

# Los Angeles Times

Saturday, January 30, 2016

ARTS & CULTURE

By Liesl Bradner

## Elena Dorfman's 'Sublime' photography imagines a more scenic L.A. River

An image in photographer Elena Dorfman's new series on the Los Angeles River shows a magnificent landscape with quintessential Spanish-style, red-tile-roof L.A. homes nestled in green hillsides, a glassy blue stream in the foreground lined with verdant foliage. Unfortunately, you can't visit this scenic paradise because it doesn't exist.



"Sublime: The L.A. River 8," 2015 (Elena Dorfman / Modernism Inc., San Francisco)

"It's a snapshot of L.A. that existed in my memory," Dorfman said of her interpretations of reality. "I embellish what I think tells a story."

In Dorfman's series, a single picture is actually a collage composed of hundreds of minute details compiled from her original photography and historic imagery of the river drawn from the collections of the Natural History Museum of Los Angeles County and USC. Dorfman incorporates elements from various photos and constructs layers to create one glorious, highly embellished landscape. The labor-intensive approach can require months to complete a single piece.

For the last two years, the Boston native explored the 51-mile stretch from Canoga Park to the sea, gathering 20,000 images in the process. Despite having two pairs of shoes disintegrate from chemical runoff, Dorfman was



"Sublime: The L.A. River 7," 2015  
(Elena Dorfman / Modernism Inc., San Francisco)

struck by the magnificent bird life and vegetation. Her photos incorporate architectural and graphic elements while exuding an ethereal, painterly quality in the landscape tradition of the Hudson River School.

For the mountains image at the top of this page, the water was photographed in Long Beach. The homes were a community near the San Gabriel Mountains, captured from an area by Forest Lawn Memorial Park. Another part of the composition was the flood channel along Victory Boulevard.

"Sublime: The L.A. River," Dorfman's show running through Feb. 27 at the Modernism gallery in San Francisco, merges the not-so-distant past, when the L.A. River was a neglected flood control channel collecting graffiti and garbage, with a more appealing future: Recent revitalization plans have attracted kayakers, joggers and artists with calls for more bike paths and park space.

"I couldn't look at the river without mountains flanking it and began thinking of the Hudson River School and Thomas Cole's 'The Savage State,'" Dorfman said, referring to the 19th century painting of a majestic wilderness.

"Some friends from the Westside see the river as a glorified sewer," Dorfman said. "For me it's a conundrum, a sanctuary and place of great sadness. A mystical and beautiful place that kept calling me back."

**"Elena DORFMAN: Sublime: The L.A. River" will be on view at Modernism Inc. in San Francisco through February 27, 2016**

**[www.modernisminc.com](http://www.modernisminc.com)**