

WHERE I LIVE I HOPE TO KNOW

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2006-ongoing

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The morning sea of silence broke into ripples of bird songs;
and the flowers were all merry by the roadside; and the
wealth of gold was scattered through the rift of the clouds
while we busily went on our way and paid no heed.

We sang no glad songs nor played; we went not to the vil-
lage for barter; we spoke not a word nor smiled; we lingered
not on the way. We quickened our pace more and more as the
time sped by.

The sun rose to the mid sky and doves cooed in the shade.
Withered leaves danced and whirled in the hot air of noon.
The shepherd boy drowsed and dreamed in the shadow of
the banyan tree, and I laid myself down by the water and
stretched my tired limbs on the grass.

My companions laughed at me in scorn; they held their
heads high and hurried on; they never looked back nor
rested; they vanished in the distant blue haze. They crossed
many meadows and hills, and passed through strange, far-
away countries. All honour to you, heroic host of the inter-
minable path! Mockery and reproach pricked me to rise, but
found no response in me. I gave myself up for lost in the
depth of a glad humiliation - in the shadow of a dim delight.

The repose of the sun-embroidered green gloom slowly
spread over my heart. I forgot for what I had traveled, and I
surrendered my mind without struggle to the maze of shad-
ows and songs.

At last, when I woke from my slumber and opened my
eyes, I saw thee standing by me, flooding my sleep with thy
smile. How I had feared that the path was long and wear-
some, and the struggle to reach thee was hard!

Rabindranath Tagore, *Gitanjali*, poem 48, 1911

THE BEGINNING: DEAD BIRD AND DEAD PIÑONS

March 2006, I moved from Seattle to Santa Fe, New Mexico. Nora and I started renting a house in Eldorado, a built community about fifteen miles southeast of Santa Fe. It could be considered a suburb of Santa Fe. There are about three thousand homes built on about four thousand acres of land. The development is ecologically sensitive in many regards, for example, there is no fence in any house, each property blends into the other enabling animals like coyotes to move freely. The community has also purchased about four thousand acres of land on the other-side of highway 285 as a preserve. The question in my mind was is there enough water here to sustain this community?

Couple days after we moved in, I found a dead-bird that had hit one of our large glass windows and died, a *house finch*. I took a photograph of the dead bird with my six mega-pixel point-n-shoot digital camera. I titled it *dead bird: tribute to Ryder*. I was familiar with Albert Pinkham Ryder's well-known painting *dead bird*. At that time my friend E. J. McAdams, then the Executive Director of New York City Audubon and his colleagues were conducting Project Safeflight that involved various components, including collecting dead birds that had hit buildings during their migrations and died or injured. They had selected a group of buildings where to study this phenomenon including the Metropolitan Museum of Art. They were successful in convincing many businesses in New York City to turn off lights at night during migration seasons and they were also working with engineers to design bird-safe glass. E. J. told me the number of birds that die in this manner in the United States range somewhere between one hundred million to a billion each year, second most cause of death, next to habitat loss.

At the same time, each day when I would drive from our home to the city of Santa Fe, all along the way I would see vast numbers of dead piñons on both sides of the road. I knew piñon is the state tree of New Mexico.

Both the dead bird and the dead piñons brought a kind of focus in my mind about where I was living, but I did not know what to do with them.

BIRD NEST ON A CHOLLA CACTUS

A year passed, I was diagnosed with borderline diabetes and high cholesterol from years of not taking care of my health and giving lectures on my Arctic project around the country. I had to exercise, and I started walking. During one of our walks, my wife Nora noticed a bird nest on a cholla cactus. I was very intrigued to see an elaborately built nest on an incredible bed of thorns – I fell in love with the cholla. I also started biking with my friends, but being a novice on biking on sandy desert, I would invariably fall trying to navigate in between two chollas. My friends would help me pull out the thorns from my neck and legs. Chollas have a tendency to release thorns whenever something brushes against it. Thus began my love-hate relationship with the cholla. Another year passed, now in 2008, I began to walk and photograph chollas.

Through my Arctic project, now in its tenth year, I have found my process of creating art. At the beginning there has been a picture of death. In the Arctic it was a gruesome picture of a polar bear eating another polar bear (climate change phenomenon) that I photographed in the sub Arctic of Hudson Bay in 2000, and the Desert it was the dead bird picture I took. Death I suppose brings in an intensity of focus that results in a desire. In the Arctic I had a desire to live with polar bears in the wild, in the Desert it was to know where I live. For many conceptual artists, Sol Lewitt, Hiroshi Sugimoto, and many others there is an idea in the beginning and then art making becomes an execution of that idea. For me there is no idea in the beginning, just a desire. Then a combination of lived experience and thought, each informing the other and evolving in an intertwined manner eventually helps me to define a conceptual framework in which I work. But it is the lived experience that is essential part of my creative process.

Over the past year I have walked whenever possible around my home in about a five miles radius. Someday I would walk only three miles, another day it maybe eight. I deliberately kept the camera gear to a bare minimum, a medium-format fixed lens camera, Fuji 690, everything fit in a small daypack. Only thing I did carry extra was a tripod. I photographed cholla cactuses during my walks. There is always a bird nest on the cholla, unless it is dead on the ground. My aesthetic is rather simple, in fact if the viewer was with me on the walk, he/she would see exactly what I see, and to aid that, many a times I explicitly include the path in the photograph. What we see in the photographs is simultaneous juxtaposition of being alive and being dead. In harsh places like the Arctic and the Desert the gap between being alive and being dead I believe is rather small. While we have forgotten that in the Desert, as we have won over it with our technological might, nevertheless

this is true in the ecological sense. From a little distance chollas always look half-dead and this maybe the reason it didn't inspire the imagination of so many artists who have created work in the Desert Southwest including such seminal photographers as Frederick Sommer, Lee Friedlander, Robert Adams, and Mark Klett. Large majestic species like Cottonwood and Saguaro seem to have dominated the photographic practice. The only photographs with cholla I have seen so far are made by Eliot Porter (close up of bird nest with bird on a cholla, Amon Carter Museum collection) and Jean Luc Mylayne (bird on a cholla). These are clearly ecologically inspired works and that maybe the reason why Porter and Mylayne paid attention to cholla and why I paid attention also.

THE DESERT SEEMED ALMOST LIKE THE ARCTIC

My project however is not about the cholla or the bird nest, but my hope to know where I live. The other things we would see in the photographs are things like, creation/construction, decay, destruction, repair, reconstruction and other subtle ecological changes. To give an example, I have been following the idea of decay and destruction and realized where I live is very much like the Arctic. The wind here blows at fifty or sixty miles per hour, which clearly results in decay or destruction of a nest. While the temperature does not go to minus forty degrees as in the Arctic, it does dip close to zero degrees however, and such temperatures with high wind results indeed in frostbite on the cholla and some of them turn red. My primary motif in the Desert series is *Color* (same as in the Arctic) – brown, green, yellow, red, gray... Color and form clearly led to a kind of ecological knowledge that I had not imagined before I started my walks. Also in this series my hope is to depart from the *New Topographic* discourse, where we see man altered landscape or an objective view of the world. While we do see in my Desert work, houses, roads, bike paths, railroads, power lines... it is one of accommodation, rather than critique. I am hoping to raise such questions as - how can we live together with species other than our own, who also inhabit this planet? We have seen much intellectual response to photographs from the work of such seminal artists as the Becher's school photographers and for that matter much photography of the past four decades, where neutrality of observation has become the dominant practice, and a cold objective sense has seeped into our consciousness. I am instead hoping for emotive response with my work - I hope the viewer would feel first and then think. The emotive possibilities I am talking about I believe results from deep engagement - as in the works of Jean-François Millet, Robert Adams, Nan Goldin, and Jean Luc Mylayne to name a few artists.

THE COLOR GRAY AND NEW MEXICO

While looking at my Desert series photographs, Dr. John Rohrbach, Senior Curator of Photographs at the Amon Carter Museum noticed the sliver of gray sky in many images and suggested that I look up at the sky. He also suggested that I visit MoMA to see Bill Eggleston's artist book, *Wedgewood Blue*. So I began a series of photographs in 2009, *Often I look up at the sky and wish for rain*. Art historian Professor Alan Braddock had introduced me to Stuart Davis's gray painting *Electric Bulb*. But instead of an ironic take on New Mexico that Davis did with his gray painting, my gray works are instead one of celebration. The series name is essentially one of the oldest and most desired wishes across the planet. While visitors have come to know New Mexico primarily through expansive, clear, blue sky - it is gray and gray only (that at times results in rain) that makes living possible in this otherwise harsh environment. I think gray is a color of conflict here in New Mexico – while the inhabitants wish for gray (rain), the visitors instead wish for blue (sky).

FICTIONAL POTENTIAL OF LANGUAGE

While the photographs show us subtle ecological processes with color and form, the text in the Desert series takes us to a different mode of imagination. I am using two kinds of text. The first is the titles of the work. Instead of a linear or sequential way of viewing, I would hope to encourage more of a circular or cyclical viewing (an ecological construct). But instead of getting stuck at the end of a circle, I hope for it to be more like tumbleweed that rolls along. There is both circularity as well as linearity of moving along. The titles are specifically done with how I remember a place, either through an object or through an experience. For example, *near the house with a dog, near the dead piñon where birds gather in autumn, near the dead piñon where the mourning doves were singing, where I thought I would eat the fruits in autumn but didn't know how...* This way of naming is clearly inspired by my living with indigenous communities in the Arctic for many years. As time goes on we see some names lose their meaning, for example, *two nests near where I bike* may only have one nest when we see it in the winter as the top nest was blown away by the wind while the bottom one perfectly preserved... With this way of naming and my use of the extended text (below) I am hoping to deflate the idea of truth or fiction in photography. I believe we have spent an incredible amount of intellectual capital on debating whether a photograph tells us truth or is it all fiction. I believe it is neither or rather it is both, what I find important is not such a black-and-white distinction, but how we tell a story – a story doesn't need to be either, it is most likely going to be a mixture of both truth and fiction.

For the extended text, I use a process similar to what a historian does. Usually a historian looks at small local publications of the time to build history. I am mining text from our community newsletter *Vista*, published monthly with contributions by Eldorado residents. These fragments of texts have to do with *seeing*, for example, *on seeing a bobcat*, *on seeing a bear*, *on seeing fallen chollas on neighbor's yard*, *on seeing an unleashed dog*, etc... In these texts, when gathered, I find all kinds of human emotions – joy, excitement, hope, fear, anxiety, anger, frustration, humor... From it emerges not a simple critique but subtle negotiations. Also with such use of text, I am exploring possible limitations of the medium of photography. My interest is in telling a story and perhaps creative use of photographs and language together can result in a story rarely possible with other mediums of visual art.

I have been thinking about “words as image” throughout the course of my Arctic project. Sometimes a group of words can create an image in our mind that may prove more powerful than any photograph(s) that can be made of the subject or idea. During a 2003 Congressional testimony, former United States Secretary of Interior, Gale Norton described the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge coastal plain as, “flat, white, nothingness”. Juxtaposition of these words indeed evokes a powerful image in our mind. In my desert series I am attempting to use text in a manner that evoke images in our mind.

With my Arctic project, I realized conflicting points of view co-exist. I would have never imagined my Desert work would also highlight conflict in our imaginations. “What do you think of a cholla”? An Eldorado resident may say “I love the scarlet bloom on the chollas”, another may say, “I hate these ugly plants and have removed them all from my property”, an anthropologist may say, “it is a plant of the disturbed Earth”, or “it is a key indicator species of native American habitation”, whereas, a rancher may say, “I removed them all from my thirty thousand acre ranch as they compete with grass”, another rancher may say, “I removed them all from my ranch as cattle eats them during times of drought and they die from it”, a native Puebloan in New Mexico or a native Tohono O’odham in Arizona might say, “chollas have been our food for ten thousand years, a few buds have more calcium than a glass of milk”.

PHOTOGRAPHS NOT IN SEQUENCE

In addition to the photographs and the text, I envision the photos to be presented not sequentially or in a grid, but spread through the space, creating a web of interconnections. For example, *near the house with a dog* that I have photographed through various times will not be contiguous but be dispersed through the exhibit space or in a book. My hope is to share with the viewer a little bit of what I experience. For example, when I revisit a cholla several weeks or months later, it is like revisiting an old friend, much to find out. But during this interim, I may have walked many other new paths, and the prospect of walking a new path is also always exciting. So in this regard the exhibit space or a book is a place where viewers without being told or forced a certain kind of viewing are free to discover such possibilities on their own.

I have been thinking about the idea of revisit and the possibilities that the medium of photography offers. When I revisit a cholla in real life, again, and again, and again... I'm always moving forward in time, I can never go back in time. Each revisit enables me with new things and interconnections I see, but I can never go back to see many subtle things I may have and surely have missed with each first sight of a revisit. Whereas with photographs in an exhibit space or book with a non-contiguous presentation, I and the viewer can both move forward as well as go back in time and in both can spend time to notice subtle things that are missed with first viewing, and this I believe is a key strength of the medium of photography. What I mean by *missed with first viewing* however, is not an object or even a relation that exists within the photograph. It is instead a relation that takes its meaning in viewing and in relation to photographs taken earlier or later. This I found a great gift photography provided me with to understand my local ecology. For example, when I see a photograph I took in late spring / early summer, I barely noticed the droopiness of a branch of a cholla, or even if I did notice it, it barely registered as much of anything, except perhaps something structural. However, on examining a later summer photograph of the same plant, I realize the importance of both photographs as significant ecological transformation. Summer rain made the plant branches straight, and plum, and the plant tightened up reducing its spatial expanse. Oddly this transformation of *form* brought certain kind of feeling in me, a drought stricken plant that either could have survived or not clearly now promises to live for a year or more. When I took the first photograph such ecological meaning did not enter into my intention and it only became visible for me on such forward and backward viewing of the photographs. I hope the viewers may discover such possibilities on their own with bi-directional viewing.

My hope is that the *picture frame* is where we begin, but we must leave the picture frame to experience the world, and I am attempting to help the viewers leave the *picture frame*.

ALL KINDS OF DEVELOPMENTS

While biking, my friend introduced me to a place about five miles from my home where a new development is beginning to take place. While we have seen many photographs where we have been selling the *view* (famous photographs of Stephen Shore, Robert Adams among others show us that), but this is the first time I am seeing we are selling *ecology*. The title of this small sub-series is *We Preserve to Build | We Build to Preserve*. Instead of being a critique the photographs just end with a question, where the answer cannot be given.

In 2008, the Galisteo Watershed, in which Eldorado is a part of, was seriously threatened by oil and gas development. While my Desert series is rather personal and these photographs are not effective in an activist campaign, I was surely more focused on creating this series, as a personal response to oppose oil and gas development in a fragile and sensitive desert ecosystem. The local activist community of Santa Fe launched a successful campaign in which photographs made by many concerned local photographers played a significant role (mine was useless in this regard) in stopping (for now) these development projects. Little further north in New Mexico such oil and gas development projects are successfully underway.

BACK TO THE DEAD BIRD

In 2009, I continued my photography of the chollas, primarily to observe reconstruction and repair and other ecological transformations. I also noticed the piñon in our property started blooming, something that happens once every six to seven years. Soon I began to notice all the piñons in Eldorado were blooming. I decided to photograph the piñons. The first photograph I took was from inside our living room and it included, one tall glass window with a black hawk decal that looks out at the piñon, a house finch on the piñon, another small rectangular window of the guest bathroom with a black hawk decal. I made the photograph with a panoramic Fuji 6x17 cm camera. In this photograph I attempted to address the issue of the *dead bird* picture I had taken at the beginning of my project in 2006. I titled the work, *looking outside I saw dead birds, looking inside I saw how they died*. This has now become an ongoing work with a ritualistic practice that will involve five panels (2006-2010) that deals not only with the external images of the issue of bird death, but also my own internal psychological struggle to deal with the issue.

SOME PRELIMINARY THOUGHTS ON PIÑON-JUNIPER OLD-GROWTH FOREST

In 2009 I began to walk and photograph piñons as well as junipers with a Fuji 6x17 cm camera with a 90mm lens that still fit in the same daypack I had used in 2008. While with the cholla work I was waking wherever possible, with the piñon-juniper work it became more deliberate and so far three specific paths, *On My Way to the Railroad*, *On My Way to the Powerline*, and *On My Way to the Cholla (near the house with a dog)*. As I started looking at the photographs, I realized these paths are essentially small ecological corridors, and on further inspection of topographic maps I realized these paths that we call Green Belts in Eldorado are built on arroyos. An arroyo, in Spanish means brook, is a dry creek bed that fills with water after a heavy rain or seasonally. I also began to realize that these small ecological corridors support a wide variety of wildlife from small underground dwellers to large avian predators. Unlike the walks I had done the previous year to photograph chollas, these walks led me to small visual clues leading to more visual clues to build a detective story. In India I grew up with Satyajit Ray's *Feluda* and Arthur Conan Doyle's *Sherlock Holmes* stories and I had always imagined I would become a detective some day. In the Desert for a short while that dream came true. To give an example, in 2008 I had photographed many fallen healthy chollas and my immediate reaction (as were my friends' who saw these photographs) was that these are fallen by humans. In 2009 I began to realize there is a whole underground world here. A pocket gopher that lives underground is a nuisance to humans as they destroy any vegetable garden by eating the roots of the plants. Humans in turn flood their intricate underground system with lot of water, hoping to kill these ugly animals but only to realize it was a futile attempt. Pocket gophers also uproot chollas, sometimes living literally right underneath the plant. But these small creatures also serve a critical ecological function, each small gopher moves up to one ton of soil each year that aerates the Desert ground. I also would find cut cholla branches in front of piñon or better yet, up inside the bark of a dead piñon and wonder who the culprits are that moves these thorny branches across some distance, only to discover it is the job of small pack rats. While these creatures are nuisance to humans as they carry hantavirus that can kill humans, they also serve a critical ecological function of seed dispersal. They can cache large quantities of piñon-juniper seeds that can result in later germination of these plants. Also chollas primarily reproduce through cut branches, and the pack rats cutting and moving cholla branches surely aid in the reproduction of the species. This also answered another visual dilemma I had, when I would photograph a large dead piñon and a large live juniper bound at the roots. The pack rat holes are also used by diamondback rattlesnakes. The rat and the snake live in harmony literally sleeping on top of each other during winter months, and when spring arrives the snake is ready to eat its host.

I had never imagined that the American Desert has an old-growth forest. It does and it is the piñon-juniper woodland. The ecologists have begun to define the idea of such an old-growth forest in the Desert only this decade. Having lived in Seattle for ten years, I had developed an appreciation for old-growth forest, but the old-growth forest around our home in the Desert is of a completely different kind. Slowly I am beginning to realize that the land around our home is just as bio-diverse as the Arctic. There are more than seventy species of birds that nest in piñon-juniper woodland and they come from such distant places as Mexico, and other countries of Central and South America. However, as I continued my photography, I began to realize that the old-growth piñon forest in New Mexico might have died in a recent climate change phenomenon. Between 2001 and 2005 fifty-five million piñons, ninety percent of all piñons in New Mexico died from bark beetle attacks, a severe climate change phenomenon that also caused havoc in the Alaskan black spruce forest.

As I began to look closely at the large numbers of dead piñons, I realized even after death these trees continue to provide food and shelter for a wide variety of species – insects come to the trees; wood peckers come to eat the insects and create perfectly circular holes; blue birds and other cavity nesters come to build nests at these cavities created by wood peckers... and the cycle of life continues.

LAND AS HOME

I am attempting to combine the documentary potential of photography and the fictional potential of language to tell a story of the American Desert that goes back ten thousand years and continues to this day, and to defamiliarize ourselves with the Desert so that we may reconnect with it in a new way, an ecocritical way. And all this is set not in a remote/wild area but a suburban development with three thousand built homes in about a five miles radius around our home.

The medium of photography has made significant contributions to our imaginations of landscape, place, space, geography... but perhaps little thoughtful work has been done about species (animals and birds) other than our own, or our relationship to them, or thinking about land from the inhabitants' point of view. My Arctic and Desert work is simply addressing two issues “home” and “food” that land provides to humans as well as many other species with whom we share this Earth. I call it *land as home*.

SOME RECENT BOOKS I FOUND HELPFUL

Lawrence Buell, *The Environmental Imagination: Thoreau, Nature Writing, and the Formation of American Culture*, The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1995.

Alan C. Braddock and Christoph Irmscher, eds., *A Keener Perception: Ecocritical Studies in American Art History*, University of Alabama Press, 2009.

Finis Dunaway, *Natural Visions: The Power of Images in American Environmental Reform*, The University of Chicago Press, 2005.

William W. Dunmire and Gail D. Tierney, *Wild Plants of the Pueblo Province: Exploring Ancient and Enduring Uses*, Museum of New Mexico Press, 1995.

M. Lisa Floyd, ed., *Ancient Piñon-Juniper Woodlands: A Natural History of Mesa Verde Country*, University Press of Colorado, 2003.

Cheryll Glotfelty and Harold Fromm, eds., *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology*, University of Georgia Press, 1996.

Karl Jacoby, *Crimes Against Nature: Squatters, Poachers, Thieves, and the Hidden History of American Conservation*, University of California Press, 2001.

Lucy R. Lippard, *The Lure of the Local: Senses of Place in a Multicentered Society*, New Press, 1998.

Gary Paul Nabhan, *Coming Home to Eat: The Pleasures and Politics of Local Foods*, W. W. Norton, 2002.

Stan Takiela, *Birds of New Mexico: Field Guide*, Adventure Publications, 2004.

Greg M. Thomas, *Art and Ecology in Nineteenth-Century France: The Landscapes of Theodore Rousseau*, Princeton University Press, 2000.