



## *Earth With Meaning*

by Alan Cohen



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### Commentary

Abstract photography and these kinds of linear compositions are not everyone's cup of tea, but they are among my favorites. In fact, Alan Cohen's book, *Earth With Meaning*, is one of my favorite books in our library. That said, however, if that were *all* these images are, I have no doubt that the audience for his book would be only those very few of us who revel in purely abstract photography. What makes Cohen's project special is that it goes far beyond that.

The great Achilles' heel of photography is that it can far too easily degenerate into a mere recording device. In order for photography to rise to the level of art, it needs to be more than a reproduction of what the world appears like to human eyes. That is to say, photography has to be about some form of *meaning*—an idea more than subtly hinted at by Cohen's title. In his project, the meaning encapsulated in every image is that the line is more than a mere line. Each line is a demarcation that divides earthly territory as a boundary. In the four images at the left, the lines of demarcation are (starting with the upper left and working clockwise): the first Olympic finish line, the former location of the Berlin wall, the line dividing the state of New York from that of Vermont, and the line delineating the separation between United States territory and the United Nations.

With that information, these four images are no longer merely abstracts but rather an illustration and encouragement to ponder the nature of artifi-

cial, man-made boundaries. We have carved up the natural territory into these intellectual units which separate us both arbitrarily and by agreement. *Earth divided* is the intellectual component of Cohen's photographic project. Without that premise, these are merely linear abstracts—perhaps even *meaningless* linear abstracts. This is a terrific example of the importance of communicating the premise of the project in order for viewers to truly understand what they are looking at.

Not every photographic project requires such an intellectual premise, but my contention is that far more projects do than do not. Expressed a bit more simplistically, every photography project has a point of view that is often a precondition of the motivations and intentions of the photographer. Without understanding that point of view, we can be left scratching our heads as to the meaning of what we are seeing or left wondering if there is any meaning. *What* we photograph is evident in what we see; but *why* we photograph is perhaps it is even more important, at least if we intend to communicate anything that makes our project worth the time and effort to both produce it and view it. Cameras reveal *what*; it is the job of the photographer (via the text that accompanies the project) to explain *why*.