

Lucy Gray photography

In Nevada Statement

1994 – 1999

I took these pictures for a book called "In Nevada: The Land, the People, God and Chance" written by David Thomson and published by Alfred A. Knopf in the fall of 1999. These twenty pictures were taken as part of the thirty-five included in the book and the fifty-five that form an exhibition which first showed at the Jernigan Wicker Fine Art Gallery in San Francisco. I had been primarily a portrait photographer but I took the pictures because I was asked to do so by the author, David Thomson, who is also my husband. We traveled with our two small children to Nevada many times over the course of four years. In Las Vegas I would get up at dawn and sneak out with my camera equipment and take the pictures. But in many rural places my husband would drive us all there knowing it would figure in his story and I'd tell him to stop the car along the way wherever I thought I saw a great picture. He rarely suggested a picture to me. He didn't ask what I was taking. He'd occupy the children while I explored.

We hardly ever talked directly about what he was writing or what I was shooting. We intuited similar or supporting views on the state. His book is about a desert in which people have experimented with their ultimate ideas. We test nuclear weapons and store nuclear waste there. We gamble there in buildings that are architecturally what we might have imagined as Hollywood. We get married as fluidly as we get divorced there. We go there to die because of the tax benefits. There is a rigorous belief in aliens in Nevada. I found all of this absurdly humorous.

Visually, the garishness of ego was expressed as neatly in the fencing of the millions of acres of desert as it was in the building of "Paris" in Las Vegas. Calling a road "the Extraterrestrial Highway" is almost embarrassingly ridiculous if you don't believe and yet it is valuable as a tourist to know that the people who live there have sightings when traveling that strip of blacktop. I admit I found it irresistible and created my own sighting at the Luxor in Las Vegas. And then I saw flying saucers in the clouds on another highway in Nevada. Would I have spotted those extraterrestrial vehicles had I seen them in clouds in, say, Massachusetts?

I took another picture in Reno of a gambling casino called the Flamingo that was lighted so brightly at night it dwarfed the crescent moon in the sky. That picture is about perspective, human imagination versus nature, light -- all the subjects deepest in the heart of photography -- and all I did was show up, it was there waiting for me, waiting for a camera in Nevada. The state is a photographer's paradise.