

dust bowl refugees



This work was made in response to Dorothea Lange's Farm Security Administration photograph of six tenant farmers who have been evicted from their farms in Hardeman County Texas. It's Sunday morning, June 1937. Hardeman County is dry wornout flatland up by the panhandle.

A tenant farmer is given land to work, a house of some sort to live in, and, if he lacks his own, farming implements, a mule, seed and fertilizer; and perhaps money for food during lean months. In return a portion of his crops belong to the landlord, as figured by an elaborate system of percentages; and he must reimburse any loans, with interest. The landlords felt that they themselves got the worst of the deal and when presented with the opportunity to mechanize the farms and eliminate the tenants they took it.

The Lange photograph is formal and confrontational, the men still and vertical as fence posts, timeless. These are powerful men, calm and defiant and totally unequipped to battle time and change; their strength and competence are meaningless in this situation. Lange quotes them: Who we gonna fight? If we fight, what we gotta whip?

As I worked their faces and figures altered to become men I might have known, and Hardeman County shifted about 340 miles northeast by north to the Kansas prairie of my childhood to become part of my own heritage, my own past. An old building behind them pins the figures flat across the front of the photograph, formally framing them, keeping their space shallow and their time firmly within that Sunday morning. As they fell into fiction the building fell away into a distant horizon and the exhibition turned toward landscape. Making this installation has become a way of representing earth and

distance and time. The men are ghosts. The men are long gone, moved on or died. The land is still there and it's still dry wornout flatland.

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