



## Trenching Lakewood, California, William A. Garnett

### Trenching Lakewood, California

William A. Garnett  
1950  
Gelatin silver print  
7 5/16 x 9 7/16 in.  
2000.32.25



### Questions for Teaching

Take the time to look closely at this photograph. What details do you notice?

What shapes do you see? (*squares, triangles*)

What kinds of lines do you see? (*short, long, parallel, diagonal*)

Which lines and shapes are repeated and thus form patterns?

How do you think this photograph was taken? Why? Imagine where the photographer would have to be to take this image. (*Garnett simultaneously piloted a plane while photographing out the window.*)

Garnett took several photographs of Lakewood over time. What do you think happened next? Why do you think so?

Imagine you are walking along the roads of the construction site. What do you notice? How do you imagine the neighborhood will eventually look? What do you see that makes you think so? What do you notice about the plots of land designated for individual homes (i.e., in terms of space, homogeneity, and convenience)?

### Background Information

*I was hired commercially to illustrate the growth of that housing project. I didn't approve of what they were doing. Seventeen thousand houses with five floor plans, and they all looked alike, and there was not a tree in sight when they got through.*

—William A. Garnett

Lakewood, located on the outskirts of Los Angeles, was the location for the second major postwar housing development built in the United States. Some 17,500 tract houses were constructed assembly-line style on 3,500 acres of cleared farmland. Mass production made the

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houses affordable, so a greater number of people could take part in the American dream of home ownership.

The developers hired William Garnett to document different phases of the subdivision's construction from his Cessna airplane. He often photographed his subjects early in the day, so the angled light would emphasize their otherwise flat-looking forms. The photographs serve a utilitarian purpose but also demonstrate Garnett's impeccable sense of design.

In *Trenching Lakewood, California*, stacked lumber appears for the foundations, utility poles are installed, and the main roads are carved out.

### **About the Artist**

William A. Garnett (American, 1916–2006)

*I was discharged and heard you could hitchhike on the transport taking GIs home. The airplane was full, but the captain let me sit in the navigator's seat so I had a command view. I was amazed at the variety and beauty of these United States. I had never seen anything like that—in a book, in school, or since then. So I changed my career.*

—William A. Garnett

William Garnett took his first cross-country flight after serving as a United States Army Signal Corps cameraman during World War II. What he saw below inspired him to learn how to pilot a plane so he could photograph the American landscape. Garnett's aerial photographs resemble abstract expressionist paintings or views through a microscope. As landscapes, they do not have the conventional grounding of a horizon line. All reveal astonishing patterns that are not seen from the ground.

Garnett honed his elegant design sensibility well before earning a pilot's license. Before the war, he attended Art Center College of Design in Los Angeles. Later, he headed the Pasadena Police Department's photography lab. In the 1940s and 1950s, he began to rack up flying hours around Los Angeles, speaking out about the area's increasing air pollution. He illustrated Nathaniel Owings's *American Aesthetic*, a book about land-use practices.

During ten thousand hours of flying, Garnett simultaneously piloted a plane while photographing out the window—traveling above every state and many parts of the world. His light 1956 Cessna plane allowed him to fly to just the right location to capture subjects with precision. At first, he experimented with a variety of camera formats and films but found that two 35mm cameras (one loaded with black-and-white film, the other with color film) best suited his needs.

Garnett's work defies the stereotype of aerial photography as purely scientific and devoid of artistry. He became the first aerial photographer to earn a prestigious Guggenheim fellowship.