



Rape Mustard Seed Field Girl #1, 2003, Lynne Roberts-Goodwin, Courtesy Sherman Galleries

# MELLOW YELLOW

## NOT

Lynne Roberts-Goodwin and  
Her Latest Projects TRACEY CLEMENT

As she covers her entire desk with colour saturated photographs of bright yellow wild flowers, shot against deep blue skies, Lynne Roberts-Goodwin delivers the deadpan comment, "I really, desperately hate yellow." Her explanation seems irreconcilable with the effortless, simple beauty of the photos, yet this contradictory friction between image and artist, or surface and content, almost perfectly sums up her photography.

Despite the fact that she travels the world extensively to photograph wild animals and stunning landscapes worthy of *National Geographic* coverage, Roberts-Goodwin doesn't seek out beauty. Actually, the opposite is true. As she says, "I don't want my

images to be overwhelmingly beautiful, sublime or breathtaking. I look for things that are challenging." To achieve this aim she immerses herself in a location, tries to get a sense of the place and then trusts her instincts, "I get a thread and just run with it, I never cancel out the happenstance or the *what if?*"

In fact, Roberts-Goodwin, Senior Lecturer at the College of Fine Arts, seems to have an uncanny ability to know subconsciously where a photo is. The first photo in her now ongoing yellow flower series came about this way. Roberts-Goodwin was in Rajasthan, India, trying to photograph the wildlife in Bharatpur, Keoladeo National Park, but aside from one cheeky snake, nothing took her interest. Until, one day when she hitched a lift in an old ute, "and suddenly out of nowhere I saw these fields of rape mustard seed that were just this insane yellow." The right subject just appeared when she wasn't really looking.

Roberts-Goodwin recalls a similar serendipitous incident that occurred while she was hurtling down a massive highway in Oman. She glimpsed a woman waiting by the side of the road and had a compelling urge to pull over. She thought, "why am I stopping?" but it all became clear when she saw the woman's luggage, a filthy duffle bag, full to bursting with pots and pans and emblazoned with USA DESERT STORM in bold military text.



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This kind of displaced western artefact, seamlessly incorporated into Middle Eastern desert culture, is part of what Roberts-Goodwin finds so compelling about the region. She describes this process of recuperation as an endless cycle and an example of "that wonderful detritus that exists in the desert. It gets blown in and blown out, blown in, uncovered and blown out."

For her 2005 exhibition, *Disappearing Acts*, Roberts-Goodwin followed this process along ancient trade routes like the Frankincense trail that meanders across Oman, Yemen, Saudi Arabia, Iran, Iraq and Jordan. "Basically I looked for anything in the sand, any flotsam and jetsam; those empty areas that are peopled." She extends this investigation to desert military/trade routes across three continents in *Random Acts*, which will be shown at Sherman Galleries in April, 2007. Roberts-Goodwin describes the resulting photos as being "empty of any incident", a statement which is simultaneously 100% accurate and absolutely false. It is true that in many of her photos not much seems to be going on. Aside from the odd bird, goat or handsome boy in a stiff formal pose, essentially Roberts-Goodwin's landscapes are vacant, but they are far from empty.

Many of Roberts-Goodwin's images have a strong political undercurrent, even though she deliberately shies away from the obvious images of violence and stereotyped clichés that saturate the media. Roberts-Goodwin refuses to overtly engage in politics, instead she takes a more sideways approach. For her, "what an artist can do is show some sort of slippage; it's like patting someone on one side of the face and slapping them on the other."

This is exactly the effect of her most recent yellow flower photographs. Provisionally titled *Last Days in Beirut*, they were shot in

July 2006, just before the most recent war broke out. Close inspection of these seemingly innocuous fields of pretty wildflowers reveals abandoned shoes and camouflaged observation towers; clearly this is a contested territory, a site of loss and trauma. These images carry a potent undercurrent of tension that is all the more powerful for its subtlety. They embody Roberts-Goodwin's confronting realisation, "that I am nothing in all this." Surrounded by momentous events, all she could do was watch and record. Roberts-Goodwin is keenly aware of her medium's strengths and limitations. As she says, "I swear I never think that photography can convey the journey, the experience or the most important part of the act that is taking place."

Roberts-Goodwin intends to call her next body of work *Crawlspace*. For her, this title is a metaphor for the way that the majority of us exist in the tiny spaces of our own experience; where what we are able to see and feel is limited by our virtual confinement. As she explains, "it's that feeling of being anesthetised. As a photographer you can meet many, many people and empathise with numerous causes, but with the majority of cultures, including my own, I can never quite get in or understand... My images can only raise questions."

And while Roberts-Goodwin's personal mantra is "What is it I am looking at?", from photographs of invisible trade routes, to images that capture the moment before an international crisis, what she has really done is dedicated herself to photographing the things that cannot be seen. At first this seems like an impossible paradox, an unachievable challenge for a visual artist, until it becomes clear that Lynne Roberts-Goodwin is doing exactly what photography does best, "being a silent witness to seemingly random acts." ●