

EXHIBITION

Shots of Silicon Valley

Fred Turner

In the mid-1990s, as the Internet entered our daily lives, a chorus of pundits sang out that the laws of the material world were giving way to those of information. This was especially true in the semi-arid flatlands running south from San Francisco. In the popular imagination, Silicon Valley became a place to turn knowledge into bits and to leave behind the hulking, filthy factories of the industrial era.

Last year the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art commissioned the Italian photographer Gabriele Basilico to profile Silicon Valley. The record he made reminds us that for all the intellectual power unleashed here, the Valley remains a place. Its landscape is shaped by its history, and especially by a series of cultural collisions. Mexican day labourers, Asian coders, Air Force officers and former hippies have added to the Valley's physical character while sustaining its entrepreneurial ethos.

Basilico trained as an architect, and his pictures rarely include people. Yet they invite viewers to read the everyday lives of local citizens from the evidence they leave behind. In Silicon Valley, Basilico works his way up and down the area's two main freeways, pausing only occasionally to pay homage to the glossy headquarters of high-tech firms such as Apple

and Google. More often, he takes his camera to a nearby hilltop and snaps panoramas of condominiums, parking lots and the sinewy tarmac of the freeways themselves.

These still images repay meditation. One depicts an abandoned 1930s blimp hangar at NASA's Moffett Airfield in Mountain View. Grass has cracked the pavement around it and toxins leach from its shell. Even without the airmen who staffed it, the hangar reminds us of the military's presence and role in the Valley's growth.

Basilico also turns his lens on the Victorian houses of San Francisco, making wide-angled colour views of the city's parks and skyline. To anyone more than 40 years old, and especially a Californian, these images recall the countercultural revolution that found its legs in Haight-Ashbury. Even now, the 1960s still supply the rhetoric of individual independence and creativity that rings throughout Silicon Valley. More than a few software engineers still sport the long hair and libertarian values of the Summer of Love.

Ironically, this is also where Basilico's method breaks down. His focus on the large-scale elements of the region's infrastructure inadvertently privileges those who have had the power to build companies, highways and



cathedrals. There is another Silicon Valley, one of pollutants lurking beneath the land and parents working in multiple minimum-wage jobs. Only one image here points to that Valley: a photograph of a nineteenth-century Catholic church in San Jose. Compared with the post-modern blandness of snap-to-grid office parks, the church looks strangely ornate.

It is a sturdy reminder that for more than a century, the Valley has depended on migrant labour for everything from agriculture to light manufacturing, restaurant work to software coding. The Valley's cosmopolitan puzzle includes service personnel from Vietnam and the Philippines and engineers from India and China. It is tempting to imagine these mobilized workers

as packets of information, shuttling across the landscape as if the laws of matter really had been repealed. These photographs remind us they haven't. Silicon Valley's success continues to depend on its infrastructure — material and cultural. ■

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Gabriele Basilico: From San Francisco to Silicon Valley is at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art until 15 June (www.sfmoma.org).

Fly image wins photo prize

Joanne Baker

This image of a live *Drosophila* larva in a water droplet has won the photographic competition that forms part of celebrations marking the 200th anniversary of the Royal Netherlands Academy of Arts and Sciences (KNAW). Winner Robert Markus, of the Biological Research Center of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences in Szeged, received the award at a ceremony on 25 February in Amsterdam.

The jury was chaired by KNAW president Frits van Oostrom, and included Dutch scientists and journalists as well as *Nature's* editor-in-chief Philip Campbell. It selected *Hemocyte Compartments of the Drosophila Larva* (In Vivo — Live *Drosophila Larva* in a Drop of



Water) as the best portrayal of the 'magic of science', the bicentenary's theme.

Markus took his photograph to show how

blood cells affect the fruitfly's immune system. "By identifying blood-cell-specific genes, we can generate transgenic *Drosophila* strains in which the blood cells express green fluorescent protein, so that they are visualized *in vivo*, making *in vivo* research possible on the immune system," he explained.

KNAW's bicentenary celebrations (www.knaw200.nl) include talks, exhibitions and guided tours of the academy's Trippenhuis Building headquarters. They also feature a mass experiment on human 'waves' propagating through a crowd of soccer fans in Rotterdam's Kuip Stadium (the team FC Feyenoord celebrates its 100th anniversary in 2008) and a tour bus taking science to schools. ■

Joanne Baker is *Nature's* Books & Arts editor.