

MATTHEW MARKS GALLERY

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ARTFORUM

Robert Adams

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When looking at Robert Adams's work, I often think about one of the other great Roberts of twentieth-century photography—Robert Frank—and the different relationships the two artists have with time.



Robert Adams,
North Edge of Denver,
Colorado, ca. 1980,
black-and-white
photograph, 7 x 7".

The restless clip of Frank's cinematic images in *The Americans* (1958) differs vastly from Adams's slow gait in a specific area—whether in Colorado, his home for thirty-five years, or around western Oregon, where he now resides. "Summer Nights, Walking," 1976–82, recently on view at Matthew Marks Gallery, is Adams's somber suite of fifty nocturnal scenes captured in the environs of Denver, many in Longmont, on the eastern edge of the Rocky Mountain National Park. Perhaps the slowest, most meditative photographs he has made over the past five decades, they are an elegy for walking.

The impulse for the series came in part from the few pictures Adams had previously taken at night, offsetting the intense, effervescent light of his daytime photographs documenting Denver's suburban sprawl. "What attracted me to the subjects at a new hour," Adams observed in the 1985 publication of the "Nights" images, "was the discovery then of a neglected peace." Taken with only the help of the moon, or streetlamps, or the occasional headlight of a passing car, some of the photos are uncannily refulgent: A carnival and gas station glow in the dark; a puddle in a pothole brilliantly reflects the leaves above it; a piece of newspaper shimmies in the wind. Others are more saturnine: A sidewalk stretches into pitch-black; the facade of a tract house fades behind a chain-link fence; a tall, flowering weed on the side of the road casts a small shadow on the dirt and gravel below.

These documents of Adams's peregrinations are romantic appeals to slowness, silence, and the "peace," to be sure, that comes when roaming at night to gather or clear thoughts, or just to meander, or to get lost. Unconcerned with the skeptical looks of bystanders, unfazed by the potential complications of photographing a stranger's house in the dark, these peripatetic works embrace solitude. Of course, the artist's desire to share his preference for solitary perambulations grounds him in good company—among figures ranging from Søren Kierkegaard and Henry David Thoreau to Richard Long and Stanley Brouwn.

Although serene, the series gains traction when it starts to appear tedious—and indeed pedestrian—pointing to the strangeness of walking in dull, repetitious suburbia. In a chapter from her book *Wanderlust* (2000), Rebecca Solnit connects the rise of suburbs in America with the fear that "a golden age of walking" expired many decades ago. Adams's pictures might be an illustration of Solnit's lament: They too seem to yearn nostalgically for an American West that was. Such romantic underpinnings shimmer through much of Adams's work, making his affiliation with the antislublime, antisentimental ethos of the legendary 1975 "New Topographics" exhibition (in which he was included) less and less convincing. Ultimately, Adams's pictures are more traditional, embedded in an older approach to landscape photography, one unafraid of the pursuit of beauty even if that is not always what it finds. What's surprising is that this attitude still resonates in unexpected ways. Explaining how Adams has made work for so many years that seems to want to stop time and to be utterly timeless, while flitting between diverse modes of conceptual photography, is beyond me. But I suspect it has everything to do with pace.

—Lauren O'Neill-Butler