

READER

Virtual Utah

by Fred Camper

John Arndt

When: Through 12/23

Where: Gallery 400, 400 S. Peoria

Info: 312-996-6114

The strange sights and sounds of John Arndt's show at Gallery 400, *Empire*, made me want to revisit Utah. Arndt, who lives in Forest Park, spent a monthlong artist's residency at a former military base in Wendover last year. During a walk in the desert he happened upon a potash plant: large ponds, what looked like salt beds, and earth-moving equipment. "I wasn't sure what I was looking at," he says. "It reminded me of those antarctic photos of ships stuck in cracked ice—without the ship." He found a supervisor, who was surprised that someone was interested in what he did and took Arndt out in a pickup, showing him how the potash separates from the briny water in the ponds. Intrigued by the crystallized salt, and informed that objects dropped in the ponds quickly become encrusted, Arndt later left a manual typewriter, a tire, and a cowboy hat on a pond's shore for a week. These objects are installed with the photos he took and a video he made, along with other objects and photos—often of abandoned buildings and industrial debris—from other sites in Utah. A recording he made in various places, including the sounds of machinery, airplanes, and wind, can be heard in the gallery. The typewriter, *Preserved*, is especially intriguing, partly because it's still recognizable. The tire, *Bonneville Flat*, recalls the Donner party, whose wagons got mired nearby in 1846, which delayed their arrival in the Sierras. All three objects suggest the passage of time and history.

Arndt has long been fascinated by industrial sites and equipment and by the outdoors; he's taken backpacking trips, mostly in the American west, since high school. When he was 11 his father took him to Kentucky's Mammoth caves, where he was struck by their being "well lit, with paved walkways. I remember wondering how they got the concrete down there. I probably had this romantic idea of spelunking, exploring some uncharted territory, and instead it was a very controlled environment." He thinks the visit initiated his interest in mediated versus direct experiences.

After high school Arndt worked in a Chicago dairy, did construction, and eventually attended college in New Mexico for two years. Around 1982 he moved to a rural area of Oregon, where he ran a cafe for a couple years. After he closed it, looking for another creative outlet, he decided to take two art classes at a local college, then got a bachelor's degree. In 1993 he earned an MFA from the University of Illinois at Chicago. Inspired by his backpacking trips, he'd developed an interest in maps—mediated presentations of the world. "In grad school I did a series of close-up photos of topographic maps, looking for the

language that cartographers use. One photo was a close-up of the word mine.” After graduating he worked for five years at the Brookfield Zoo building “fake environments”—making rotting trees out of metal and concrete, for example. He felt complimented when a woodpecker was seen pecking a painted tree in one of his murals. Though he doesn’t want to create openly political art, his work has long had an environmental aspect. For one early piece he tied cloth diapers to his car’s exhaust, which created brown stains, and exhibited them in a lidded can.

Empire is less about aesthetic presentation than it is about the place depicted—and the inevitable limits of depiction. Visitors can take home a free copy of the CD and read Arndt’s “liner notes”: texts describing the place each recording was made and identifying the sounds. In fact his initial idea was “to see if I could make a landscape just through the use of sound.” In his gallery talk, Arndt emphasized the region’s history—the pilots who bombed Hiroshima and Nagasaki were trained at the military base he was visiting. Swat Team Meth Lab consists of a torsolike target and 12 photos of two houses, complete with furniture and mannequins, used by the local sheriff for practice raids. Coming upon them unexpectedly on a walk, Arndt found a bullet-riddled “woman” in one house and shell casings on the floor.