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Distance and Detail

Stephen Strom offers a dizzying Western ride with his landscape photos

By **MARGARET REGAN** ✉

Looking at Stephen Strom's roomful of landscape photographs in the Temple Gallery is like taking a dizzying plane ride through the open country of the West.

You careen down mountainsides, into valleys and up again over rolling hills, crossing deserts and rivers, snatching views that are strangely near and far at the same time. It's not always easy to figure out where you are, either, because the horizon--the faithful line that never fails to ground us in the wide-open West--is rarely visible. And you almost never see the sky.



"Mudhill, Beautiful Valley, Arizona," 1982.

Take "Mudhill, Beautiful Valley, Arizona," 1982. You catch a glimpse of land folded into dry slopes, their gold-baked surfaces rippling endlessly into the distance. Their curves keep right on going to all four edges of the photograph, with no spacious skies or fluffy clouds to intervene, no place markers to bring the slopes back to a human scale. And at the same time that he exults in this compressed distance, Strom insists on detail that tells a story about climate and geology. Deep erosion marks are etched into the hillsides, feathering like tree branches across the desiccated mud.

It's as though a scientist had taken a close-up picture of the earth from very far away. And that's not far from the truth. Strom is a Harvard-trained astronomer turned artist, and he still works at his first profession, as a researcher at the National Optical Astronomy Observatory. He's taught at a number of universities, including his alma mater and SUNY Stony Brook, but he took up photography at the University of Arizona almost 30 years ago.

It comes as no surprise to glean from his artist's bio that he trained with the late Todd Walker, an esteemed UA prof who specialized in colored photographic

abstractions, as well as with photographer Harold Jones. Strom's colors are every bit as eclectic as Walker's. For a photographer who specializes in Western landscape, he has precious few purple mountain majesties and no orange postcard sunsets at all.

He uses a surprisingly subdued palette, favoring pale coral over orange, ochre over yellow, lavender over purple and gray over blue. Though they're regular color photographs, shot with a 35-millimeter or a 4x5 view camera, they have the look of hand-tinted works.

"Badlands, South Dakota," 1982, for instance, pictures the famous cliffs in a delicate violet-pink; the gently curved rocks in the valley are a pearl gray, the plants sprouting from the earth a spring green. The palette in "Mud Hills Near Hanksville, Utah," 1983, does slide toward autumnal, but it's more copper than vermilion, with sage green plants clinging to slopes in coral and brown, and ochre rocks scattered irregularly across the slopes.

And Strom doesn't use the dramatic contrasts between light and dark so typical of his genre. Instead, his pictures are like pattern paintings, with all-over repetitions of similarly toned colors and shapes that give them a distinctive texture.

In "Winter, Green Water Valley, California," 1982, the pattern is formed by small bumps of green trees. In "Overlook From the Comb Ridge, Utah," 1983, it's fluffy bushes thickly growing on the brown slopes. In "Desert Floor Near Shiprock, New Mexico," 1982, it's thousands of tufted plants erupting out of the earth between dust-colored rocks. Tinted a sprightly green, the plants are the picture's only markers of distance: In the foreground, they occur at regular intervals. In the middle, they're more closely clustered together. In the distance, they begin to coalesce, forming thick bands of green.

Strom sticks primarily to the Southwest, to Arizona, New Mexico and Utah, with occasional side trips to California and Hawaii (whose craters prove to be allied, color-wise, with the Southwest deserts). Most of the time, Strom brings his tilted perspective to remote landscapes, still unadulterated and untouched by humans. But some of his most winning images feature tiny Navajo settlements. Set in a vast landscape, and seen from far away, the tiny structures look by turns feisty and hopeless.

In "Winter Overlook, Defiance Plateau, Arizona," 1983, a cluster of homemade houses and trailers clings to a snowy patch of valley in the roller-coaster Navajo land. Overshadowed by the plateau's vastness, its swathes of snowdrifts and clusters of evergreens, you hardly seem them at first. But joined together in a community, they seem to be making a go of it.

Not so in "Abandoned Hogan Near Bluff, Utah," 1983. The traditional Navajo house is set in a benevolent-looking patch of green in the foreground, and the coppery bluffs rising up behind it are lovely enough. But the house is minuscule in this big land, and when you finally notice it, you see that it's dead and splintering. You wonder what's become of the family who built it, and of the traditional life they once led.

Occasionally, the idiosyncratic Strom does perform some of the standard tricks of his trade. He turns in a classic expected landscape-as-body metaphor in "Mud Hills, Nazlini, Arizona," 1982. Dusty violet slopes cascade from top to bottom of the picture, each curve suggesting human flesh.

And at least one of the 21 pictures in the show is a conventional landscape, one that lets you know immediately what it is you're seeing. "Cottonwoods Near Mummy Cave, Canyon de Chelly, Arizona," 1983, has a standard composition, with the top, bottom and middle readily discernible. A muddy river snakes around some trees on the canyon floor; evergreens grow on the copper-colored banks above.

It's a fine picture, but looking at it makes you feel like you've stepped--unwillingly--back into the everyday, your wild plane ride piloted by astronomer Strom done and gone.

Stephen Strom Photographs

10 a.m. to 6 p.m., Mondays-Fridays, ending Wednesday, Nov. 29

Temple Gallery

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