

Final Frontier Art, for a Cause

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Contemporary landscape art almost inevitably carries with it a politically charged message, especially as the world's natural wonders and resources become ever more scarce and endangered. Even if the artists behind the work claim otherwise, they're helping to fight a good fight in a world being developed into oblivion.

The geopolitical rationale is particularly pointed, and put in our face, in photographer Jeff Jones' project "A Wilderness Worth Saving," now at the Corridan Gallery on Milpas Street, a wonderful and newish space on the scene. In an exhibition partly benefiting the local Community Environmental Council, Jones shows his inspiring images taken in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge. What emerges is a view to die and to fight for.

As most know, this final American frontier is being threatened by the Bush administration and its oil cronies, and any effort to help promote the cause of the land's preservation and purity is laudable. But what gives Jones' photographs an extra measure of allure is his sentient eye for both grandeur and subtlety in his pictures.

Naturally, the northerly landscape itself speaks volumes and conveys a unique, rough beauty without an artist's help. In his most striking pictures, Jones finds ways in which the implicit scene before him and touches of visual expression -- his own personal input -- are interwoven.

An already dramatic shot of a steep valley to mountain peak incline is the subject of "Similar Yet Opposite Slopes." But the drama is further accentuated by the mysterious blanketing of shadow on all but a sliver of the scene. A dreamy sensibility is at work in the aerial shot "Arctic Olympus," as we peer at a rough mountain face through an opening in thick fog.

The title tells the visual subplot in "Contrast in Color and Contour," in which craggy rock outcroppings with red moss in the foreground contrasts the lyrical spread of grass-covered valley and meandering streams far below. Plant life disappears in the inviting rocky bleakness of "Above Timberline, Sheenjek Valley I," like a study in geometric forms.

By default, the most impressive works in the gallery are Jones' epic-scaled, panoramic views, created through the seamless stitching together of multiple exposures, rather than the conventional panoramic camera method. The technique allows him to convey the gaping majesty of the scenery.

Of the epic images, "Fall's Red Brush Strokes" views the Sheenjek Valley from above with patchwork of trees and red autumnal vegetation.

In "Oneric Autumn," the composition's bottom half is filled with a brown and golden flatlands, from which the mountains rise precipitously.

Jones understands that good nature photography is much more challenging than it may seem. When it's good, the medium requires a careful balancing act of composition and contrast, and the providential luck of catching the right light and right angle at the right time.

As idealistic and pleasing to the eye as these pictures are, they also come equipped with an underlying sense of angst, along the lines of a desperate preservation impulse. The subtext in Jones show might be: "This is what we stand to lose." Bush and Co. should take heed of the message, as should all fossil-fuel hogs, from Hummer-wielders on down.