Tracy Hills

Yogan Muller
UCSC Arts & Ecology Festival, 2026

Transcript from the recording's auto-generated captions, lightly edited for clarity.

[Recording begins mid-introduction.]
...based in LA. Today I'd like to talk to you about Tracy Hills, which is this new publication. I have a copy here, and a limited number of copies with me. I'll be out front if you want to see it - not just on the screen, but if you want to touch it. It's a very special book. It's a two-volume collaboration, or two-volume dialogue, between myself and my friend Ryan McIntosh. I invite you to look at it and touch it, because it's a very special publication with some embossed structures and textures. So I'll be out front after the brief presentation here.

It's a two-volume collaboration. It came out about two months ago, so it's fresh off the press. It also features essays by curator Britt Salvesen and Greg Foster-Rice, who is in Chicago. So between 2021 and 2024, we photographed Tracy Hills, which is a new master-planned community in the Central Valley, about an hour east of San Francisco. We photographed this rapid emergence from grazing land to a grid of 5,000 new homes, until a 14,000-acre blaze engulfed all three sides of the new development.

It's July 2021, and Ryan, under the cloth here, is driving back from San Francisco on the 580 freeway. He sees those large billboards announcing new homes, future villages like this one. He calls me and convinces me to go explore this new city under construction. I said, sure, let's do it. There was no defined project, though. We wanted to have fun. We wanted to just explore this new place, to photograph it. There was no project per se; there was not even a book project. All we wanted to do was have fun photographing this area. And this is the resulting image, shot with an 11x14 view camera - a big camera, and a sail, especially on that day, because it was a very windy day.

Here you can also see the same billboard on Google Street View. That was February 2021, a bit before our first trip. And in a matter of 12 months, the entire area was graded, as you can see here in a street view from March 2022. For context, this is where Tracy Hills is in the Central Valley. You can see the Bay Area, and it's right there, along the 5 freeway, where the 5 and the 580 branch off.

When we first drove to Tracy Hills, it was 2021 and the Dixie Fire was raging up north. I still remember - I'm not from here, I'm from France - it was the first time for me driving up north and seeing the entire Central Valley shrouded in smoke. It left a big imprint on me. I had this impression of driving through the landscape of the Anthropocene. That was my initial thought.

In terms of scale, this is roughly the footprint of Tracy Hills. You can see those two lines: it's roughly 2.3 miles on this southeast-northwest diagonal, and about 1.6 miles the other way, just to give you a sense of scale. You will also note burn scars on this Google Earth view, which are from one of the fires that we documented - and this is also how we concluded the project. That was in June of 2024. Here's a partial catalog of houses you can buy in Tracy Hills.

And so, based on our shared concern for humanity and the ecological crisis, we began photographing in August of 2021. Here's the first pairing of our work. It's been fun, because our work

is very different. I'm a digital native; my friend Ryan is still working with an 8x10 view camera, and on our first trip he was actually using an 11x14 view camera, like I mentioned. This is another pairing, the third one, and the fourth one, really highlighting the differences in terms of photographic styles and syntaxes and aesthetics. And yet we were turning our lenses to the same phenomena, the same motifs, the same textures, the same abstractions, if you will.

Greg Foster-Rice, who wrote an essay in the book, really wanted to focus on trespassing, the act of trespassing, because all of the pictures you just saw are the result of trespassing. We didn't have permission to take pictures in Tracy Hills. That's obviously in the essay, but there's also the notion of trespassing in terms of how those images, showing this crude reality of the materials and the forms and the shapes of Tracy Hills - how those very forms intrude on our conception of what a house is, how it was built, and why it's standing here.

We were also in dialogue with the New Topographics, the very seminal landscape photography exhibition of 1975. In a way, our work riffs on this quote. If we just read this last part - it feels like it was written today, but this is Lewis Baltz reviewing The New West by Robert Adams in 1975. So it was a big challenge for us to riff on this kind of quote and make references to the New Topographics, because how do you challenge this exhibition? How do you do that? So we went into the houses. Here I have selected a few pictures by Ryan, and then mine.

It was sometimes interesting to see, for example here, how very intentional those piles were. I saw sculpture. It wasn't accidental by any stretch of the imagination, in my eyes, so I took great care in taking a picture of this. Ryan also photographed these piles of essentially drywall. I also wanted to mention that an architect, at an exhibition we had in LA in May of 2024, walked up to us and asked if this is what we found in Tracy Hills, in those interiors. We said yes, and he couldn't believe that they wasted that much drywall. For us it was a moment of revelation. We realized at that point that it was a very, very wasteful enterprise. So we really wanted to photograph the interiors with that in mind, having this sculptural approach, like I said.

And then also talking about the hills that were, in a way, obliterated. It used to be grazing land. Here you can see them from inside a house, using a flash and looking outward. You can see what I believe is scaffolding crisscrossing the hills, and it was, for me, this statement of the hills being torn and completely ravaged by urbanization.

Like I mentioned earlier, our shared influence is, you've guessed it, the New Topographics, a seminal landscape photography exhibition that opened in the fall of 1975 - which is kind of funny, because we launched the book at Paris Photo in November of 2025, so almost exactly 50 years later. It's a big influence for us, especially the work of Robert Adams and Lewis Baltz. I've selected a few iconic images from them. This is by Robert Adams, shot in Colorado in 1969, in and around Denver. You can see how urbanization is encroaching on the land. You can also see it here, with this important series by Lewis Baltz, The New Industrial Parks near Irvine, California, shot in 1974. Or this image from the Park City series.

We have no knowledge of construction materials, but it became really clear that what we saw and photographed in Tracy Hills was very similar, if not completely identical, to what Adams and Baltz photographed in the 1970s - for example, with the Park City series. And so for me, one way to further the conversation the New Topographics launched in the 1970s was to really try to bring those forms

into the ecological crisis: into droughts, into the water crisis, into the housing crisis. Importantly, one major difference between, for example, this image and what we photographed in Tracy Hills is that this is a suburb, and Tracy Hills is an exurb. There's a more theoretical discussion there, but it's an important difference.

And then it's May-June 2024. We thought we were done photographing when the Corral Fire erupted and engulfed all three sides of the new development. Here you have a picture by Ryan. You can see the complete and finished houses here; this is Tracy Hills phase one. The 580 is right here, the 5 freeway is this line here, and you can see the damage caused by the Corral Fire. ... I don't know what happened here. And then a picture that really gives you a sense of scale, looking at the hills right underneath those power lines. It's always funny when you walk landscapes like these; you find yourself in some strange situations. I wasn't very confident wrestling a metallic tripod and camera right underneath those massive power lines, and Ryan was just fine - he was carrying a view camera, which is essentially made of wood. But this is just to give you a sense of scale.

At the same time, in May of 2024, we started a conversation with Radius Books. It's a Santa Fe-based nonprofit whose mission is expanding art publishing, with a donation program. And this book came to fruition a year later. You have two volumes, one unit, as you saw. This is the slipcase. You have my volume here, vertical color photography, and then Ryan's volume, horizontal black-and-white photography.

A quick spin through those two volumes. My book is a little more experimental. My friend Ryan, who is highly respected, has a more purist approach to photography. He wanted to reproduce all his images at scale - no cropping, no transformation whatsoever, exactly 8x10. By contrast, I'm not too precious about the photographic image, although that's part of how I learned and studied photography in Europe; sometimes people would tell me, oh, this is just an image. I've grown out of that now, but my volume is a little more experimental. You can see it here; this is the first spread. We decided to use short-cut pages to create clashes between spreads and between images.

So it really reflects my experience of walking and photographing in Tracy Hills: this big clash of forms and colors and textures and procedures and grammars, human-made and natural materials, and so on and so forth. You really have that overwhelming feeling as you flip through the pages, of this big whirlwind of forms and colors. And it also says something about Tracy Hills - the town, not the book - because they really wanted to build 5,000 new homes on those hills. Those short-cut pages really insist on that superimposition of this massive project right there. They had to build those houses right there. So it says something about the violence and the scale of the enterprise.

And then we have Ryan's, which is a little more linear in terms of sequencing. We start with this image, the first one: we start with the natural landscape, with the hills, the untouched lands. And then we descend into the town, and then we enter into the houses, and then we go back out and go back in. So there's something more linear, and yet something that I believe really arrests you. Anyway, I love this image. It was so weird sometimes, but it was so much fun. I'm talking about it, and maybe it has a very serious tone, but we had so much fun being out there taking pictures and trying not to run into any security or workers.

And if I talk about the book in its conception: it takes a village to make a book. Here I really want to underscore the value and the importance of collaboration, because this is a collaboration, but making

a book is a big collaboration as well - from your supporters and collectors as an artist, to your publisher and their team, but also the entire cohort of highly skilled professionals who help you bring the images you can see on the screen to images you can see on the printed page. This is Ryan and David Chickey, the director of Radius, examining the first proofs. Offset printing has a huge learning curve; I was taking a lot of notes. That was in Verona, in Italy. I counted 11 or 12 different steps from having an image on your screen to having an image on a page through offset printing. It's a lot of quality control, a lot of baby steps you have to take to finally get the book finished.

And I want to conclude with this funny image of Ryan with one of the pallets of prints, to again really underscore the importance of collaboration in a time of political strife and ecological peril. Tracy Hills, the book, wouldn't have existed without a shared concern. Ryan and I shared a commitment to learn about ourselves, about photography, and about the world through the making of Tracy Hills. And I really believe that this is a testament to collaboration. It is really by coming together that we can achieve great projects, raise awareness, create new ways to engage with our current condition, and, I hope, inspire change. On that note, if you want to look at the book, not just on the screen - if you want to see it, if you want to touch it - I'll be out front. Thank you for your attention.