

Video Game Photography

James Bridle

Ansel Adams's 1968 photograph *El Capitan, Winter, Sunrise, Yosemite National Park, California* has been celebrated for its epic evocation of the American landscape: the blunt head of a 900-metres-high granite monolith rearing over the wooded valley floor. It was also a technical innovation: Adams shot the image on Polaroid's Type 55, a large-format film he'd personally badgered the firm's founder, Edwin H. Land, to devise for him. It could produce both high-resolution black and white images and negatives but it also created its own aesthetic artifact, the 'Polaroid frame look'. As the development gel was squeezed between the negative and positive prints, it pooled in the margins of the frame, producing a distinctive mesh-like grid around the image that has since been Photoshopped onto a million digital images, culminating in the Instagram effects of contemporary mobile photography.

Justin Berry's *Stone Shields* (2012), depicting a high mountain valley scattered with brush and patches of snow, recalls *El Capitan* ... in every way. It doesn't carry any obvious signs of digital manipulation, but it bears out Adams's famous remark: 'You don't

take a photograph, you make it.' *Stone Shields* is a composite of screenshots, created within the virtual world of the first-person-shooter video game *Medal of Honor*: its landscape is entirely digital. It is a composite of composites, as every pixel has been rendered from millions of lines of code and pre-existing textures created by the game's designers, captured within the experience of the game itself (one notorious for its violence and militarism), and ultimately manipulated by Berry. In its artifice, it reveals all the artifice of image-making itself.

New technologies rarely produce radical novelty *ex nihilo*; rather, they reveal the latent processes that called them into being. Theorists may tie themselves in knots to justify or deny the place of the constructed virtual image within the canon of photography but, as Adams knew (and we can see), photography itself is a construct, and all images contain the mechanics of their own making. ♦♦

James Bridle is a writer and artist based in the UK. His most recent solo exhibition, 'The Glomar Response', is at NOME, Berlin, Germany, until 5 September. His writings can be found at booktwo.org

Justin Berry
Stone Shields, 2012,
ink on archival Baryta
paper, 38 × 31 cm

Courtesy
the artist

