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Martin Stupich, *Forty-two-inch Gas Pipeline Section* (Construction Staging Area near Sinclair, Carbon County, WY) 2006, Pigment Inkjet on Acid Free Fine Art Photo Paper, 25x32 inches © Martin Stupich
Currently on display in [Environmental Impact](#)

Environment, Art and Us

Martin Stupich

I've been asked here to describe my "hopes and aspirations for the role that art and artists can play to promote good stewardship of [earth]"... and how my "own art and lifestyle" encourage responsible behavior. To start, I ditch the myth of artists as shamans with the power to restore equilibrium to this ravaged planet. We artists are no smarter, no more sensitive, no greener than the average person who earnestly drags her recycle bin to the curb every week, hoping that it matters. As for my life as an example of responsible behavior, I might claim to live modestly, but am no model. Chance places me in the most privileged race and gender in history's most obscenely wasteful culture. In this context, I aspire only to make sense of my life while photographing along the way.



Martin Stupich ASARCO El Paso Copper Smelter in Early Stage of Demolition (Aerial view from over Ciudad Juárez looking northwest) 2011, Pigment Inkjet on Acid Free Fine Art Photo Paper, 32x23 inches
© Martin Stupich Currently on display in [Environmental Impact](#)

I can't measure whether my work hastens the planet's healing, or its demise. We artists, at least the altruists among us, think of ourselves as good campers leaving less mess when we exit than when we arrived. This is saccharine idealism. Most of us are driven to "make an impact; to leave something behind", a trail of artifacts, a pile of paintings or sculpture (a legacy, we are fond of saying) –as though a reputation, some good stories and a corpse are not enough. Like you, I consume more than I contribute; this is irrefutable physics. There is no ecological upside to our presence here. And using the measure of the earth's well-being, the moment I vanish the planet breathes a little easier, literally. But for now, I *am* here and I take the privilege seriously.

We artists teach, and if we pay attention we learn too. For me, the best lessons on how to live responsibly come from disparate examples: poets and "environmental" artists.

First, the poets. They are the most important, seeing more subtlety, articulating more nuance, dependent on empathy and literacy to engage us. And they wield nothing more invasive than an iPad, or a notebook and a pen. Of this sort, Wyoming poet Harvey Hix is the best example I can give you. Mr. Hix writes to show us how things in the world have meaning because they

are kin to other things. Of course poetry resides elsewhere too. Architecture, sculpture, painting, dance, cinema, photography mean the most to us when they invite us to feel at home in the big discordant world. Even Goya at his most horrifying is holding a mirror to his audience; if we see ourselves in his pictures, we win.

"Obvious is a trap, the last resort of an artist who can't think clearly about what to do next".

- Seth Godin, on the value of elegance in art and in life



Martin Stupich *Rio Tinto Bingham Open Pit Copper Mine, Near Salt Lake City, UT* (View to Northwest Corner) 2012, Pigment Inkjet on Acid Free Fine Art Photo Paper, 23x32 inches © Martin Stupich Currently on display in [Environmental Impact](#)



Martin Stupich *Rio Tinto Bingham Open Pit Copper Mine, Near Salt Lake City, UT* (Switchbacks on the North Face of the Pit) 2012, Pigment Inkjet on Acid Free Fine Art Photo Paper, 23x32 inches © Martin Stupich Currently on display in [Environmental Impact](#)

We all understand the appeal of grand gestures. Artists engaged in “earthworks” embody the most overt link between environmental thought and an impulse for visual expression. Robert Smithson, Lita Albuquerque, Christo, De Maria are four of hundreds. They give us monuments (ephemeral and lasting) to ponder, but they give us more. In the decades since [Spiral Jetty](#) we have grown up. Smithson’s famous work on the briny shore of Great Salt Lake represents more than his trademark “entropy”. To people passionate about limiting human impact on frail ecosystems, it is a cautionary lesson in hubris, with little else to sustain or justify itself.

Another equally rich teaching moment is Lita Albuquerque’s [Stellar Axis](#), ninety-nine big blue balls posed on the ice in Antarctica (yes, transported there, photographed, then transported home). “Their sole purpose was to pursue and materialize a sculpture and ephemeral event on a scale and in a place that was completely unprecedented [sic]¹”. –in other words, simply to put something huge in a place where nothing had ever been put; to be the first to trample a pristine Antarctic tract. Exemplary high art? A lesson in eco-responsibility?

These artists demonstrate to me ego trumping creativity; landscape as casualty rather than inspiration. The blunt thud of their obvious “intent” was fresh and impressive decades ago when the cost of such naiveté seemed small. But artists should *lead* the conversation about creative problem solving. Marring acres of earth is inelegant, especially now, when a digital model of the same ideas can be as compelling, and have a limitless audience. We would be better stewards of the biosphere if we took a page from the play books of Claes Oldenburg or Da Vinci. Both are genius-masters of imagination whose ideas *still* live in raucous drawings, of giant tooth brushes and baseball bats; and prototype helicopters centuries before Sikorsky (I know that you know these sketches) - as drawings the ideas live more powerfully for more people over a greater temporal arc than the relative few who ever saw a coastal cliff suffocating under a Christo wrap, or who can afford the pilgrimage to De Maria’s *Lightning Field*. As for the fate of the ice caps, the absurdity of planeloads of artists flying annually to the poles to “respond to” the slow death of those frail ecosystems is a sad joke without a punchline. Of these examples, none would be less poetic if it had never got off the page. It is now possible to do “virtually” anything without revving up a bulldozer or a thirty-seven ton military cargo plane.

Beauty isn’t only in the eye. In some cultures, aesthetic eloquence is (to borrow from Flannery O’Conner) a *habit of being*. A finely illustrated book from 1981 on traditional Yemeni architecture² shows entire cities of multi-story hand-painted mud buildings as visually vibrant as any anywhere. Without electricity or plumbing or architects, depending on native understanding of meager rainfall and prevailing breezes, desert populations of thousands live more comfortably than many first-world condo dwellers. Here, living *is* environmental art.

¹ statement from Lita Albuquerque Studio, 2007

² *Art of Building In Yemen*, Fernando Varanda, MIT Press, 1981



Martin Stupich *Iron Pipe Merging with Alkali Lake Bed (South of Baroil, Sweetwater County, WY) 2006, Pigment Inkjet on Acid Free Fine Art Photo Paper, 25x32 inches*

© Martin Stupich Currently on display in [Environmental Impact](#)

Earth works. The artist's toughest job is to show just how miraculously true this is, without obliterating the evidence.

The photographs by Martin Stupich featured in this post are currently on display in the traveling museum exhibition [Environmental Impact](#).



Martin Stupich currently resides in Albuquerque, New Mexico. Stupich was trained in painting and sculpture in Milwaukee in the 1960s. In the early '70s he studied photography with Emmet Gowin in Ohio. Then, after 2 years as a steel worker, he earned a masters degree in photography from Georgia State University as a student of John McWilliams.

He stepped from graduate school into a career photographing industrial landscape with early grants from the National Endowment for the arts, jobs with the U.S. Department of the Interior – then as a photographer documenting sites from Panama to Puget Sound for the Army Corps of Engineers.

In 2011 the Smithsonian Institution commissioned him to document its revered museum buildings, the Washington Monument Grounds and historic National Mall vistas. And in El Paso his ASARCO project enters its final phase, exploring the complex cultural landscape on the Rio Grande borderlands where Chihuahua, Texas and New Mexico meet, and their cultures merge.

Throughout Stupich's career the line between commerce and art has been wiggly and blurred. His photographs of Cape Canaveral Launch pads hang in galleries in Tokyo while his industrial panoramas reside happily in official State archives folded into dense historical reports.

His projects from Japan to Juárez reaffirm his belief that all landscape is cultural, and that good photographs made there can contribute to the useful literature of this place and time.

For more on the photographer and his work, please visit: <http://www.martinstupich.com/>

This post is part of the [MAHB's Arts Community space](#) –an open space for MAHB members to share, discuss, and connect with artwork processes and products pushing for change. Please visit the [MAHB Arts Community](#) to share and reflect on how art can promote critical changes in behavior and systems and [contact Erika](#) with any questions or suggestions you have regarding the new space.

MAHB-UTS Blogs are a joint venture between the University of Technology Sydney and the Millennium Alliance for Humanity and the Biosphere. Questions should be directed to joan@mahbonline.org

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