

## Middletown

### AMANDA MEANS

#### Zilkha Gallery

THE TANGLE of undergrowth and fallen branches in the foreground of one of Amanda Means' recent black and white landscape photographs is suggestive of

barbed wire, while the wildly spiky trunk of a fallen tree in another presents an intimidating obstacle for the eye that wishes to enter the tranquil orchard scene that lies behind it. These photographs, shown at Zilkha Gallery of Wesleyan University in Connecticut, reflect a provocatively ambivalent attitude toward nature; the backgrounds of many of these 18 large and exquisitely rich prints offer glimpses of the inviting side of nature for which a city dweller longs, but the foregrounds imply—ever so subtly—violent struggle. Some of the dense and rather sinister knots almost writhe with rampant decay and rampant regeneration. And yet throughout the work there is a sense of the utter matter-of-factness and impassivity of natural struggle.

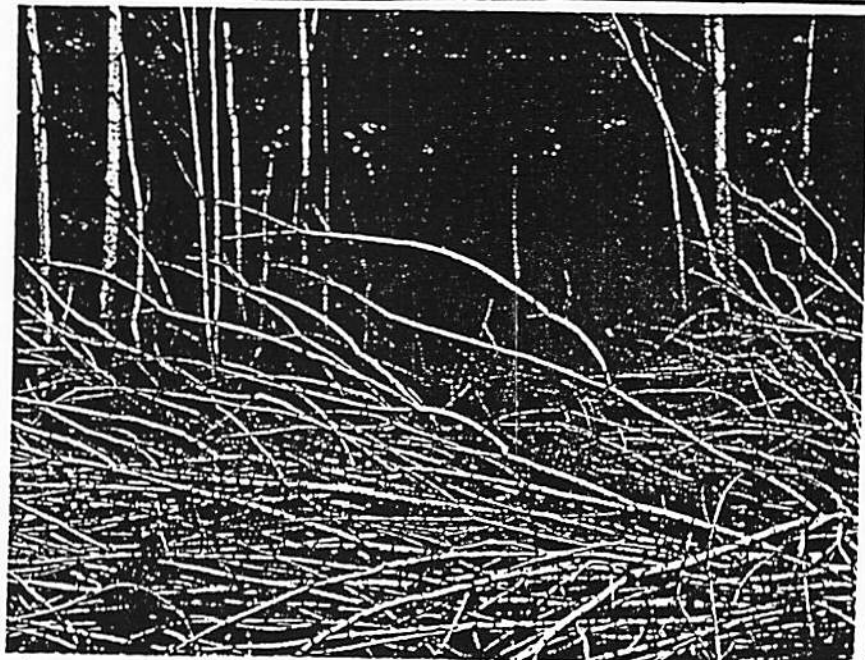
In some of Means' images sawn logs or bits of refuse suggest the encroachments of civilization. This is a subject that has been explored extensively by Robert Adams, among others, but Means' photographs are more subtle, more complex and more beautiful than his. While Adams lectures, Means implies. Her photographs resonate with ambiguous overtones: Nature, too, destroys. We are part of nature. Nature is hardly defenseless against civilization.

Even in nature's wounds we may find a certain perverse beauty.

Means draws on a rich and diverse body of photographic and painterly tradition. In her works one finds the visual intricacy of Lee Friedlander coupled with the absolute straightforwardness and clarity of the great 19th-century photographers of the American West. Both in her fresh, unsentimental view of nature and in her large (20-by-24-inch) and unobtrusively virtuoso prints there is much to remind one of Carleton Watkins' mammoth-plate views of the Yosemite Valley.

There is also much in Means' work to remind one of Abstract Expressionism. Viewed as abstract configurations, some of her compositions call Pollock's classic drip paintings to mind. Indeed, Means maintains a very fine balance between the painterly and the purely photographic, between abstraction and literal representation, between an obvious personal susceptibility to the beauty of nature and a keen intellectual objectivity. She is a very *graphic* photographer, whose images are marked by an unusual sensitivity to line. Throughout Means' rank tangles are lines of extraordinary grace, delicacy and strength.

—Richard Whelan



In Amanda Means' *Untitled*, 1981, gelatin silver print, 20 by 24 inches, the tangle of fallen branches suggests violent struggle. Zilkha Gallery.