Spotlight

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AG'S STARK BEAUTY

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TURNING FRESH EY

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MARK CROSSE/THE

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YES ON THE VALLEY

FRESNO BEE, **above; OTHER PHOTOS COURTESY OF BARRON BIXLER**

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and Bixler, in town to visit his parents, drives me in his black Audi TT to a part of Fresno I've never been: a section near North Avenue east of Highway 99. We pull into the parking lot of a chemical storage facility. The buildings are vast and seem to stretch into the distance. Across the street is a stretch of modest homes.

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Barron Bixler discusses his photos

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Many people would say that an agricultural landscape is a "natural landscape" — despite mammoth evidence to the contrary. Why do you think this is the case?

You're right, and to me it's a strange and rather unnecessary idea to cling to. But I'm not sure I'm the best person to break down this association because the reasons behind it are probably different for everybody. My hunch is it's probably part mythology, part nostalgia, part product marketing and part policy rhetoric. And

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nia: A Landscape of Dreams," which depicts a much more idealized vision of the state, with gorgeous vistas and unadulterated open spaces. Cano wanted to balance that view with the "gritty realities" of land use.

"I wanted to create a contrast with the dreamy landscapes," she says. "Barron has this unflinching eye, and he uses that to look at the land."

Human power

There's an even deeper level to be uncovered in Bixler's work that I find most fascinating of all: the issue of control.

"What I hope also comes through in the project are tensions between order and chaos, control and powerlessness, development and decay, ascendancy and decline," he says. "You'll see that the machinery of agriculture is central to this project. But I don't mean this in a strictly literal sense. It's a metaphor for control — over land, animals, crops and people, but also over things like infrastructure, inputs, financing, production, distribution, marketing, information, regulation, policy and, in the case of genetically modified organisms, the very fabric of life."

Humans have a tremendous sense of dominion over the land. The impact extends far beyond agriculture, whether it's building vast cities, clearing forests, mining for minerals or constructing superhighways. Even with its deliberate near omission of the human form, something about Bixler's work in "A New Pastoral" sparks a re-examination of what it means to be, well, human.

And what of the one photograph in the exhibition that includes a person?

It's a shot looking down at the hands of a farmworker standing in a field of dry grass. At the opening of the exhibition, Bixler overheard a woman remark to a friend: "Those are my father's hands, my brother's hands."

He was moved.

"To have someone say that about your work — to recognize something of themselves in this frankly quite challenging set of pictures — is almost unbearably humbling," he says. "Moments like that are rare and powerful."

► The columnist can be reached at dmunro@fresnobee.com or (559) 441-6373.

COURTESY BARRON BIXLER

PHOTOGRAPHY

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maybe it has something to do with the fact that agriculture is fundamentally about our relationship to other living organisms — about the cycle of birth, growth, decline and death represented by the seasons. And so we allow ourselves to ignore the fact that modern agriculture is increasingly about overriding and overwriting what you might call the natural order.

How do you respond when people ask if your show is "pro-agriculture" or "anti-agriculture"?

I turn the tables and ask them what they think because I'm genuinely interested in how people interpret the pictures. Plus I love feedback, whether positive or negative. Personally, I try to resist coming down on one side or the other because I think you lose credibility, reach and impact when you become the mouthpiece for a particular movement or point of view. I suppose I'm happiest when everybody's a little uncomfortable.

For an extended interview, go to fresnobeehive.com.

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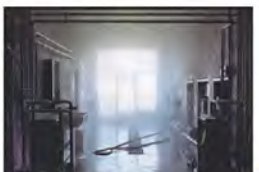

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