

OF CAMERA & COMMUNITY

By: Jodi Patterson

After spending decades in my painting studio, I have recently become compelled with landscape photography. This essay reflects on the nuances of the praxis and the unlikely community outreach opportunities a camera and social media are providing.

With cellular phones having decent photo making capabilities, people rarely carry cameras anymore. However, when one does see a person lugging a camera around, that camera is generally of significance. It's obvious presence signifies one is likely in the midst of an artist. An artist with a camera is hard to miss. The camera might have an elongated lens topped with a hood - maybe mounted on a tripod. A bag will be nearby. The bag will hold the extra lenses, filters, lens tissue, blower brush, batteries, maps, waterproofing materials, trail food, etc. It is no small feat to gingerly haul this equipment up and down trails, over rivers, through airport security and on to airplanes. This burden is not something a typical tourist is willing to do.

The difference between the praxis of a studio artist vs. a "plein-air" artist is significant. As a person who spent decades in a studio, I know it is possible to sit for hours and not see or talk with another person while making art. Studio artists do not carry their supplies around their necks, and people do not randomly approach them to chat about their paintbrushes or the paint brand they prefer. When sitting next to them on an airplane or by a waterfall, nobody can usually identify these strangers as "artists."

On the other hand, the camera being carried by a photographer alerts people to the status of an "artist" and sets him or her up to be a person in (not of) the world -- a potential nomadic ambassador for art. The artist who solely makes his or her art outdoors shares a studio with the public.

Onlookers often view this declaration as an invitation to discuss the world at a deeper level. Conversations emerge between strangers that would otherwise likely not happen. Such at-the-scene quips sound like: "See that rainbow earlier?" "Try walking up the hill for a better view." "Does that mirrorless lens work as well as they say?" "Tried Pixlr?" "What a green!" "May I help you?" "Do you have a website?" "This is beautiful!" "You should have seen this when there was more water." "What is your name?"

Due to the wonders of social media (blogs, Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, etc.), these outside conversations can keep going. People who engage with social media are people who sign up to be "friends" or "followers" to other friends, artists, organizations, etc. One person can have thousands of followers, and each follower has a batch of friends that are, by theory, also accessible. These people distribute images, links, and friendly debates - using their media presence as a town-square of information sharing. Social media provides a free and instant base for sharing what one knows while controlling the message that is sent, offering artists an incredible opportunity to connect both his or her art and message to a broad community. This community is vast. It includes people who do not necessarily often communicate with art or artists: old hometown friends, colleagues, neighbors, parents, aunts/uncles/cousins, past students/acquaintances, etc. It is in this realm where contextualized imagery can alert, inform, engage and expose a broad audience to a message; where art can be

used to both form community and bring the attention of one community to another in a non-threatening way.

Since my newly found love of photography has delved almost solely into landscape imagery, the combination of my photography, writing

and social media skills allow me to advocate subtly for the land by sharing the extraordinary beauty of Nature with contextualized accounts of what I am seeing – both good and bad (Figure 1).

Personal Facebook Post: Example #1

About 7,000 years ago Mt. Mazama (a stratovolcano) collapsed with a fury and created a 6 mile round caldera. This hole was eventually filled with snow/rain water. It is now the deepest lake in the USA, with a depth of 1,900 feet in some places (and the 6th deepest in the world). No rivers go in or out of Crater Lake. Furthermore, it holds the world record - with visibility up to 142 feet! Just wow.



Figure 1: Crater Lake, Oregon

Land Ambassador

“Landscape” is imagery that depicts engagement with a natural space. This space filters through several forms of place-relations, from the personal and spiritual to the social and political. Though the spectacle of the scape is often apparent, artistic representation of the land is not about the “view” it is about the involvement it extracts. It is about the life and modes of life that arise within and in relation to it.

Travel is often a luxury of health, time and wealth. Since Nature does not miraculously fall in a lap, the hazarding of the risk of venturing into natural places strengthens one’s relationship with the land. The thrill associated with getting to the “light show” (those magical fleeting moments when the sun kisses the land with abundant verve) is a significant part of a landscape photographer’s overall experience. Surrounded by the elements, he/she searches for aesthetic moments while being exceedingly mindful of light, shadow and sound — and any dangers associated with being in a foreign space.

Though the time needed to formulate a bond within an unknown space can be minute, the memory and sensation of the experience does not fade when manifested and shared via a photograph.

The general public has a natural affiliation with landscape photography. They like looking at nature. Images of sky, land, water, soil, fields, mountains, roads, etc. are easily recognizable all over the world, and because it is identifiable, people are confident discussing what they see. Landscape photography bypasses the elitism of the art world jargon, especially when shared in “low-brow” social media venues. People from various backgrounds often connect with landscape. They either dream of visiting the places exposed in photographs -- or instantly recall a memory if they happened in the space

already. Because well-photographed land is often so incredibly beautiful, and beautiful land in apparent turmoil is so incredibly heartbreaking, people people tend to want to at least “listen” to the photographs.

With these lines of communication open, I have been able to use landscape photography as a way to bring up difficult topics in non-threatening ways. Photographs evidence the fact that the natural spaces of engagement, though often vast and seemingly untouched, have been affected, at times choked, by social/political/economic spaces. By linking photographs with narrative in approachable general public venues, art can subtly expose the inconspicuous realities of the land to a community.

Building Community

For the past two years, I have become a nomad with a camera — having traveled to Iceland, The Yucatan, St. Thomas, British Virgin Islands, Hawaii, Alaska, Nevada, Canada, Utah, Colombia, across the USA (route 80) twice and more. I am new to the Pacific Northwest, and spend my weekends hiking to waterfalls in Oregon, Washington, British Columbia, Idaho, California and Wyoming. In these two years, I have photographed over 70 waterfalls. I have since learned that my camera serves as a calling card for conversations for and with individuals all around the world. The resulting photographs evidence nature’s glory and demise. By sharing my images on social media, I can link the people I meet in my new “outside art studio” with my other “friends” in an unsuspecting community of advocacy.

The images below (Figures 2, 3, 4) come from recent glacier hikes on two different continents where I donned crampons, an ice pick, hardhat, my trusty backpack and a camera. I then carefully walked miles upon glacial ice while speaking with guides and other hikers who have grave concern about the obvious receding of the ice. I came

home and edited the hiking images and then posted them on Facebook. The “likes” and comments allowed the land to speak to an audience that would otherwise not be exposed to the demise.

One respondent emailed me and said, “I never believed in global warming, but I never seen it in person. You make me see it.”

Personal Facebook Post: Example #2



Figure 2: Mendenhall Glacier in Juneau, Alaska.

Mendenhall Glacier is a 12-mile long glacier located in Juneau, Alaska. Inside the glacier are ice caves that are accessible to anyone willing to hike to them. However, the glacier is retreating/melting increasingly fast and this means the ice caves are collapsing and disappearing. Sadly, I was ten months too late and unable to see the most famous ice caves (they collapsed last July and are now lost forever), but I did get lucky enough to see some smaller caves. Organized hikes will soon be obsolete to the general public – as what once took a few hours to hike, now takes eight. This glacier has receded 1.75 miles in 50 years – something it took 500 years to do previously. I am very glad I got to see the Mendenhall up close ... soon it will be too late.

Facebook post replies to Mendenhall photograph:

ROBERT: "Glad you had a good experience. So sad about our disappearing glaciers."

JODI [author] ". . . my guide doubted he'd have a job in two years, the hike is too far for most people. Sad decline."

MICHAEL: "I was going to say that We are losing are Glaciers Faster then what we Have been told."

ANN: "Awesome you are a film crew shy of a Discovery Channel show."

JOE: "See it soon or be prepared for a much longer walk? No joke (or lie) really 'eh!'"

JIM: "Wow seeing it like you are puts global warming in a whole new Perspective".

JODI: "Yes! When you SEE it – it stuns."

ROBYN: "Amazing. Thanks for sharing."



Figure 2: Me hiking the glacier. I like to put snapshots of the treks online, too. I am in front of the ice cave that collapsed 10 months previous due to warming weather.

Personal Facebook Post: Example #3



Figure 3: Jökulsárlón Lagoon, Iceland.

Most of Iceland is located just below the Arctic Circle. It is one of the fastest-warming places on the planet. It is said to be warming as much a four times more than the average Northern Hemisphere. 300-some glaciers cover Iceland! But more than 10 percent of the island is losing an average of 11 billion tons of ice a year. I snowmobiled and hiked two glaciers here ... the beauty is astounding and the loss is depressing.

Facebook Post Replies:

BECKY: "I feel like you are my history teacher and I absolutely love it! Are you sure you are not filming a travel show, if not you sure as hell should be!!!!!!!!!!"

LIZ: "That is a good idea film it for a travel show ..."

ELAINE: "It IS a travel show. LOL These pictures are scary, wonderful, beautiful all rolled into one."

DIANE: "Oh wow what a cool place to be especially during the summer. Have fun, be safe, still living vicariously through you guys so keep those pics coming."

EMILCE: "Gracias por al aviso!"

RAY: "Awesome, unique also looks a little dangerous so be careful."

DOTTY: "Amazing pics it looks a little desolate though."

TINA: "Very cool-cold."

LINDA: "Just amazing."

LIZ: "An inconvenient truth for sure."

ADRIANNE: "Wow beautiful land and pics, thanx for sharing."

CONCLUSION

Mother Nature's show is fickle, fleeting and often demanding. As an emerging landscape photographer, I am quickly learning the emergency-of-now; how once-in-a-lifetime moments are immediately lost if not acted upon. There is no safe, warm studio to snuggle up in and no way to get the content without being outside, in the land, surrounded by the elements and forced to contend with the kindness, fury and temperament of Mother Nature. Simply put, if I do not show up (and react to impulses) I will not get the photograph.

This emergency-of-now is also inherent in the translation of a photograph that can project the voice of the land. It is my wish that the land's call for help, glory and cognizance will be heard far and wide via whatever community flows from my photographs, be it a gallery's walls, a website, a magazine, airplane seat conversations and/or the one-on-one conversation between my partner and I as we stand somewhere far from home, snapping shots and swimming in awe — feeling the urgency to expose the encounter while pushing "POST" to our Facebook feed via a rented hotspot connection.

Jodi Patterson is affiliated with Eastern Washington University. She can be contacted through www.jodipatterson.net

