

## Letha Wilson Turns Landscape Photography on Its Head with Industrial Sculptures



Portrait of Letha Wilson by Rob Harris. Courtesy of GRIMM.

Landscape photography of the United States is embedded into the nation's cultural DNA. Images by Carleton Watkins, William Henry Jackson, and Ansel Adams not only captured the sublime and awe of geology and nature, but forged a reading of place which informed cultural and political ideas of nationhood and place.

Since graduating with an MFA from New York's Hunter College in 2003, artist Letha

Wilson has also concentrated on landscape photography, though her resultant artworks differ greatly from the masters that went before. For Wilson, the photograph is only the beginning of an artistic process, not the endpoint, the image passing through studio and workshop before ending up as a component of geometric sculptural montages, condensing nature into industrial structure.

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Wilson often uses industrial materials, though her palette has evolved. “It started with drywall and it’s a natural evolution from there,” explained the artist, who began using plaster and drywall after experiences handling the materials in her day job building and repairing gallery walls. Her repertoire expanded to include two-by-four timber, then concrete, and later steel.



Her new works, showing at GRIMM in London—the newest outpost of the gallery that also has spaces in New York and Amsterdam—refine her use of steel, and incorporate copper and brass into a series of plinth-mounted sculptures and wall-based pieces. In “Fields of Vision,” which opened on August 31st, 15 sculptures feature nature photographs printed onto metal, carefully folded and interlocked to create spatial interplay between nature, industry, and disparate geographies. “I think something that the images don’t convey is the struggle to get there,” Wilson said of the works, which have an appearance of simplicity, belying the complex work required.

There are three stages to Wilson’s practice, which starts with long forays into the wilderness to make the initial photographs. Walking alone, sometimes through the national parks Adams and others captured, Wilson describes her job as “just to pay attention, gather, and capture.” Aesthetically, she is gathering beauty and poetic, accidental geometry, but she also describes “capturing atmosphere” and “recognizing fleeting moments.”

These images then join a growing archive in Wilson’s studio where she lives with the images, allowing them to speak to her and each other before she begins to test them with cardboard maquettes of interlocking fragments. Once she’s settled on a sculptural form at scale, the chosen images are printed onto metal sheets then moved into her metal workshop.



Having previously used fabricators, over recent years she has enjoyed learning to shape, cut, bend, and join materials herself. “This summer I invested in a folding brake

for my studio, to bend the metal,” Wilson said. “I have my own shop setup so I can do welding and plasma cutting.”

This is complex work. Not only is it a physical skill to manipulate metal (though Wilson said she enjoys the resultant imperfections, or “the residue of the activity”), it is also a mathematical puzzle of geometry, ensuring each fold and cut is meticulously positioned so that each plane smoothly intersects.

In the GRIMM show, the completed sculptures offer agglomerations of abstracted landscapes reformed into architectural form. On the wall, Idaho Sunrise Triple Bend (all works 2023) breaks the flat blue plane of the clear sky by physically folding the image over the steel frame, celebrating the scars and marks of the physical processes. Several sculptures’ titles give clues to the locations captured, like New Mexico Moonrise Strips and Antelope Canyon Steel Fold. Craters of the Moon Brass Pierce, meanwhile, is a twice-folded detail shot of geological rock formation, punctured by a brass pole running through carefully

placed, perfectly sized holes. With no designated front or back, each angle creates a shifting impression of materials, places, and geometry.

This speaks to the complicated way that nature is compressed by the modern age. Wilderness—whether cared for by indigenous communities or managed by the state—is subjected to processes of manipulation, control, and framing, which in return feeds a romantic and culturally embedded construct of nature which, just as Adams and many before, Wilson finds constantly fascinating to contend with.

**Will Jennings** is a London based writer, artist, educator, & curator. With a longstanding interest in architecture, landscape, place & our relationship to man-affected environments, his various practices relate to these central concerns, and work to explore how they relate to current issues & concerns in a creative & playful way.

He has experiences working in conservation architecture & as a cultural programmer for public events, talks & exhibitions, informing his communication & creative practices. He draws strong interest from historical perspectives, events & architectures, using these to consider both present & future conditions for place and people.

