

## New York

### “The Permanent Way”

APEXART

291 Church Street

June 6–July 28

To commemorate the 150th anniversary of the passage of the Pacific Railway Act, which resulted in the United States' first transcontinental railroad, this exhibition gathers historical documents, vernacular images, and contemporary art photography that trace the ways that trains have shaped representations of landscape in American visual culture. In his accompanying essay, curator Brian Sholis marvels at the transformative power of the railroads on the economic and political development of the US. His selection of images also prompts reflection on the radical alterations to railroads themselves over the past century and a half as well as parallel shifts in the forms of photographic representation that mediate this history.



Victoria Sambunaris, *Wendover, UT*, 2007, C-print, 39 x 55". From the series "The Border," 2009–.

The show revolves around pictures of railroads by five contemporary photographers who take radically different approaches to the landscape genre and to conventions established by popular representations of trains. Compare Justine Kurland's *Donner Pass*, 2008, a majestic (and romanticized) view of a train hugging a mountain pass, with the heroism of James Welling's black-and-white "portraits" of engines from the early 1990s: Where Kurland revels in tropes of sublime beauty, Welling takes an ironic distance from the anthropomorphizing strategies in picture postcards of trains. Mark Ruwedel's *Westward the Course of Empire*, 1994–2007, uses Becher-like grids to organize standard views of trestle bridges, tunnel openings, and track cuts, while Victoria Sambunaris achieves an extraterrestrial effect by photographing at great distance a winding stretch of track along the US-Mexico border where the railroad is a site of violent crimes. In his "Railroad Landscapes," 2010–11, Jeff Brouws photographs abandoned tracks that have been "reclaimed" by nature where "traces" of trains recall the lush colors of works by Eliot Porter.

Alongside these works are reproductions of maps charting the rapid proliferation of rail lines in the latter half of the nineteenth century and wonderful early-twentieth-century photo postcards (from the collection of Luc Sante). At the front of the gallery is a small desk where visitors can page through a selection of Sholis's recommended reading on railroads. These books are classics of American history, but there is a significant omission: art-historical discourse on the development of landscape photography. The changes wrought by the first transcontinental railroads were not only economic and social; they were also representational.

— Megan Heuer