

Photographic technique on both a grand, and personal, scale

The CVA's retrospective of photographer Tomiko Jones is also a master class in show installation



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A scene of the border wall between the U.S. and Mexico, part of the series "These Grand Places, shot in 2021. (Ray Mark Rinaldi, Special to The Denver Post)

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The way an art exhibit is installed — how things are hung on the walls, placed on the floors, lighted, and attached with signage — is an art form all to itself. It is so difficult to get things just right, so that visitors to a show can not only navigate its space with ease, but they can also feel the rhythm of the work on display, moving from one piece of art to the next organically.

A good install helps to explain the work overall, and to uncover what the curator wants to explain about it. Major museums know just how crucial this process is and have entire teams — from painters and electricians to art handlers and conservators — around to make sure things are done right.



Tomiko Jones' "The Intimate Infinite" continues through March 22 at the CVA. (Ray Mark Rinaldi, Special to The Denver Post)

The Center for Visual Art is a relatively modest operation, a one-story, mid-sized former warehouse space on Denver's Santa Fe Drive, and it gets by with a small crew. Still, it knows that putting objects in the right place is key. Exhibits there tend to unravel like chapters of a book, with separate stories that come together into a compelling novel.

That book reference is a good way to talk about the current show, "The Intimate Infinite," a retrospective built around the work of photographer Tomiko Jones, and curated by CVA director Cecily Cullen. The exhibit pulls work from nine separate bodies of work that Jones has produced over 20 years.

The projects have wildly different personalities, and purposes, and they are set in geographic worlds that are way apart. But they come together to show a common interest the artist has pursued, of connecting humans to their histories and to their landscapes.

That said, Jones has a broad definition of landscape, and a wide variety of photographic techniques to create her scenes.

There are, to be sure, photos that capture vast natural vistas, and examine how natural light impacts the ways things look and feel. One of the series on display, "These Grand Places," which Jones worked on from 2008-2013, includes images from a rock quarry in Indiana, national parks in France and the White Sands National Monument in New Mexico.

The works here are linked together via technique. Jones used a large format camera that allows picture precision even when natural light is limited, and the images have sharp contrasts between their monochromatic lights and darks. The branches of trees against a glowing sky, or the shadows that form in the folds of a rock, feel especially stark.

But by exaggerating the contrasts, Jones imbues something that feels like motion into a scene that is largely still. You don't see the rocks or trees moving exactly, but you can feel the Earth turning, the light fading. The photos are not movies, but they resemble movie stills.



Jones photographed every bed she slept in from 2009 to 2020, as she traveled the world. (Ray Mark Rinaldi, Special to The Denver Post)

For Jones, though, landscape can also include interior, and very intimate, spaces. For the series “A Place to Rest,” Jones photographed every bed she slept in from 2009 to 2020. The works document her travels during a period when she did an artist residency in France, a collaborative photo project in Jordan, numerous artist residences across the United States. For each photo, she used the exact same aperture setting (an f-stop of 22) and so the images have a similar crispness of detail to them.

They still feel like landscapes in their way — the emphasis is on physical spaces occupied more than their occupants — but they are intimate. They show how our notion of landscape can be very personal, and mobile, and yet still connect to a very big world. We get up close and personal with the mattresses we sleep on, and this series also has the benefit of reminding us how these places envelop us, and produce memories of place.

There are political landscapes here, too. “These Grand Places,” shot from 2017 through the present, documents protected public lands that have been considered for de-regulation by the federal government. Some of the scenes are set in places like national parks in Utah, others in open spaces in Arizona, and some include scenes of the border wall between the U.S. and Mexico. These are dusty, arid lands, more craggy than lush, and in some ways inhospitable. But Jones finds their value by seeing them on their own majestic and hardened terms.

She also turns her technique over the scene itself, using whatever photo and printing methods best match the job at hand — descriptors in the exhibition catalog range from “photointaglio” to “cyanotype” to “archival print.” Accompanying many of the works are lengthy, handwritten texts within which Jones has described her journey to the remote places where the images were shot. The gallery has framed the pages for viewing and also made transcriptions of them, in both English and Spanish, available for deeper reading online. They are well-edited and compelling.



One of Jones photos hanging in front of the CVA's windows on Santa Fe Drive. (Ray Mark Rinaldi, Special to The Denver Post)

The writings are just one of the tricks Jones uses to personalize images that could easily feel distant and remote. Her other technique is to include herself in many of the photos. That act serves as an interesting opportunity for visitors to get to know her a bit and to feel the human-nature connections she is trying to illustrate. She is a stand-in for anyone who has ever stood in an open field, alone, and contemplated his place in the world.

Jones is the protagonist in this collection of book chapters laid out in distinct, yet linked, spaces within the CVA gallery. Each of the series on display has a quiet separation, in a physical space walled off just enough to allow a deep look at the project at hand, yet still within an open architectural plan that leads from one featured attraction to the next.

"The Intimate Infinite" is a pointed, well-paced retrospective, and the kind of tribute that Jones' works needs and deserves to be experienced just right.

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