

The other Adams who photographed the West

By Claire O'Neill, NPR

I don't know if I can directly answer the latter question. But certain curators like Joshua Chuang at the Yale University Art Gallery are determined to answer the former: Who is Robert Adams?

Chuang, now probably the leading Adams expert, started asking that himself, back when he was a student of photography. He picked up one of Adams' books – with characteristically dense writing and arguably unapproachable photos. “It took me a couple years to really get it,” he says over the phone.

But now, it seems, he gets it. In 2004, Yale inherited a huge trove of Adams' work, and Chuang has been processing it since then. “There was not a single bad image in the group,” Chuang says with a genuine deference. “His standards were so high and his editing of his own work was so rigorous.” The fruits of their joint labor are in a traveling exhibition, *The Place We Live*, now at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA).

The basics: Adams can most succinctly be described as a photographer of the American West. He was born in New Jersey, but his family moved westward to mitigate his issues with asthma, and he has remained there. Only after getting a Ph.D. in English did he really begin photographing, and he has been at it since, but quietly. He doesn't email, he rarely takes interviews, and he lets Chuang come to him.

Maybe it helps to set the stage. When Adams picked up his camera, the most recognizable images from the American West were those sublime landscapes of Ansel Adams. To a large degree, that's still the case.

But where Ansel had a moral mission (to conserve nature by presenting it to the public in its pristine form), Robert's approach has been more clinical: He observes the interaction of man with land as objectively as possible. Where Ansel's photos say, "Look at what we should cherish!" Robert's say: "Here is what we are doing, and make what you will of it."

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