

## **American Rockies: Photographs by Gus Foster**

INTRODUCTION by James Moore, Director, The Albuquerque Museum

Mountains are mysterious. They are often named for gods and heroes, and like their namesakes, they are turned by our thoughts into metaphors for contrasting emotion: dangerous, sacred, terrifying, inspiring.<sup>1</sup> For centuries, from Moses to Martin Luther King, people have turned, literally and metaphorically, to mountains -- seeking solitude, challenge, enlightenment, and wisdom. In mountains we look for something we can find nowhere else. And we accept the strenuous effort required of the journey, knowing that we will be repaid by the exhilaration of a magnificent view. Many roads in the West still attest to the history of mountains as the horizon markers that once guided overland travel; people who live near mountains orient themselves visually by familiar outlines seen against the sky, presences that offer a sense of comfort and belonging. As landscapes where we look both outward and inward, mountains are, fundamentally, about seeing.

Gus Foster's ambitious project to extend our vision along the "backbone of the continent" is at once rewarding and humbling. Time and again his panoramic image places us in a position that is privileged by its commanding view, yet this momentary power is charged with apprehension, for the photograph also suggests, even though we know it is told in fictional terms, that we are alone in this remote place. These are the aesthetics of the sublime, brought forward from the late eighteenth century to our own time.<sup>2</sup> But if wisdom follows fear, the sense of being alone on the mountaintop is often replaced by a deeper understanding of being connected.

Seeing the "body" of the earth from the top of a mountain -- a view that no other vantage point allows -- enables us to begin to perceive systems in nature: the relationships between ridges, valleys, streams, changes in vegetation, the way in which weather moves across the terrain. These relationships make up the complex of forces that create the watershed, and the boundaries between the parts of the system denote what Gary Snyder has termed the "markers of the natural nations of our planet."<sup>3</sup> As we begin to comprehend the territories held by these "natural nations," our perception transcends conventional political borders. To spread our vision along the continental divide, as Gus has, is to connect intuitively with the larger systems of the living planet.<sup>4</sup> Like the panoramic photograph, the view from the mountaintop can be taken in quickly; but learning the knowledge held in the "severe, spectacular, spacy, wildly demanding, and ecstatic narrative"<sup>5</sup> of this landscape can take lifetimes. Most people who have lived in the American West over the past half of a century can describe great changes they have observed in their own lifetime, an indication that our transformation of the landscape is moving at a pace faster than we can control. Gus's panoramas are grand vehicles to stir the emotions, but they

also present to us an image of complexity and diversity that we will have to understand much better in the next century if we are to survive.

Gus's vision is large. His effort is immense, well beyond what most people are willing to endeavor. Gus is like a modern-day Han-shan, the seventh century Chinese poet of the Cold Mountain Poems, who wrote:

Men ask the way to Cold Mountain.  
Cold Mountain: there's no through trail.  
In summer, ice doesn't melt  
The rising sun blurs in swirling fog.  
How did I make it?  
My heart's not the same as yours.  
If your heart was like mine  
You'd get it and be right here.<sup>6</sup>

Gus takes us to places most of us will never go.

## NOTES

1. Marjorie Hope Nicolson, *Mountain Gloom and Mountain Glory: The Development of the Aesthetics of the Infinite* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1959, reprint, Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1997), *passim*. 2. Foster's own inspiration for photographing the length of the Rockies came, in part, from viewing a satellite photograph of North America published by National Geographic Magazine, an image that carries the same implications on the grandest possible scale. 3. Gary Snyder, "Coming into the Watershed," in *A Place in Space: Ethics, Aesthetics, and Watersheds* (Washington, D.C.: Counterpoint Press, 1996), 220. 4. Standing on the continental divide has mythic qualities in American culture that connect us as a nation from sea to sea, as indicated by the often-repeated statement that a drop of water that falls on this side will end up in the Atlantic Ocean and on the other, in the Pacific. And by extension of this notion, watershed, as a metaphor, is often used as an indicator of an event of major proportions, whether in national history or personal affairs. 5. Snyder, *op. cit.*, 224. 6. Gary Snyder, *Riprap and Cold Mountain Poems* (San Francisco: Four Seasons Foundation, 1969, reprint, San Francisco: North Point Press, 1990), 42.