

# EVERYTHING IS ILLUMINATED

BY MEISHA ROSENBERG

## THE WORK OF KEN RAGSDALE

PHOTOGRAPHY CENTER OF THE CAPITAL DISTRICT, TROY, THROUGH DEC. 28

**K**EN RAGSDALE WILL TELL YOU THAT he is an artist concerned with the passage of time, and that's true—his photographs convey the flat monumentality of childhood memories. But his work is also invested with particularly American longings and fears about life on the road. In this series, he remembers childhood camping trips along the Lewis and Clark trail. Like a memorable movie image by Antonioni or a photograph by Frank Gohlke, each image uses lighting and careful staging to create a palpable tension between objects in the landscape and the viewer's expectations. His work is complex, despite the repetition of images, and worth getting to know.

Ragsdale, born in 1962, grew up moving frequently, from Walla Walla, Wash., to northern Idaho, and he captures both the era and the Pacific Northwest region. Especially his photographs of campgrounds—*Clarkston*, *Wallula*, *Arlington* (all works, 2008)—reminded me of my childhood in the 1970s. Perhaps it's because of the precisely realized Ford Econoline van circa 1961 that appears in several images. However, most scenes generalize to a universally American atmosphere of dislocation and unreality, that feeling that we're all actors on a cardboard stage. *Wishram* is a good example of this: in it, a trailer drives away from the viewer down a winding highway into a tired but cheerful yellow light. It could be anywhere and any time in America where there are roads and inchoate longings.

He places what he calls "monsters" in his photographs: a barn on stilts and menacing, oversized objects suggestive of grain silos or water towers that look like they mated with scalpels and funnels. These surreal landmarks enhance the eeriness that comes from blank paper props and colored gel-enhanced lighting. The most astonishing thing is that, unlike Gregory Crewdson and David Laundy, who also photograph artifi-

cial scenes, Ragsdale makes all his own detailed architectural props from single pieces of white paper that he folds without using glue or tape. He meticulously draws and cuts out shapes with tabs, and in the final versions, the dotted lines from his drawing phase are visible.

Because drawing is an important aspect of his work, some photos are framed with images of drawings. *Bushes* shows the infinitesimally small lines he drew for branches, and it's not as compelling as the finished photos, but it's still interesting. He told me, "I wanted this process of thinking, sketching, making drawings, cutting out, folding, setting up, taking photos, as this idea that at each stage it's just based on the last stage and it's constantly changing." At the Photography Center, viewers are treated to the actual set he photographed for this series, mounted on a table. Director Katherine Wright delightedly pointed out that the paper barn has doors that slide open, and the tractor wheels turn. It's a rare and generous look at an artist's methods.

Growing up he made shop drawings for his engineer father, and he continued draft-

*tion in Contemporary Photography* at the Metropolitan Museum of Art alongside works by Crewdson and Levinthal. His work also has similarities with Gohlke and other practitioners of New Topographics—photographers who mined an uneasy relationship to industrial scenery and who came together with a show at the George Eastman House in 1975.

It's the America of lost dreams and sinister kidnappings lurking just outside the frame of the picture, where a picnic table has been overturned and a trash barrel rolls on the ground, buffeted by an unseen wind. In *Wallula*, the Ford Econoline and a barn radiate with alien light. One can see the outline of every branch of tree and bushes, and we can see the emptiness inside the van. Ragsdale explained, "When you see the final image you're never really confused as to what it is. It's paper. It's folded paper. But when it's constructed and photographed you know immediately that it's also something else." His unpopulated scenes suggest ambiguous narratives: why did the barrels fall over? Where are the cars going? His life-sized paper station wagon hanging above an escalator in Con-



American unreality: Ragsdale's *Wishram*.

ing at the Pacific Northwest College of Art as a shop tech and as an assistant to sculptor William Moore in Portland. His process didn't really come together until when he was at grad school at SUNY. He was painting when his teachers recommended he create scenes, which he then photographed, and these images took on a life of their own.

Images such as *The Campsite at Night*, showing a Jeep and van outside a barn lit brightly from above, would fit in nicely at the current show *Reality Check: Truth and Illu-*

course B at the Albany airport, *The Quest*, is one of my favorite items there, because it so perfectly suggests the anonymity and narrative possibilities of travel.

A teacher at the College of Saint Rose and RPI, Ragsdale will also have work as part of a group show at the Amrose Sable Gallery this month. But if you've never been to the Photo Center, make it a point to visit. It's a wonderful resource. Ragsdale's photos are an example of the kind of cutting-edge work the center aims to inspire. ■