

# The Cuyahoga Valley

Photographs by Robert Glenn Ketchum

An exhibition organized by the

**Akron Art Museum**



This exhibition is made possible by generous support from Akron Community Foundation,  
The GARR Foundation, The George Gund Foundation, The Cleveland Foundation,  
and with cooperation from the Cuyahoga Valley National Recreation Area, National Park Service.



## All Seasons and Their Change: Photographs of the Cuyahoga Valley by Robert Glenn Ketchum

Robert Glenn Ketchum was commissioned by the Akron Art Museum in 1986 to photograph the Cuyahoga Valley National Recreation Area (CVNRA). Two and one-half years and one thousand exposures later, this exhibition of his photographs not only documents the Valley's diverse natural and historical landscape but also comments on the complex interrelationship of man and nature.

### The Artist

Recognized as one of the leading contemporary photographers of the American landscape, Robert Glenn Ketchum has exhibited in more than two hundred one-man and group shows at institutions such as the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, the Corcoran Gallery of Art and the Carnegie Institute. His photographs are represented in the permanent collections of major American institutions including the Museum of Modern Art and George Eastman House. Two books of his photographs, numerous exhibition catalogues and scores of magazine articles have helped disseminate Ketchum's work beyond the world of museums and galleries. He has also organized a number of photographic exhibitions as well as serving as Curator of Photography for the National Park Foundation.

Ketchum was born in Los Angeles in 1947. Initially trained in painting and design, he received his B.A. from the University of California, Los Angeles, in 1970. This was followed by a study of photography, first at the Brooks Institute of Photography and later at the California Institute of the Arts, where Ketchum received a Master of Fine Arts in 1974. His teachers included celebrated practitioners of the fabricated and manipulated image such as Edmund Teske, Robert Fichter and Leland Rice as well as Robert Heinecken, whose conceptually-based work had a great influence on Ketchum.

Interestingly, work with an opposite approach also had a strong effect on the young artist. Viewing the awesome effects achieved by the "straight" photography (works shot from nature without manipulation or artifice) of Paul Caponigro, Ansel Adams, Edward Weston and Wynn Bullock brought revelations for Ketchum in 1969. That same year he discovered his personal commitment to environmental issues. The combination of these influences has led Ketchum to produce distinct bodies of work of straight photography. Each group centers on a single concept or theme and each is concerned in some way with the environment.

In contrast to many photographers who specialize in a single format, Ketchum employs whatever equipment and printing techniques he finds most appropriate to each project's goals. Earlier works such as the startlingly colored dye transfer *Twilight* series from 1972 and the small-scale, black and white photographs of *Winters: 1970-1980* explore formal problems, light and weather conditions as well as various moods of the landscape. The large format Cibachrome prints of *Order From Chaos* (1972-1984) organize the chaotic, abstract forms of nature into coherent compositions. Some of his choices of materials are highly unusual: he has had his images printed on fabric and even reproduced as tapestry.

A 1982 commission to photograph the Hudson River Valley through its four seasons was the direct precursor of the Cuyahoga Valley project; simultaneous with it was an exploration of Southeast Alaska's rain forest and of the Chattahoochee River National Recreation Area in Georgia. In each of these projects, documentation of a specific region with its unique geological, historical and ecological climate is the central focus. However, producing an object of strong aesthetic quality, that also expresses a deep concern for sound, thoughtful use of the land, is equally important to the artist.



## Ketchum and Two Traditions of American Landscape Photography

While the beginnings of American landscape photography in the nineteenth century emphasized the grandeur of the new Eden, those commissioning the pictures sought documentation rather than expressive statements. The photographic surveys of the West were commissioned by the government or by private companies seeking scientific and geological information. The photographers, however, were artists. Making a good picture – one with aesthetic value and expressive content – was also a goal along with the gathering of factual information.

By the twentieth century, photography was beginning to be recognized as an independent art form. Ansel Adams, America's best-loved landscape photographer, documented the American wilderness from California to Alaska. In contrast to the nineteenth century photographers, Adams' primary goal was artistic expression. His fresh views of natural monuments already renowned as tourist sights capture the drama of a majestic earth seemingly devoid of human presence. Adams' sharp focus and great depth of field allow every detail to be seen. His photographs convince us that each tree, each rock, tells the earth's story. A dedicated and active environmentalist, Adams feared that America was about to become a paradise lost.

Robert Glenn Ketchum is an heir to both traditions discussed above. His photographic "surveys" of specific regions may be as extensive as those of the early explorer/photographers of the West. To document the Cuyahoga, Ketchum visited the Valley eight times over a period of two and one-half years throughout all four seasons and most weather conditions. His desire was to document the land while simultaneously producing a fine aesthetic object.

However, aesthetics and expression are probably more important to Ketchum than factual information. In that, and in his involvement with environmental and land use issues, Ketchum more closely resembles Ansel Adams. Although Ketchum uses color in addition to Adams' preferred black and white film, the work of both emphasizes sharp focus and great depth of field. The high gloss, smooth plastic surface of the Cibachrome paper often used by Ketchum is well suited to capture those qualities. Employing a medium format camera (6 x 7 cm.) with transparency (positive slide) film for the Cuyahoga project, Ketchum produced large-scale prints. Sizes of the works in this exhibition range from 30 x 40 inches down to 20 x 24 inches.



CVNRA #866



CVNRA #125

These photographs are examples of straight photography. Ketchum's compositions are not cropped; they are printed full frame. He uses neither filtration nor darkroom manipulation. His aim is to distill and preserve the ephemeral splendors he witnesses. Ketchum waits for that opportune moment when the time of day, the light and the weather join to form an optimal, perhaps even mystical, image of each location. Then, he combines his extensive technical knowledge of lighting and the responsiveness of film with his artistic skill to capture that moment. If the color or light in an image seems unbelievable, it is because nature has provided this seemingly magical occurrence.



## Ketchum's Cuyahoga Valley: Man and Nature

The Cuyahoga Valley is a continuation of, rather than a radical shift in, the landscape that lies beneath the buildings and asphalt of the cities flanking it. It is truly "just down the street and around the block, where the sidewalk ends" (as the Park Service describes it). Since the late nineteenth century, the Valley has been a recreational retreat from nearby cities. Central to the park is the human occupation and use of the land.

Following in the footsteps of Edward Weston and the social documentarians of the Great Depression, Ketchum's photographs subtly emphasize human intervention in the landscape. The magnificent image of Brandywine Falls cascading before gold and orange leaves (#125) appears, at first glance, to be a scene of natural beauty free of artifice or intervention by man. A closer look reveals the foundations of an historic industrial structure which once used the Falls as a source of power.

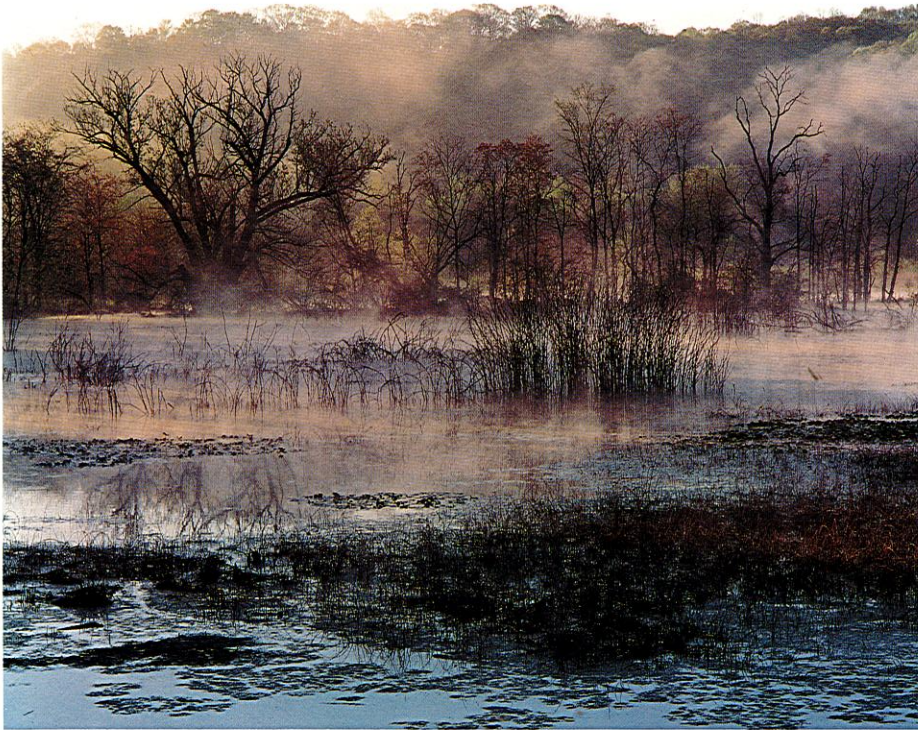
Such scenic views of the park's natural wonders are easily reachable, thanks in part to the efforts of the National Park Service which continually strives to improve accessibility. Ketchum underlined this feature of the CVNRA by photographing trails as well as vistas and roads as well as the meadows and ponds adjoining them. In fact, a number of the areas featured in the exhibition can easily be seen by car.

Functional structures in the park, from weathered barns (#302) to superhighway bridges, are featured rather than shunned. Practical necessities of life in a park setting, versus a wilderness, appear, such as benches and trash cans. Nor has the artist ignored the park's problem areas. A tree trunk mutilated with graffiti is shot in close-up. It is transformed into a totemic object, dominating the camera's frame with its imposing scale and vertical thrust. This can be juxtaposed with the similarly strong vertical form of a power pole. Included within park borders is a Superfund site, a polluted dumping ground which is in the process of being excavated and cleaned up. In Ketchum's photograph of that area (#705), the hills of old tires and other trash create rolling forms that echo the gentle landscape at the same time that they ecologically violate it. Man-made colors and textures stand out jarringly against the lush foliage.



CVNRA #302





CVNRA #412

## The Cuyahoga Valley National Recreation Area

Because the Cuyahoga Valley is bracketed by Cleveland and Akron, many people think its landscape consists of Rust Belt features: skylines marked by rows of smokestacks, plains crisscrossed with train tracks, and rivers lined with shipyards. These industrial resources are necessary to support the area's population. They were documented in an earlier Akron Art Museum project, the commissioning in 1979 of Lee Friedlander's famous series of photographs entitled *Factory Valleys*.

In contrast with the cities, the Valley contains forests, streams, marshes, meadows, waterfalls, gently rolling hills and steep ledges. These natural resources, only minutes away from the industrial and urban areas, are part of the Cuyahoga Valley National Recreation Area. This 33,000 acre national park, which was established in 1975, runs along twenty-two miles of the Cuyahoga River through the Valley. In addition to the traditional natural and recreational attractions, the CVNRA includes cultural and historical sites such as Blossom Music Center, Hale Farm and Village and parts of the Ohio and Erie Canal system.

The CVNRA is a unique type of national park, one that is on the forefront of land use management for recreation. Unlike most national parks, which are owned and operated exclusively by the federal government, this park is a partnership between the National Park Service and many other organizations and owners, including some of the organizations listed above.

The park's proximity to two major urban centers – units of the Cleveland and Akron metropolitan park systems are actually part of the CVNRA – is also significant. Unlike most national parks, it is not a wilderness site. From the Paleo-Indians who came to the Valley hunting Ice Age mammals to the current residents of the towns within the park's boundaries, the area has experienced 12,000 years of continuous human use and interaction with its natural environment.





CVNRA #705

Ketchum chose not to produce an encyclopedic catalogue of the Valley's physical characteristics and structures. His photographs are instead distillations of the essence of the park. There are many ponds within its confines. Instead of seeing them all, we are given three views of the same one – a pond formed by beavers – seen in winter; in barren, early spring (#412); and in summer. Each season, each time lends its own character to the same location. The series of three works reminds the viewer of the constantly changing face of nature.

Each image becomes a metaphor for the larger themes behind the park's existence. The carpet of daffodils surrounding a fallen tree (#397) symbolizes a happy solution to the conflict between the human urge to domesticate the land and nature's ability to regenerate and propagate itself. Probably originally planted beside a cabin or farmhouse, the flowers have gone wild, spreading joyously along a small valley. Nature and human intervention have combined to produce a fleeting annual spectacle and a testament to the enduring power of nature. Even the rotted tree will feed future growth.

The Cuyahoga Valley is an example of the successful integration of the all too often opposing forces of man and nature. It offers a model for future recreational land use as well as a respite from the hectic pace of urban life. Beneath our civilized exteriors remains a basic drive: to periodically re-establish our relationship to the land. The stunning beauty of the photographs of Robert Glenn Ketchum offers an aesthetic haven paralleling the natural refuge they depict. Regarding these works can be almost as refreshing and nourishing as a visit to the park; a basic drive of the civilized animal is the desire to see beautiful images. Ketchum, however, also uses beauty to address a difficult topic, one at the heart of the national park system which has helped preserve the Valley. The relationship of man to nature looms large as one of the most important issues of our time.

Barbara Tannenbaum  
Curator

*The Cuyahoga Valley: Photographs by Robert Glenn Ketchum* was first presented at the Akron Art Museum April 8 - June 11, 1989.  
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Cover: CVNRA #397