

'Stewards of the Land': Orah Moore reveals the spirit of the American west

Visual Art Review, *The Times Argus*

Mary Gow | May 12, 2018

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Orah Moore: "Through the Ropes" (Courtesy Studio Place Arts)

Ranchers toss hay to cattle from the back of pickup trucks, corral and brand calves, round up their herds as snow blankets the ground. They go to the local parade and horse sales and occasionally find a few minutes' leisure sitting on a porch or fence. The ranchers in Orah Moore's photographs "Stewards of the Land" work hard and live in the vast landscape of the American west.

"Stewards of the Land," with over 20 photographs taken and developed by Moore, is presented by Studio Place Arts at the Morse Block Deli. Taken in the 1980s, Moore's hand-printed silverprint photographs look at the life and land of Montana ranchers.

"I was very impressed by this series of Orah's work when I first saw several large scale works at the South End Art Hop a few years ago, noted Sue Higby,

executive director of Studio Place Arts, which has curated shows at the Morse Block Deli for the last several years.

"I thought this body of work represented a world that many people in New England may not have had a chance to experience firsthand and that it'd be an especially fascinating show for our area," she said. "Plus, the show gives me a chance to pull out my cowboy boots and silver collar tips for the reception!"

A classically trained, award-winning fine art photographer, Moore lives in Hyde Park and is founder of Haymarket Press. Her photographs in "Stewards of the Land" could almost be described as vintage, she noted, developed in a darkroom with an unusual camera and film she selected for the qualities they offered for considering her subject.

"It's about the lifestyle of the rancher, not a rodeo kind of thing," Moore said of "Stewards of the Land."

A commercial photographer based in Los Angeles in the mid 1980s, Moore went to Montana as a publicity photographer for a PBS mini-series, "The West of the Imagination." A morning cattle drive through the town where she was staying made an indelible impression, leading her to this multi-year project photographing and interviewing ranchers.

"I fell in love with the landscape and ranching," Moore explained.

Through trips to Montana, staying with ranchers, seeing them at work, getting to know their families and their close

interactions with their animals and the land, Moore developed her series. The exhibition traveled and was shown in many western galleries in the late 1980s and 1990s

"I am interested in the spirit that impels them, the land that nurtures them, the storms they weather, and the livestock that supports their way of life," Moore said in her artist's statement.

"I observed that these people value their freedom and independence more than anything else. I could also see that ranching as a way of life was slowly being eroded by tax-dodge ranchers, insurance companies, and big business. Many ranchers wonder if the next generation will be able to or even want to carry on with the family ranch," Moore said.

Moore used a Widelux camera for the series, a camera with a rotating lens that served to take broad panoramic images. In Moore's images, it captures the "Big Sky" quality of Montana's landscape. She used infrared black and white film.

"The film changes the values of some things in the picture and gives a magical look," she said.

Morse Block Deli *Studio Place Arts presents "Stewards of the Land," photographs by Oprah Moore, through Aug. 10, at the Morse Block Deli, 260 N. Main St. in Barre. For information, call 802-479-7069, or go online to www.studioplacearts.com. An opening reception will be held 5:30 to 6:30 p.m. Thursday, May 24.*



Orah Moore: "Lined Up" (Courtesy Studio Place Arts)