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Contra Costa landscapes capture artists' eyes

By Robert Taylor
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Do artists live in a different world, or do they just see the world differently than the rest of us?

Ask most people where they would paint or photograph Contra Costa County, and they might suggest Mount Diablo or the oak-studded hills of old ranch land.

The pros head to West Contra Costa as well. They scout shoreline scenery, old shipyards, abandoned factories and graffiti-splashed walls. The industrial design of freeways and bridges catch their eyes, too.

Mundane sights that residents and commuters might not even notice, or might dismiss as eyesores, can be transformed by a painting or photograph. In this transformation, some artists reflect their own hopes for West County.

An old Richmond factory building, with the sky above reflected in a pool of water, looks like a modernistic temple in one photograph. A steep street in Crockett suggests the skewed perspective of a Richard Diebenkorn painting. Close-up photos of graffiti on an abandoned Hercules munitions factory recall abstract expressionist paintings of the 1950s.

Oakland photographer Katherine Westerhout has explored the Ford Assembly Plant in Richmond many times. She notes that it was designed in 1930 by Albert Kahn, one of the renowned industrial architects of its era.

"I think these buildings are like cathedrals," Westerhout says, "and many of them are quite beautiful."

She finds West County "fertile ground" for her photography, which has been shown in galleries across the country.

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The Ford plant doesn't look sad or abandoned to her.

"Quite the contrary, I think the restoration of these buildings is going to revitalize Richmond," she says. "It gives people a sense of context, a sense of pride, a relationship to the past."

Benicia painter Jerrold Turner is also a structural engineer, so it's no wonder that the Carquinez Bridge appeals to him. Crockett is a favorite setting, and one of his paintings from the 1980s, from a vantage point behind the Nantucket restaurant, looks down on the bridge and railroad tracks as if they were somewhere in France.

"Crockett is painted a lot. I think it is probably going to be remembered as Giverny or Arles down the road a bit," Turner says, referring to the French towns where Claude Monet and Vincent van Gogh worked.

Painter Mark Jeziorny, who lives in Crockett, often has chosen Contra Costa County refineries as his subject -- but transformed by color and composition into something resembling Middle Eastern villages.

"I like looking at the structures, the forms, the way they fit into the landscape," he says.

Oakland resident Art Levit and a group of friends from the Berkeley Camera Club pleaded with a demolition contractor to give them just one more hour to photograph an old munitions plant building in Hercules.

It wasn't the building that caught Levit's eye, but the sprayed layers of graffiti that, in close-up, resemble abstract paintings of the American masters.

"This area has such a great wealth of old industrial history," says Levit, who also has photographed railroad flatcars, stacks of wooden pallets and bundles of recycled paper.

"I find it quite beautiful," he says, "both the more natural settings and parts of the industrial and urban landscape that are being reclaimed by the earth."

More of these artists' paintings and photographs can be seen on their Web sites: Katherine Westerhout, www.katwest.com; Art Levit, www.artlevit.com; and the site of Crockett's Epperson Gallery, now closed for seismic retrofit, www.eppersongallery.com. Images of West County are often on view at the Richmond Art Center and Arts Benicia Gallery.

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