I drove to Rochester to see the new New Topographics: Photographs of a Man-Altered Landscape, a restaging and reconsideration of the seminal 1975 exhibition that so thoroughly changed how we understand the American landscape. I followed the Erie Canal through Amsterdam, Rome, Verona, Lyons, Liverpool, Palmyra, and dozens of other European-named but irrevocably American towns; places whose most visible quality seemed a lack of visibility, a sense of unattendedness, of life that has escaped being chronicled—of spaces waiting to be photographed.

Even in the George Eastman House’s carpeted, chic, museumy space, New Topographics is a modest affair. The second most-cited photography show in history—after only Edward Steichen’s 1955 The Family of Man—is a tiny room hung with mostly 8-by-10-inch black-and-white prints. The original 1975 show, curated by William Jenkins, was even sparser, hung, in current Eastman House curator Alison Nordström’s words, as a “bathtub ring” around a space that had once been George Eastman’s garage. Vintage installation shots show the simultaneous potency and humility of the sites of many revolutions: the Wright Brothers, Thomas Edison, and Steve Jobs also got started in garages.

Down stretches of modest road from Phoenix to Düsseldorf, the approach of the NT photographers has come to define a rigorous, serious, removed strain of photographic practice. And as with many mass movements, its place in the public imagination has only a little to do with the intentions of its founders. I found some comments in the guestbook at the Eastman House that come close to defining a commonly held New Topographicism. “BORING,” one complicated visitor wrote. “I understand why this show is ‘important’ but why do I feel so depressed and uninspired?” asked another. “Intentionally boring,” “engaging the mundane,” “dry,” “restrained,” “cool,” and “critical” are the standard lexical palette describing NT. And in the hands of its many followers, these taglines ring true. But walking through these sets of intimate, hand-printed photographs, it is easy to hear strains of whimsy, irony, and great affection set against the Sousa march of conceptual remove.

Henry Wessel Jr.’s sly side-streetscapes link these photographers to the quick hand-camera imagery of William Eggleston and Lee Friedlander. Wessel is the great poet of the decorative planting, and a profusion of palms, hedges, shrubs, and reeds surges with vertical life through his long 35mm frame. Small-format pictures tend to speak in the first person (“I see”), whereas large-format images expound in the third (“There is”). Wessel walked into the trough of the sine wave of the landscape Americans are constantly building and tearing down, looking for light and clever little first-person photographic stories. In his Las Vegas (1973), Wessel stands on a fading pedestrian way alongside six lanes of gleaming blacktop. This place was built for cars, and, as in so many American cities, the photographer on foot feels like a foreigner. We are a long way from the encompassing European plazas of Henri Cartier-Bresson, or from Garry Winogrand’s dynamic city boulevards. Instead we stare at a strip mall containing a cocktail lounge, a wedding jeweler. Our link to the European tradition comes in the Sistine Chapel-ish outstretched finger of some driven-past plaster statue. Instead of all creation, the hand of God is sparking life into Rosemary’s Souvenirs and Sylvia’s Accent on Femininity.

In a letter to Jenkins, Joe Deal insisted: “The world is infinitely more interesting than any of my opinions concerning it.” This statement sounds like a rallying cry for the species.
of systematic, neutral-aiming photographic projects that has evolved from this show. But each of these artists’ visual approach to the world defines a sort of opinion. Deal’s tracts of Western land, photographed from high vantage points, are close to abstractions. Despite describing a lot of physical space, they aren’t views. Without horizons and cropped into square petri dishes of new construction, Deal’s pictures read like legendless maps. They make you feel that this development might spread beyond the formality of the frame, into infinity. That is an opinion.

Lewis Baltz’s images of industrial parks read like the work of a critic. Harsh, contrasty prints seethe with silver and vitriol. Rigidly frontal, they sneer at the anonymity of contemporary architecture: the photograph as blank container addressing the building as blank container.

Both Nicholas Nixon and Frank Gohlke use the vocabulary of commercial photography. Nixon’s images of urban Boston are almost indistinguishable from straight-ahead architectural photography. They remain the most difficult work in NT, because they seem the least intrepid, the least interpretive. Gohlke’s pictures are also coded with conceptual chiaroscuro. They remind me of the industrial photographs Larry Sultan and Mike Mandel were at that time culling from corporate archives for their 1977 book Evidence. Gohlke appears to have come across just-finished social events: a ribbon cutting or a Veterans of Foreign Wars parade. They challenge the hierarchy of fore- and background, and possess a quality particular to photographs: the ability to be so clear about subject, and so obscure about meaning.

When you compare the most important state-sponsored photographic surveys of the nineteenth century—the Mission Héliographique in 1850s France, and the U.S. Geographical Surveys of the 1860s and ’70s—it is easy to recognize how important photography has always been in describing the American scene. Nearly everything man-made that Édouard Baldus, Henri Le Secq, and company photographed still stands intact. No human-made thing that Timothy O’Sullivan, William Henry Jackson, or Carleton E. Watkins photographed does. The American landscape is a theme park of flux, always willing to plow under its past, making photography vital in preserving it. Robert Adams and Stephen Shore come across as the artists in New Topographics most freed by the push to re-survey the American landscape. Their work still feels open-ended and undogmatic, without formal expressiveness but suffused with attention to how things appear. Their views, varied in scale, elevation, distance from subject, seem made by people who woke up every morning absolutely open to the possibility that the street stretching out beyond them was likely to have mushroomed with meaning overnight. They address the American present, a virulent, metastasizing place whose growth only photography can slow.

—Tim Davis