

# KEVIN O'CONNELL

## EVERYTHING COMES BROKEN

These photographs are not intended to make a definitive statement about the economic value, efficiency or public policy wisdom of wind energy. Rather, my goal is to compel the viewer to consider our wind energy future in a broad, qualitative dialogue—a vision within the realm of art and poetry. Jules Gibbs, my friend and poet, kindly agreed to assist me in this task and her elegant text plays an important role in this exhibition: that is, to add the human voice to vast pictures of human structures that are devoid of humans.



It is my hope that this exhibition gives cause for reflection on some of the questions and issues that exist beyond the present dialogue surrounding wind energy. What are we trading away for the promise of renewable energy? Will wind energy forever change the land? What is the fate of the horizon?

For most of us, the new windmills are physically removed from the realities of our lives. They are seen only at a distance: through car windows, in promotional materials espousing the virtues of wind energy or in advertisements selling products or causes unrelated to energy. The modern windmill has become an icon of optimism and opportunity that has taken on a romantic, idyllic presence in the vernacular of “green.” For the exhibit, I wanted to introduce the viewer to the immediate physical presence of modern wind farms and to deconstruct the pastoral myth that has arisen along with them.

I find myself conflicted and troubled over the manner in which utility-scale wind energy development is taking place in the West. As an amateur environmentalist, I am encouraged that as a society we are developing an energy policy that is trying to cope with environmental issues. As an engineer, I am fascinated by the large scale of the machines but disappointed that we are not implementing more efficient technology. As a citizen, I am wary because it seems we are placing the development of this resource in the hands of those who, through shortsighted management and profiteering, have brought us to the brink of financial ruin. As one who loves the land, I am insulted by the lack of regulation and oversight of wind energy development and I am left wondering if this is yet another ill-conceived policy that will have long-lasting negative impacts on enormous tracts of fragile ecosystems.

I grew up in a densely populated industrial area and that experience fostered in me a lifelong appreciation for vast, open places. Since moving to Colorado almost thirty years ago, photographing the spaces and skies of the Western plains has been one of the central passions of my life. For me, time spent in these places is exponentially better than time spent almost anywhere else. I hope for their continued existence.

- Kevin O'Connell

Kevin O'Connell has been a photographer of the American West since 1989, focusing mainly on the state of Colorado. MCA Denver invited O'Connell to create a body of work concerning renewable energy landscapes and to engage in a dialogue about the changing nature of the West as it responds to humanity's ever growing need for energy resources.

Trained as a civil engineer and as an attorney, O'Connell now works as an engineering consultant on water projects, is well versed in issues of the American West and is focused as an artist on discussions concerning how we live in and relate to these Western landscapes.

His time as an artist has been spent wandering what most have historically considered “marginal lands” of the plains and high deserts—environments that are fragile and slow to repair themselves. Beckoned to these vast and open spaces, he has continually been amazed how each year the journey to these places takes longer and longer as development, extractive industry and now the renewable energy boom, expands to claim more of the horizon and the volume it contains.



History, and what we know about our current needs for growth, shows us that the landscape we experienced as children will be dynamically different than the landscape presented to our grandchildren. Public policy will change to accommodate the increased demands of the landscapes of the west and our expectations of these lands will also change.

Photography has long been relied upon to document the fleeting moment between realization and destruction—the realization that we exist as human beings and the destruction wrought by human greed and consumption. During the early years of photography, 19th and early 20th century thinking called for documentation of the American landscape knowing that the encroachment of human endeavor would sully and forever alter the land. It was not until these images were created that a case for preservation and conservation could be made.

Kevin's work for this show poses a number of questions about our ability to view these “marginal” lands as fully valuable—regardless of what they can produce for our energy thirst—and about the value of unfettered space. The work asks us to consider our own presence in these landscapes and to reconcile our own needs, both physical and spiritual.

Energy production has always brought noise and spectacle to the quiet splendor of the landscape, and renewable energy development in the West is no different. Many photographers who focus on the environmental impact of energy production make photographs that look like crime scenes—revealing the evidence of a tragedy. O'Connell's work for this show focuses more on the overriding philosophies that predict change in mindset, tracking the slow erosion of acceptable practices for environmental stewardship, and illustrating the regressive nature of benchmarks for conservation.

- John Grant, Curator for MCA Denver