Nature’s Restoration

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INTRODUCTION

American history is peppered with riveting experiences. But it becomes a fascinating topic of a different kind through artistic freedom using a camera. The combining of artful composition and creative editing further brings this very same history to a new colorful and vibrant life. As nature strives to reclaim that which man has created, I believe photographic arts can restore the beauty, if not the function, of those very subjects. Insight into the past can become relevant again. “The photographer, wherever he stands is tiny, and the camera is a small thing that plays a significant part and gives the whole thing meaning.” I enjoy documenting existing structures that may no longer be habitable, or objects that are no longer regarded as worth saving. In my opinion these are keys to the past that are worth safeguarding.

When I photograph old places or once treasured possessions, I see the purpose of a past that today’s culture finds hard to imagine. Empty barns, discarded furniture and antique automobiles now share the landscape alongside more contemporary structures. The further removed we are from the past, the more desensitized we are to a history rich in cultural information and alive with artistic value.

CAMERA TECHNIQUES

I began exploring different cameras looking for the medium that best suited my goals. In addition to using a digital camera, I also used a fully manual 35mm film camera, as well as medium and large format cameras. My first attempts at using a 35 mm camera involved a red filter and many rolls of infrared film. The project was disastrous at first, but eventually
ended with satisfying results. Infrared film is extremely sensitive to light and very easily fogged. By the time I shot my thirteenth roll of infrared, I finally managed to get an image (figure 1). I didn’t care that half the barn was chopped off or that the horizon line was skewed. My euphoria was in direct proportion to my anticipated success.

Next, I moved to a medium format Holga camera, which is a plastic toy camera prone to light leaks and producing soft focus images. Every time a roll of film is loaded into the camera, it is necessary to seal potential light-leak areas using black electrical tape. Yet, in spite of the light leaks, this camera is popular and fun to use simply because of unpredictable results. While this is part of the allure for some, I was not willing to sacrifice what I thought had the potential to be a great shot to the unknown qualities produced by the Holga.

Moving from the medium format Holga to a larger format, I chose to simultaneously shoot with a Pinhole camera and a 4x5 view camera. Both used the same type of film and film-holders and appealed to my sense of multi-tasking. The lens-less Pinhole camera I chose closely resembled a size 10 children’s shoebox. “Station wagons have been used as pinhole cameras – and rooms in large buildings. Basically a pinhole camera is a box, with a tiny hole at one end and film or photographic paper at the other.” Pinhole negatives produce slightly softer images similar to a camera with a soft-focus filter attached to the lens.

The large format 4x5 view camera is dramatically different than the Pinhole. “A view camera’s movements give you an extraordinary amount of control over the image. The camera’s back and front can be independently moved in any direction: up, down, or sideways, tilted forward or back, swiveled to either side (figure 2).” The downside to this camera is the size, weight and overall bulkiness, thus requiring a heavy-duty tripod to counter-balance the weight
and provide support. The ground glass is overlaid with a grid aiding the photographer in correcting perspective. A large piece of black cloth covers both the ground-glass and the photographer’s head blocking out light to view an image which is seen up-side down. While this was one of my favorite cameras to shoot with, in both media and size, it is cumbersome and requires time to set up. It is not an easy camera to use, but the quality of the final image is highly rewarding.

I learned valuable information while working with a variety of cameras. Digital format not only offered the flexibility I desired, but I realized it was the format I repeatedly returned to for images. When I started working with alternative processes, I chose a variety of styles covering darkroom, inkjet, and computer techniques that would allow me to use both film and digital images.

ALTERNATIVE PROCESSES

Using images from all formats, I began to work with alternative processes such as Liquid Light, Cyanotype, VanDyke Brown, and Image Transfer. The diverse databank of imagery further allowed me to experiment with which type of image best suited the process. Silver halide photo paper is pre-coated paper ready for use in the darkroom. Liquid Light is a firm gel-like solution infused with silver halide and comes in a bottle requiring heat to liquefy. Once a liquid, it can then be easily painted with a brush on any porous surface and processed through the chemicals the same as photo paper. The purpose of this method is to mimic the results of a black
and white image using a variety of surfaces such as tile, ostrich eggs, or even hard woods. The only requirement is that the surface be able to withstand the development process.

The processes of Cyanotype (figure 3) and VanDyke (figure 4) are similar to make, slightly different in processing and completely different in effect. Both require transparent images or objects to be pressed between specially coated paper and a piece of glass and exposed to the sun or an alternative UV light source. Cyanotype produces a cool toned blue image while VanDyke is warm toned with rich browns.

The appearance of the two processes above were similar to the results seen when I began toning black and white archival fiber paper. To start this process, I used a negative, an enlarger in the darkroom, and archival fiber paper. I made prints using a core sample of negatives ranging from 35mm to 4x5 nature and architectural images. While I was able to create prints in the darkroom that were close to identical, this was not repeated when using the toners due to exhaustion of the toner after each use.

The final processes I experimented with were variations of image transfer. The first was a Polaroid Emulsion Lift (figure 5) using a Daylab printer and warm water. The image was transferred to Polaroid film (no longer available) and then lifted from the support and placed on a paper
surface. The second process was an Inkjet transfer (figure 6) using digital images, an ink jet printer, glossy paper and watercolor paper. The digital image was transferred from the glossy surface to a fine art paper with varied effects.

All of these processes added variety to the way I viewed and ultimately interpreted a scene. Infrared helped me evaluate contrast and sometimes see the negative even before taking the picture. Cyanotype and VanDyke taught me to be selective when determining images for a particular style. Image Transfers helped me focus on the distinct parts of the image I wanted to accentuate.

INSPIRATION & WORKS

A friend showed me a book titled Abandoned America by Steve Gottlieb containing similar subject matter to my collection of barns and debris. “I wanted to see, touch, and explore these lost and forgotten objects before they vanished, before they became extinct. With my camera, I have tried to preserve their spirit—to bestow on them a flicker of immortality.”

Where he has traveled across America searching for his beloved subjects, I have remained closer to home. My idea of abandoned America is re-introducing what is recognizable to many, but in a composition that makes it new and interesting. Because of this, I try creating a more personal touch in keeping with the integrity of the location. There is much history to be learned about the places I visit. It is my desire to record these stories alongside these places people have forgotten and nature is slowly reclaiming. As seen on both the cover of Abandoned America (figure 7) and Gottlieb’s website, the similarity between Gottlieb and myself in choosing our subjects is uncanny. However, in my desire to promote
solitude and beauty, I sometimes apply digital methods beyond simple corrections to enhance the brilliance of color or angle to lead the eye. I altered the original image to create a digital hand-colored infrared image (figure 8) emphasizing the truck and using foliage to reinforce nature’s ability to reclaim.

The drawing in figure 9 is another example of the truck image combining photography with drawing. Using a photograph of a leaf seen close-up and printed on matt paper, I hand-drew the outline of the old truck. The truck itself is similar to the one on the cover of Gottlieb’s book, but whereas his images remain in the natural state without becoming a digital illustration, I have transformed my image into two different interpretations of nature reclaiming the detritus that we leave behind.

Using art, science and a little creativity, I have opened my eyes to new experiences inspiring me to share the beauty I see when traveling the road less traveled. A photographer who has impacted and inspired my early style of fine art photography by saying so much with so little is Ansel Adams. “He put together those little fragments of the world in a way that transformed them into a picture.”5 While I have advanced to primarily using digital images with alternative color saturation, I never stray too far from black and white variations as seen in the old truck image previously. And, like Adams, I hope “not to confuse technique with art.”6

CURRENT WORK

Originality defines the artist and determines perception and/or acceptance among the diverse culture known as peers and critics. In Richard Shiff’s Originality he states, “Originality implies some sense of coming first or doing first, a priority or lack of precedent.”7 Because I now
work primarily in digital format using programs such as Adobe Photoshop and Lightroom, how can I be considered an “Original?” Someone else created the programs to include the tools I now use to edit my own work. Does it make me an original because of how I apply those tools? Furthermore, we are bombarded with media advertising and other forms of visual aides, how can we justify calling our work original and not an idea furnished by a subliminal message? If there are answers to these questions, I am unaware of them. Aside from these questions, I believe in the freedom to explore. Using digital media has allowed me to take advantage of some of the more artistic variations of photography involving light, long shutter speeds and image manipulation. I now understand originality occurs at the beginning of image creation and is not derived from the manipulation that follows. While I experimented with different cameras and alternative processes, a style of unique similarities began to emerge in my chosen subject matter. I needed flexibility in both size and color options that were as extraordinary as the subject matter.

As a photographer, part of the appeal lies in the delicate balance between what was and what will be. There is an old house (figure 10) set back in the woods just off a dirt road not far from my home. This house has long been deserted and is leaning dangerously close to the point of falling over. As seen from the road, it appears as though nature is redesigning the landscape and slowly recalling the space it once gave up. The unintended addition of windows created by falling trees provides the casual observer a view of nature in the back by standing in the front. To showcase this home, I chose infrared to increase the bold contrast of black and white, keeping the focus on the home.
and demonstrating that beauty is sometimes more fully appreciated when seen in monochromatic colors.

Photographers continuously look for opportunities that will challenge their skills and provide an avenue to showcase a body of work created through the use of new and unique concepts. I was presented a unique opportunity when new owners of a home originally built in 1931 and later used as a bed and breakfast invited me to tour shortly after taking ownership. Many possibilities filled my mind and would later not only challenge my imagination, but stretch my technical abilities to new limits. I grew to know the home and the young couple who were beginning the daunting task of remodeling and I began to feel less like an intruder and more as a kindred spirit. As I photographed throughout the home, there were places that made the hair on the back of my neck stand up. At a certain point I started to question whether or not I truly believed in the existence of the spirit world. I explored nooks and crannies, the unique angles, the hidden rooms that make an older home truly interesting and full of character through the eyes of a photographer. While the inside was appealing, the outside captivated my imagination. Using natural light, a flashlight and long exposures, I merged multiple images to create the image in Figure 11. Color and angle were used to highlight the sense of unease, but also invite a feeling of comfort. At the end of my journey, I was certain of two beliefs: First, I am a better photographer for having this experience, and second, I do believe spirits really exist!
CONCLUSION

Nothing and no one escapes the ravages of time. It is a singular influence with an all-encompassing grasp. Somehow, in some way, everyone leaves a part behind for others. History becomes the lines marked inside doorframes documenting the growth of children. Sometimes it’s the treasure hidden in loose floorboards or between the rafters and long-forgotten knick-knacks packed away in the attic trunk. Other times it’s the floorboards themselves, identified by the cut, shape, grain, or color. As a historical photographer, I am honored to sift through and explore that which others no longer hold valuable, or deem worthy of preserving. As an artist and a professional photographer, I can help bring new life and new perspective to those objects abandoned and forgotten. I hope to continue finding new ways to make the past relevant in the present and the future.
ENDNOTES:


BIBLIOGRAPHY:


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ILLUSTRATIONS:

Figure #1
Kelly Parrish
*Untitled*
Silver Gelatin, Infrared
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Figure #2
Barbara London, Jim Stone and John Upton
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Figure #3
Kelly Parrish
*Untitled*
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Figure #4
Kelly Parrish
*Untitled*
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Figure #5
Kelly Parrish
*Untitled*
Polaroid Emulsion Lift
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Figure #6
Kelly Parrish
*Untitled*
Inkjet Transfer
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Figure #7
Steve Gottlieb
*Untitled*
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http://www.gottliebphoto.com/node/7
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Kelly Parrish
Old Travels
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Figure #9
Kelly Parrish
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Figure #11
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