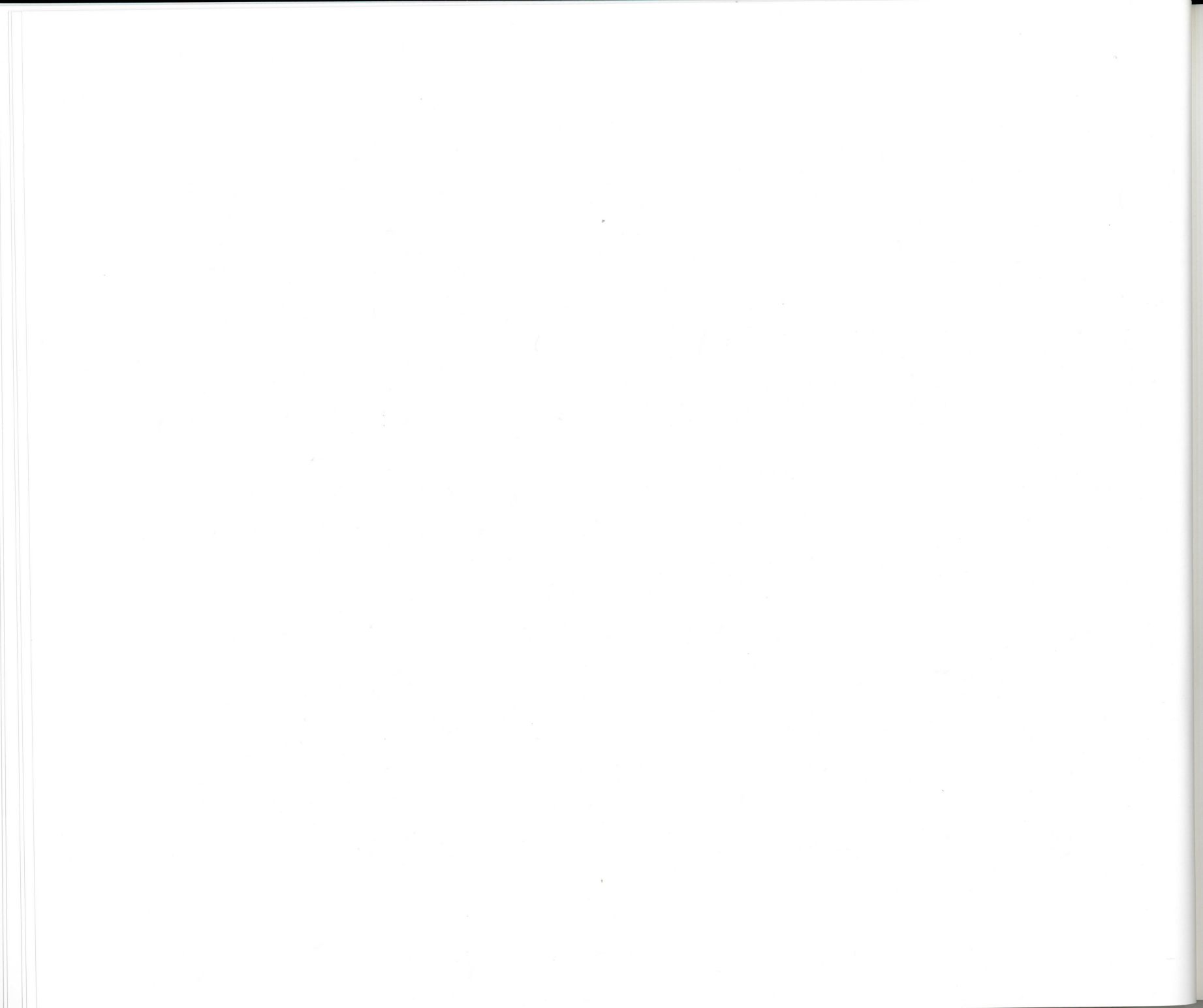
2 *Madison, Wisconsin, 1977*

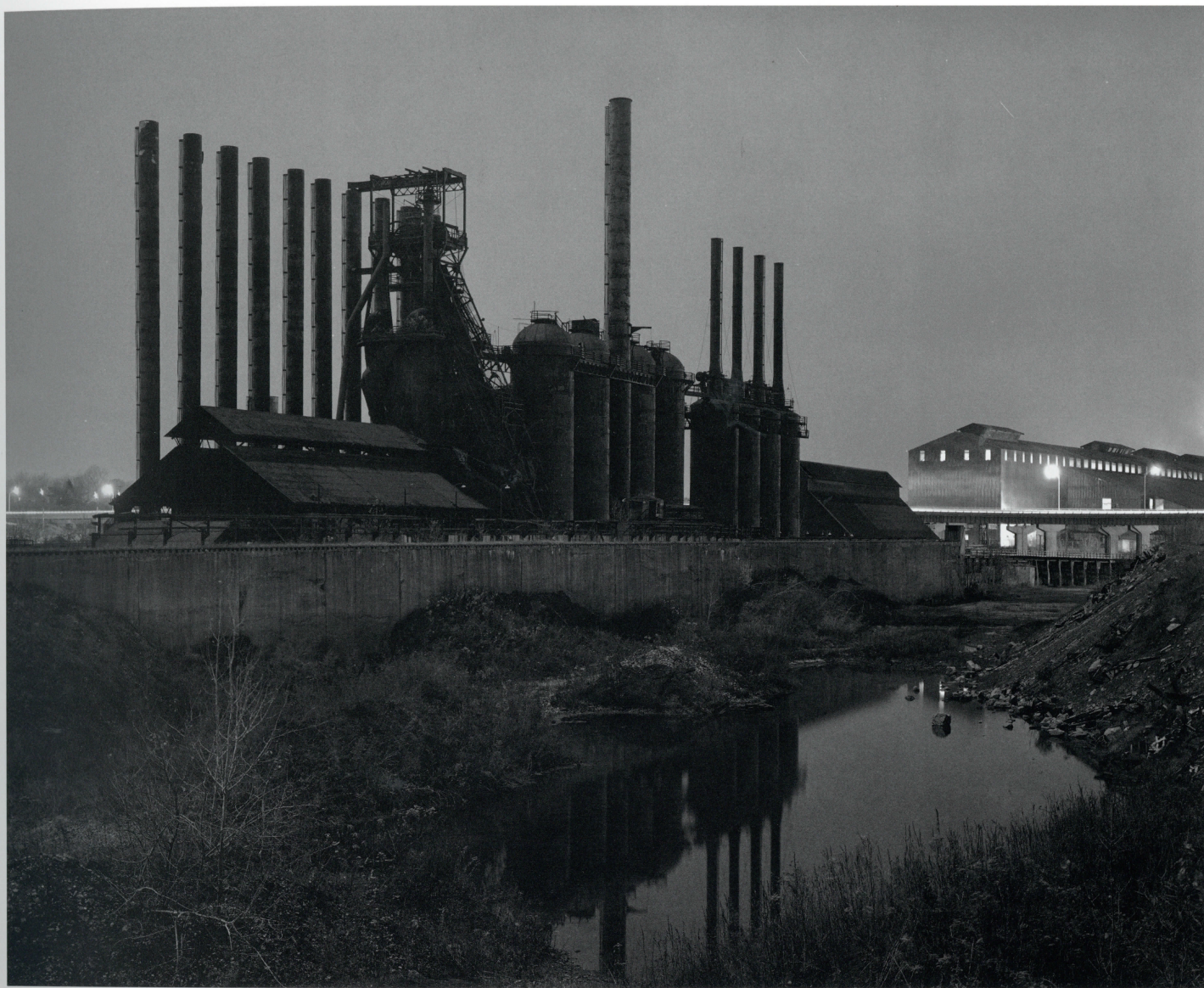


3 *Youngstown, Ohio, 1981*



4 *Youngstown, Ohio, 1985*





5 *Youngstown, Ohio, 1989*



6 *Wildwood, New Jersey, 1979*



7 *Madison, Wisconsin, 1979*