



THE WORK

Sunset in the Yosemite Valley, 2007
Lambda print, 114.3 x 81.3 cm

The Deepest Natural Crack in the Earth's Crust, 2005
Lambda print, 114.3 x 81.3 cm

Big Bob, The World's Oldest Rock, 2005
Lambda print, 114.3 x 81.3 cm

Swamp (Day), 2005/2006
Lambda print, 152.4 x 121.9 cm

Forest, 2005
Lambda print, 114.3 x 81.3 cm

Swamp (Night), 2006
Lambda print, 152.4 x 121.9 cm

All images © Henry Carroll

Henry Carroll would like to thank his model maker,
Nigel Howlett.



NATURE IS A STAGE IN Henry Carroll's photographs. The mystery and majesty of the North American landscape is the set for his *American Places* series.

An eighteenth-century conception of the Sublime springs to mind when we see these images: they appear to allude to the awe of the New World and its topography which was common at the time. However, whereas pioneer painters such as Bierstadt, Church and Cole and photographers such as O'Sullivan and Jackson attempted to capture the wide expanses of the American landscape, here Carroll is investigating the redundancy of the idea of the unfathomable majesty of nature. Carroll satirises what post-colonial studies would call the American *cultural imaginary*: the way the United States has projected its ideological preoccupations onto the American landscape, and then used that landscape to construct a sense of identity. Thus, he shows us a jetty winding nonchalantly through a murky swamp, a picnic bench sitting incongruously in a saccharine forest clearing and a rock fenced off for safe contemplation.

Man's presence is felt: he has left traces behind, converting the landscape into an attraction ready for consumption. A sense of nature's wild and untamed beauty has been lost. For instance, in *Forest* a glade is marked out as a picnic area where visitors are kindly reminded that this is where they should eat their packed lunch. In *Big Bob; The World's Oldest Rock* the eponymous attraction is referred to with fondness, as though he were a friend from way back. A culture of entertainment has taken over. The scenery has been safely packaged: nature has been delimited in an attempt to understand its essence and to fathom its boundaries.

Although loosely based on actual places, Carroll's landscapes are fictitious. The artist has worked closely with a model maker to build a unique stage for his images. The dwarfed picnic bench is no more real than the gigantic trees that surround the clearing in which it sits. Although his places appear at first to be incredibly convincing, just as on a stage set, any possible sense of the Sublime ends in fact at the edges of the model and through the cropping of the photographic image. The breaking of the sense of reality leads to the loss of what Walter Benjamin called the *aura*: the sense of reverence we feel when in the presence of art which possesses great cultural value. The recognition that the landscapes are not real provokes the further recognition that sublime representations of nature are always symptomatic of the *cultural imaginary* rather than objective reflections of *reality*.

Carroll's images do not document a constructed reality, but rather attempt to capture the gap between reality and the aforementioned *cultural imaginary*. In other words, he uses references to the Sublime — and therefore to a certain conception of landscape — to probe the limits of that term's visual vocabulary. Under Carroll's scrutiny, the idea of using nature to convey an impression of the unfathomable breaks down. As a result, the work ceases to be sublime: once we have fathomed the work's craft what remains is symmetry and harmony. Beyond the layers of artifice, what remains is beauty ❧

American Places

Henry Carroll

THE ARTIST

HENRY CARROLL is an artist and writer based in London. A graduate of the Royal College of Art, his first book, *'Fourteen Zebra'*, was published in 2006.

THE WRITER

EMILY BUTLER is a writer and translator. She is currently an assistant curator of international visual art exhibitions at the British Council, London. She is currently working on touring the *'Turner Prize Retrospective'* in association with Tate Britain