



Perpetual Mirage: Photographic Narratives of the Desert West

John Chavez, May Castleberry

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Many impressions of the American West as a place of romance and scenic beauty, filled with towering mountains, majestic canyons and unusual wildlife, have been shaped by photographs, many of which were first seen in photographic books. This legacy includes the magnificent survey albums of the mid-19th century, turn-of-the-century ethnographic reports (notably the North American Indian Project of Edward S. Curtis), illustrated travel guides such as those by Edward Weston, books by Ansel Adams and Eliot Porter that marshalled the environmental movement, and photo-textual documents made by Dorothea Lange. This volume, the catalogue for an exhibition at the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, from June 1996, is an illustrated history of the desert West and also a study of one of the most distinctive American publishing traditions - the photographic book. By including material from 20 books spanning 150 years, as well as maps, letters and vintage photographs, the work traces the shifting perceptions of the American West. Essays by 22 historians, novelists, journalists and environmentalists examine the mythic and actual history of the American desert from a wide range of perspectives.

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