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### Land of Opportunity

Walking into *Virgin Landscape: Representations of Women and the American West*, I was initially taken back by the exhibit. Due to my experiences at other museums, I had a preconceived notion that I would see three-dimensional objects, intricate sculptures, and engaging displays. Although I was expecting something completely different, I was pleasantly surprised by what I observed. This exhibit has two rooms with evenly spaced, mostly black and white photographs that are hung against the crisp, white walls. The rooms promote both a professional and tranquil atmosphere. *Virgin Landscape* mainly features photos of women and the environment, although a few photos include men too. These photos consist of old, young, nude, and dressed individuals. By studying the photographs, one can learn a lot about each individual pictured. Who he/she is, their personality, and their true authentic self all come out in each photograph, which evokes raw and real emotion. *Virgin Landscape* features four sub-sections, and I chose to focus on the “Indigenous Women and Landscapes” section.

*Virgin Landscape*, which is on display until March 19, 2017, is conveniently located on the Santa Clara University campus in the de Saisset Museum. It features photographs by over twenty different artists such as: Ansel Adams, Judy Dater, Imogen Cunningham, Edward Weston, and Janet Delaney; and it is guest curated by Professor Bridget Gilman and her students. The topic of this exhibit could not be more perfectly timed. “*Virgin Landscape* provides an opportunity for in-depth discussion of contemporary issues of gender and environment within

our own society” (de Saisset Museum). In light of recent environmental issues such as global warming and the ongoing fight for equal rights for women, this exhibit gives us, as college students, the opportunity to reflect upon our history and what is currently going on in our world. This exhibit allows us to think critically about these issues and it enables us to explore our opinions. *Virgin Landscape* is a healthy, peaceful expression of ideas about gender and the environment, which will hopefully lead us to have empowering discussions. It can also encourage us to take action on these crucial issues, and participate in activities that we normally would not, such as peaceful protests, in order to make an impact.

The first picture that caught my eye, *The Burden-Basket – Coast Pomo*, was photographed by Edward S. Curtis. It is of a Native American woman from the Pomo tribe standing in a field. The field is the background of the photograph, and is slightly blurred in order to put an emphasis on the Native American woman. Wearing a thick, long-sleeved plaid shirt with a long skirt, she is dressed conservatively and covered in clothing from her neck down. As an accessory, she has a small, patterned scarf around her neck. In one hand, she has a wooden stick with rope tied around it, which she uses as a tool to collect seeds. A thick strap, made from woven straw-like material, is wrapped around her head to help her carry a basket. This large and hefty basket, full of harvested seeds, is clearly a burden and looks as if it is causing her pain. However, her face, especially her longing, troubled eyes and wrinkles, suggests sadness and pain beyond just the basket. It is unclear what this pain is from, but it is most likely from the hardship of being both a Native American and a woman in 1924. It is clear that life is difficult and an ongoing struggle for this Native American woman.

*Navaho [sic] Sacred Mountain of the East* by Laura Gilpin is a black and white, landscape photograph that captures both the beauty and authenticity of nature. Gilpin began

photographing the Navajo people in 1931, and she displays her passion for this group of people through this scenic picture of their homeland. The bottom of the picture gives up-close details of the ground such as jagged rocks and cracks. It is harder to see the details of the ground as it leads up to the mountain on the horizon, but it is overall mostly flat terrain. The sacred, snow-capped mountain at the top of the picture is relatively small in size because it is in the distance. Nature is represented as serene and peaceful in this landscape. There are no people, animals, or any forms of life here, just the calming presence of nature. The caption of this photograph discusses the landscape, “While Gilpin’s aerial perspective captures the beauty of the mountainous vista, viewers are also able to understand that the West was not simply a serene landscape for the taking, but rather a home to the native peoples there” (Emily Mun, SCU Student Curator). The caption informs viewers that the absence of people does not mean that they did not live here. The title of this artwork indicates that the Navajo people inhabited this land. The absence of life in the photograph helps to showcase the beauty of nature and how precious it is. This piece of artwork encourages students to cherish the environment and be appreciative of it. It is truly amazing that the Navajo people were able to live in this marvelous, sacred place.

The title of the exhibit, *Virgin Landscape*, is both intriguing and thought-provoking, “Referring to land as a virgin is a centuries old phrase used to perpetuate notions of ownership over pure, untouched territories ripe with opportunity” (de Saisset Museum). *Navaho [sic] Sacred Mountain of the East*, perfectly fits under the title of the exhibit, and particularly applies to the phrase, “ownership over pure, untouched territories ripe with opportunity”. This photograph displays vast amounts of land that were full of potential. Inhabitants of this rich and resourceful land, the Navajo people were the only ones that populated this land. The title of the exhibit also refers to women. Historically, virginity was important for women living in

patriarchal societies. They were thought of as pure, and were expected to remain this way until marriage. *Virgin Landscape* also alludes to the fact that women were untouched and able to be controlled by men. As a whole, this exhibit explores the changes of women's roles in society, making a connection between women and the environment. As shown with the Native American woman that collected seeds in *The Burden-Basket – Coast Pomo*, it is clear that women were stuck with certain responsibilities that they did not want to do. In contrast, a photo of Marilyn Monroe from 1952 is showcased in this exhibit as well, and the caption talks about her striving for self-improvement. This points out the differences in freedom and opportunity that women had between 1924 and 1952. The variety of women and time periods displayed in *Virgin Landscape* gives different perspectives on how life was, and allows us to see changes throughout our history. Although society has a long way to go in terms of gender and environmental issues, this exhibit does a good job of addressing these issues.