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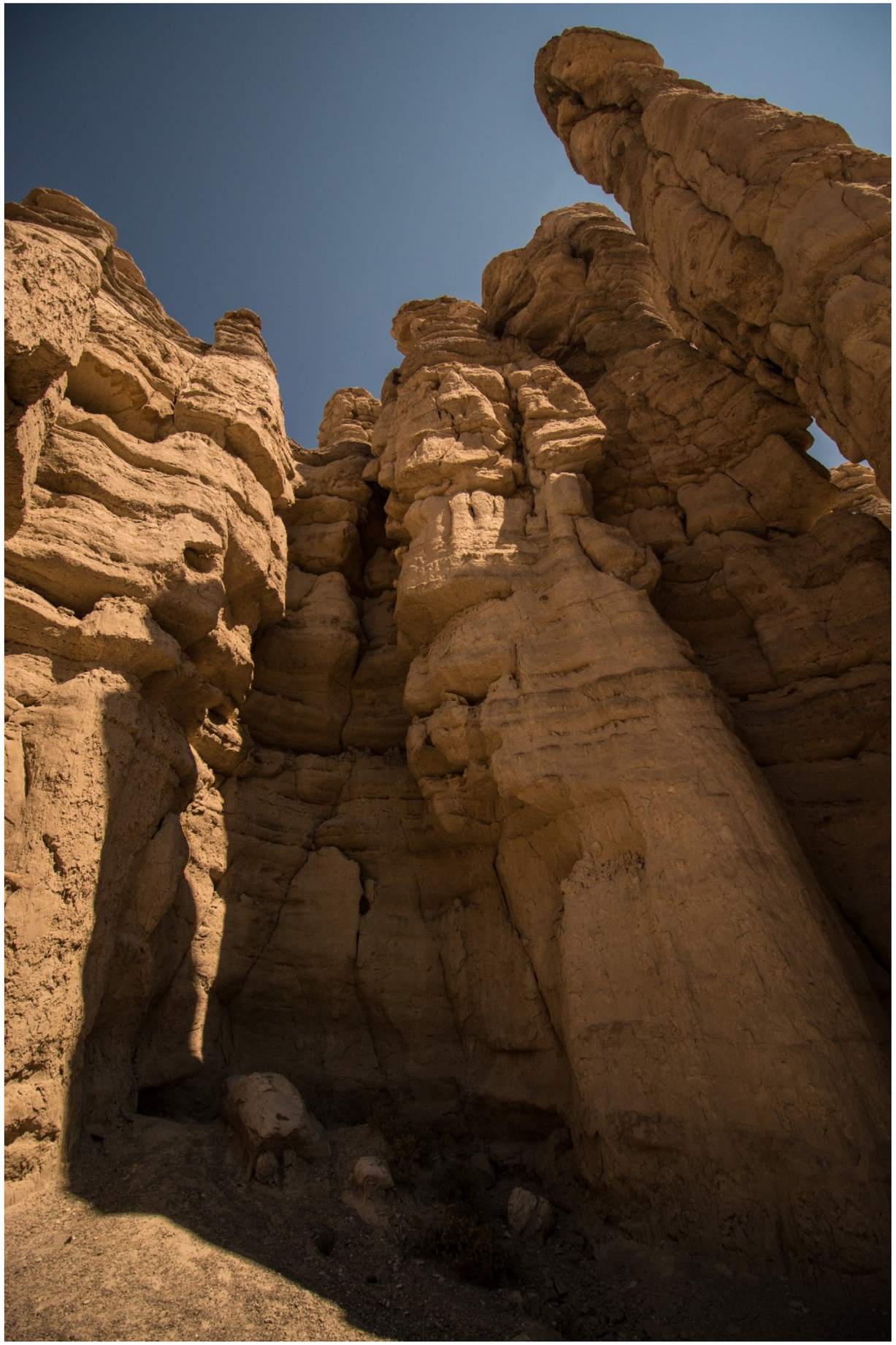
Ways of Enchanting New Mexico



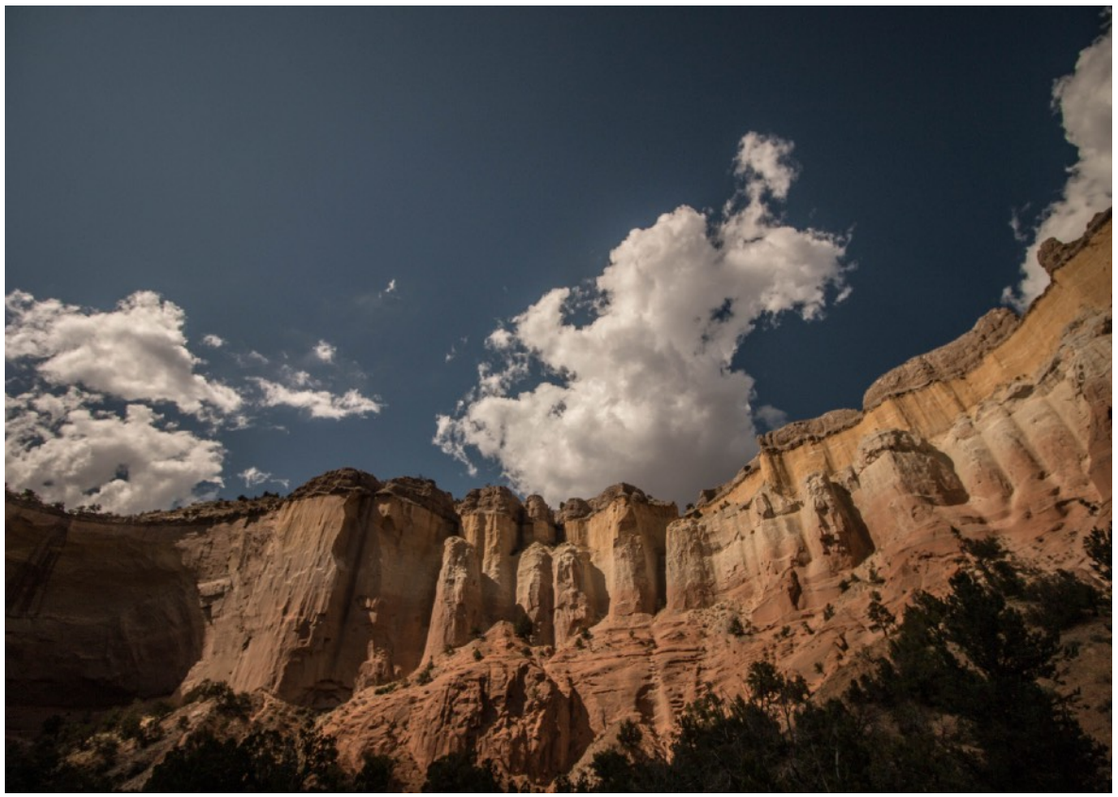
It was dark when we got to Santa Fe, our small domestic aircraft pushing its nose up to the airport, which denied its modern origins under a cloak of red adobe clay. Dragging our shared suitcase over broad, glossy tiles and out into the darkness, I was very aware that we were walking into a vast stratigraphy of memories, knowledges and representations resident in New Mexico. Here I was to invent my own, and my mother hers; each with unique challenges to negotiate. For her (Lydia), the story began at Tate Modern at its 2016 exhibition of Georgia O'Keeffe's work. Seeing O'Keeffe's soft, glowing renditions of a landscape she intuited to bristle with texture and grit, she was piqued to discover what true complexions were being masked by O'Keeffe's modernist treatment. For me, three days out of the furnace of a degree in human geography and still radiating arcane theories and abstract notions, the process was a little more fraught. Over the previous year, I had discussed, researched and read about so-called 'O'Keeffe country' and the many other peoples who have made their claims to it. One of the most sparsely populated states in the country, New Mexico is often celebrated for its great emptiness, spanning cosmic distances, here and there pinched into towers and jutting escarpments. But in truth there was never a desert more cosmopolitan. From millennia of indigenous society, to the indelible influence of Spanish colonialism, to the 'Anglos' and their artistic fascination with the 'Land of Enchantment', in this self-titled 'tri-cultural' state, the legacies of countless generations have left every mesa and valley daubed in social and cultural significance. By the time we arrived, the idea of a 'true' representation had become an impossible illusion. To which vision of New Mexico exactly was I hoping to 'do justice'?

‘The Land of Enchantment’ was a phrase that stuck in my mind. It is the official nickname of New Mexico, and footnotes many a postcard and mug in bold yellows and reds. ‘Enchantment’ was also the word used by Max Weber to describe society in which the sacred and spiritual play an active role in daily life. I thought of Weber every time ‘the Land of Enchantment’ smiled at me from book covers and road signs, and gradually his ideas developed into an apposite framework for reading and interpreting the places and spaces we travelled through. For native Puebloans, discussions of the New Mexican landscape in terms of the spiritual and the sacred is certainly apt. In native tradition, landscape constitutes the literal substance of society. Their prolific use of clay, from pottery to multi-storey buildings, sees the earth itself reimagined in new forms. Distinctive adobe architecture, rising out of the ground like giant termite mounds whose sharp edges have been sanded down to nubs in the high desert winds, could exist nowhere but where they do. More than that though, the land is a backdrop for shared cultural history, in which mythic and ancestral memory blend seamlessly across space and time. In this relationship, which cultural historian William Dodge claims ’represents the deepest level of psychological involvement with their land’, people and place are bound inalienably through histories of association. To document this idea of Enchantment that blurs sacred and secular then, is to cast an eye not only at the stacked clay pueblos, or their residents, but to see their neighbouring rocks and hills in the

context of that association - a reckoning beyond the cold mechanics of any camera to be sure.

This idea of 'Enchantment' shows that understanding landscapes sometimes means asking for more than images can provide, drawing on words and stories, and leaving some things comfortably unknowable. But 'Enchantment' is just the start of Weber's story however. Over the past couple of centuries the process of modernisation has seen logics of scientific truth, rationalism, and social progressivism spread across the world, stripping societies of that relationship with the sacred. By promoting a more factual and utilitarian understanding of the universe and our place in it, modernity, claims Weber, can corrode the moral and spiritual fabric that binds people together under a shared social identity: a process he calls '*Dise*nchantment'. New Mexico has never seen the level of industrialisation undergone elsewhere in the U.S, and the native populations there are among few in North America that have weathered colonial pressures, sustaining much cultural and cosmological continuity. For many of the 'Anglo' aesthetes who moved to or visited New Mexico from the east coast during the 20th century however, it was exactly this urban *Disenchantment* from which they sought respite in the high desert. Shortly after New Mexico's admission as a state to the Union in 1912, New York socialite and patron of the arts Mabel Dodge arrived in the Pueblo town of Taos, and brought with her a succession of visiting artists and writers. Dodge's early attempts to establish an artistic colony in New Mexico were strongly influenced by a nostalgia for the reciprocity of communal life and the endurance of the sacred in society; both so absent back in her native New York. Indeed many of the artists who have since explored and represented the area focus on the seemingly immanent power of its landscapes and natural spaces; the piercing light and the grandeur of the desert landscape enabling clear-headed communion between the self and the universe. This attention to the individual experience was typical of modernism in art and the desire to reject the universalising narratives of the Enlightenment in favour of a more subjective view of the world. Georgia O'Keeffe herself is often described as the 'mother of American Modernism', a movement that sought to plumb the depths of individual human perception in a world that was becoming increasingly fragmented and unfamiliar.

What would Weber have to say about this? Is the artistic experience a continuation of the 'Enchantment' described of traditional society? I would say not. Whilst it is true that neither Puebloan culture nor modernist artists pursue a rational or scientific understanding of the New Mexican landscape, they are nevertheless motivated in very different ways. By curating an approach to land that tries to distance itself from modernity, the Anglo artists still in effect responded to its ideas. To be its opposite necessarily meant keeping one eye on the thing they were rejecting. Where the mutuality between native society and landscape is embedded within a culture that is shared, the artistic experience as expressed in painting or poetry is fundamentally an individual one. In a final variation of the concept, some scholars have come to call this reintroduction of the spiritual to a secular world 'Re-enchantment'. While both Enchantment and Re-enchantment describe a state of spiritual sensitivity then, Re-enchantment still exists as a



self-conscious response to a previous Disenchantment, and so is equally a product of modernity.

Unpacking these distinctions throughout the course of our trip, I began to ask myself where I was positioning myself, as the latest eye presuming to speak for New Mexico. Was I responding to the landscape itself, pimping its geological magnificence? Was I there to push back against O'Keeffe's visual monopoly on the look of the land? To remind Tate-goers that the Pueblos were there first, or to focus on my individual experience, to the exclusion of all the former? There was a time when I took photographs of things that looked to me as though they wanted their photo taken. Now I felt as though every composition was a choice made, a statement of what should be seen and what left out, pinning me to some point on Weber's progression. It was the only place I have been where it was possible to feel completely alone in the land, and yet totally self-conscious. It seems New Mexico does that to a person, and by all accounts I am not the first or last to pace the desert paths with a powerful sense of being an outsider.

Should we be redesigning New Mexico's licence plate then, to welcome us to 'the land of Enchantment, Disenchantment *and* Re-enchantment'? Perhaps not, but I have come to feel it is a place best represented by its heterogeneity, and its strange and at times awesome incoherence. In my photography I have tried to maintain an awareness of the different layers of culture that exist within this land, by abandoning any particular stylistic or thematic patterns.

There is hardly a human to be found in my images, yet I am keen to show their traces, their ways of interacting with land. To that end, my chosen photos contain the visible manipulations of the earth in adobe architecture from Abiquiu to Santa Fe. They wander the natural spaces that act as vessels of invisible knowledges. And occasionally, they cede a little space for the land to speak for itself, if such a thing is possible.