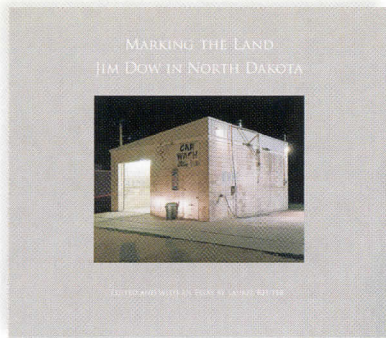


Dow's "Red
Apple Cafe,
US 59
and 200."



P O R T F O L I O

Marking the Land: Jim Dow in North Dakota

By Jim Dow

Center for American Places/North Dakota Museum of
Art; 224 pages; more than 180 photographs; \$35

PICTURING THE PLAINS

There is a temptation to describe Jim Dow as a latter-day Walker Evans, even though most of Dow's work is in color. As did Evans, Dow records the varied shapes and surfaces of vernacular culture—architecture, signage, interiors—relying on the rendering power of the 8x10 view camera. As with Evans, Dow's photographs are largely empty of souls. But while Evans insisted to the point of arrogance that his work, despite its descriptive nature, was the highest art, Dow has no such pretension. His images are artful, to be sure, but they are less about the artist and more about the people who create the things depicted. Despite their precisionism, they are far more human than Evans's pictures.

Yet the totality of Dow's new monograph, *Marking the Land: Jim Dow in North Dakota*, makes it clear that the photographer's images are not judgment-free records of weathered roadside attractions. The best of them quietly critique our attitudes toward the particular landscapes we inhabit. As in this coffee-shop interior (which seems quaint in the instant before its grotesqueness registers), nature is more often conquered than abided, its creatures made harmless. In Dow's outdoor images, signs and sculpture of buffalo stand in benignly for the real thing, once nearly wiped off the Plains. (By our count there's only one live animal in the book, a distant, ironic cow.) Yet Dow's timeworn building facades have a plainness that suits the prairie's nondescript topography and camouflages the dense decor of their interiors, which are crammed full as if to nullify the starkness of North Dakota's great outdoors.

Dow started this project in the 1980s and finished it after a two-decade hiatus during which social and meteorological forces altered the state's landscape. Had the common art he loves been washed away, or its makers moved to more populous ground, you wouldn't know it from these photos.—R.H.



