

**'Nature For Me Is Alive'**  
**By TERRY ELLIS**  
**Contributing Editor**

Ansel Adams, one of the most famous American artists of this century, was obsessed with how human beings can live in harmony with nature. He chose the camera as his tool and produced images that, in the words of the curator of an Adams exhibit now on tour, "have passed beyond the man to attain mythic stature — they are iconographies of the American West and beauty in the 20th century."

*Icons* is an apt word, since alone in nature Adams experienced something best described as religious — a timeless joy in being alive. Just listen to his words, written from New Mexico in 1944: "It is very beautiful and magical here — a quality which cannot be described. You have to live it and breathe it, let the sun bake it into you. The skies and the land are so enormous, and the detail so precise and exquisite that wherever you are, you are isolated in a glowing world between the macro- and the micro-, where everything is sidewise under you and over you, and the clocks stopped long ago."

And while he experienced that moment in his heart, he believed that other people could experience it, too. So his job as an artist was to capture the spirit and character of living mountains and water, sky and clouds, moonlight and sunlight, in the line and tone of photographs.

Adams could not understand the critics who labeled him an outdated romantic who excluded people from his artistic world any more than he could understand politicians who saw nature as something to be exploited, or religious fundamentalists who were more concerned about an afterworld than preserving this one. Adams bristled at the critics' accusations — he knew that his photographs had everything to do with people. As early as 1943, he wrote in a letter: "Nature for me is alive — just as alive as people. But my next phase will be people in relation to nature; I feel it coming. At present, I am engulfed in teaching, but this, too, is a phase. I cannot force myself into subject matter which is not perfectly clear and justified; every time I have done so I have produced inferior work."

During the last 10 years of his life, Adams devoted himself to the darkroom. He worked to establish himself as "a photographer with a capital P," equal in artistry to a painter or sculptor, says Andy Grundberg, who selected for the current exhibit a broad cross-section of Adams' prints from this period, including his famous landscapes and other subjects less well known.

Even as he worked long hours to prepare a legacy, Adams continued to engage family, friends and the world at large. He was in his 70s and his health was declining, but he intensified his efforts on behalf of the environment and against nuclear weapons, writing and speaking out in hundreds of letters and dialogues. A little more than one month before his death in 1984 at 82, his last letter was published in the *New York Times*, calling on the next president of the United States to eliminate nuclear weapons.

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