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## Rural Doesn't Equal Empty: Lisa M. Hamilton's 'I See Beauty in This Life'

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Lisa M. Hamilton's "Almond Hulls. Lost Hills, Kern County" (2011)

*I See Beauty In This Life*, photographer [Lisa M. Hamilton](#)'s exhibition of her own work as well as images she pulled from the California Historical Society's vast archives, attempts something seemingly impossible: in Hamilton's words, to "cover a history dating from 2012 all the way back to a time when California was essentially nothing but rural" in about 150 pictures. This presents a gargantuan curatorial challenge. How do you address California's geographical vastness, the scope of its industries, and the numerous complexities of its rural labor history?

"Rural" is different than "empty," and the exhibition's images nearly all emphasize the vast abundance of this land. Hamilton's photograph of almond hulls piled into gravelly mounds ("Almond Hulls. Lost Hills, Kern County") defeats any sense of a horizon, while an image from 1921 documents what seems to be hundreds of feet worth of sacks of C&H sugar. Even the trees, turned to props in jokey logging portraits, stretch both ways within the frame. Fields stretch and roll like oceans. Whatever you can say about California, it sure isn't small.

Hamilton's work as an artist and curator hits many essential

themes in rural California's history. There are images of rodeos, mining, orange picking, and logging. An unquestionable gem within the exhibition is a six-print cyanotype panorama of 1893's construction of the Santa Ana Canal, which transformed the brutal Central Valley into miles of fragrant navel orange trees. But for the thin, dark pipeline cutting through chalky mountains and over scrubby terrain, inland California held few discernable landmarks.

“Nearly all versions of the story focus just on picking an orange ripe from the tree and leave out everything that comes before and after that reward—they leave out the work,” Hamilton writes. “Sweaty, dangerous, exhausting, manure-encrusted work. But also gratifying, worthwhile, indeed welcome, wouldn't-trade-this-life-for-anything work.”

Indeed, Hamilton's historical picture is more rosy than not. There's little exploration here of the miseries endured by migrant workers, the exposures to pesticides, backbreaking labor, environmental damage or rampant exploitation that built California and continue to power it. For that, it's true we can turn to John Steinbeck, Upton Sinclair, the lyrics of Woody Guthrie or the work of WPA photographers like Dorothea Lange. There's also little mention of the troubles faced by rural Californians today: health and drought and miles of corporate farmland crowding out independent farmers. (But Hamilton's photo series [“The Landscape of Water in California's Central Valley”](#) does more fully document the problem of water shortages.)

But there is also no one story of rural California. *I See Beauty In This Life's* tale is one of rural industry, of abundance and the happiness within the work it took to create and maintain California's agricultural wealth. In this sense, it's a leap into the glories and the beauties of the state's recent past.

[I See Beauty in This Life: A Photographer Looks at 100 Years of Rural California](#) is on exhibit till March 24 at the California Historical Society, 678 Mission St., San Francisco.

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