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Review of *Saskatchewan: Uncommon Views* Photographs by John Conway

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Saskatchewan: Uncommon Views. Photographs by John Conway. Essays by Sharon Butala, David Carpenter, and Helen Marzolf. Edmonton: University of Alberta Press, 2005. xx + 135 pp. Photographs, bibliographical references. \$29.95 paper.

In his acknowledgments, John Conway writes: "I have 'gone out photographing' with only one other person in my life, my friend Garth Abrams. When we arrived at a place, we usually walked off in different directions, each preferring our own way." That statement defines *Saskatchewan: Uncommon Views*. As a Saskatchewan landscape photographer, I too resonate deeply with the solitude the Great Plains invites, if not commands. Conway's spartan landscapes form the mouthpiece for a haunting lament shared by all who choose to spend time alone here. To recognize these unadorned one hundred sweeps and unpretentious corners is to acknowledge our own unfinished edges, and to confront vast space as an end in itself rather than a medium through which to escape into wishful thinking.

The enigma, I believe, has to do with the push-pull, love-hate, hot-cold dualities that the land fosters. Initially it can be a daunting proposition to spend long periods of solitude in a place that feels like nowhere.

Conway's landscapes, laced with their patches and traces of human intention, past and present, invite us to show up alone and to pay full attention. As a chronicler, he records, not as an occupation but with an enquiring mind. By being totally present, hunched into a tripod, he allows the landscape to speak in ways that present-day occupants might not hear, perhaps because the all-too-familiar scenery has become a mere backdrop to the task of feeding a family or conducting a profitable agribusiness.

A common reaction might very well be "Now why would you want to take a picture of that?" The most poignant answer lies in the images themselves. Each photograph evokes its own dialogue with the viewer. I particularly appreciate the generous layout of one image per double page. The book is designed to invite one to linger and contemplate rather than, like big business interests, to plow through the landscapes. The accompanying text is provided as a mere whisper, the pictures speaking louder than words.

The essays, though not essential to the book, provide three unique frames through which to gain

perspective on Conway's epic portfolio. This is a book to be absorbed, if not also dissected.

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