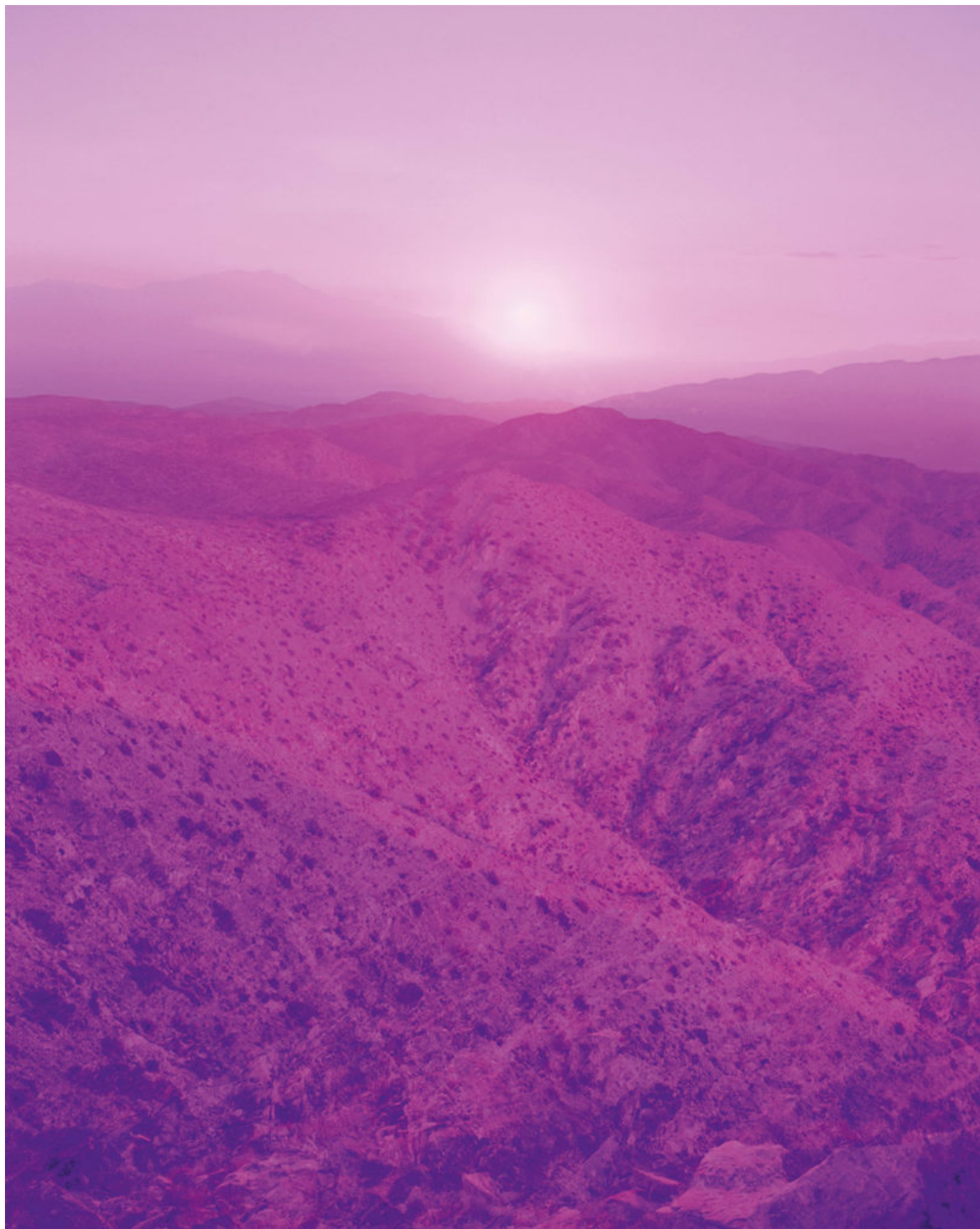


DOCUMENT

# Chasing divinity in the Mojave Desert

Text by Ken Layne  
Photography by David Benjamin Sherry

January 2, 2023



Midnight Sun Horizon, Mojave Desert, California.

# For the seeker, the mystic, the artist, the outlaw, the romantic idiot, the allure of the American West endures.

The closest I have come to seeing God in the desert (so far) was on Highway 395, south of Lone Pine, California—a December dusk in the Sierra Nevada's shadow, the year of 9/11.

I was making good time in my old Grand Cherokee, the Cadillac of Jeeps, bought used with the advance on my first book—the first time I'd had wheels in five years. There is nothing so enormous and beautiful as the Eastern Sierra in winter's fading light, on the most beautiful highway in America.

In that purple dusk, I saw a jittery light on the horizon, due north. We were somewhere around the Highway 190 turnoff to Death Valley, near the mostly dry Owens Lake; I've never figured out exactly where this happened, though I still make that drive a couple of times a year and keep my eyes open. I'd just gotten married again, and my then-wife was in the passenger seat.

The *size* of the light was changing, and it wouldn't stay put on the horizon. We both watched it for a while, on a stretch of divided highway with those jagged piles of black lava rock in the median, and talked about what it might be: maybe a radio tower, or a low-flying plane? Right then, it transformed—from a distant light, a curiosity, into this enormous manta ray something hovering over the sand and brush. I was transfixed, barely aware I was still driving 70 miles per hour through the night. Big, solid lights on each corner, and a jerky spotlight beam from its belly. My wife was screaming for me to Pull over! Pull over! But where?

I spotted a dirt turnoff with its rancher barbed wire on either side, and a loud, bumpy cattle guard. The thing was still there—much closer now. Menacing, beautiful, hazy at the edges. I could not look away. The Jeep lurched to a stop and I was out the door, running toward it. There were no thoughts in my head beyond, That's the kind I always wanted to see.

Is that why I'm seeing it? Is it real? What does "real" even mean?

That's when it disappeared, as I was barely out of the driver's seat, staring into the void where something fantastic had just arrived from the ether to put on this peculiar display. Now we were blinking into the deep, dark sky, with only a few high clouds still catching a faint glow of the departed daylight. Around one of those clouds, we saw a tiny point of brilliant light make a beautiful, wide arc and vanish for good—like Tinkerbell in the Disney logo. Was that it, too?

The words "ecstasy" and "awe" have lost their real meanings in our dull and disenchanting world. Ecstasy is entrancement, astonishment, insanity! When you come face to face with the Divine, with the Gods. To stand in awe—in dread and veneration. I understood those meanings at that time. They were the only words that approached the experience. Twenty-one years later, I consider it a life-changing moment, even if its meaning remains elusive and its context suspicious.





*Mojave Meditation I.* Purportedly the largest freestanding boulder in the world, Giant Rock stretches seven stories high and covers 5,800 square feet. It has long served as a gathering point for believers, who claim it rests in a spiritual vortex.

*Wilderness* is the original meaning of “desert.” Like so many romantic words, the scientists have stolen it, reclassified it. They turned a term of mystery into a measurement of rainfall.

When Jesus commanded his disciples, “Get thee to a desert place, and rest a while,” annual average precipitation was not the point. It was the lack of people, of civilization—that’s why you meditate in the wilderness. That’s why you spend 40 days and 40 nights testing yourself against the wilds, in a hallucinatory battle of wits with the Devil.

In the Middle East of 2,000 years ago, wolves and bears and the majestic Asiatic lion ruled the mountains and forests of Palestine. To walk alone into the wilderness required a determined soul. Hermits, madmen, criminals on the run, holy fools—these were the solo travelers of the ancient desert. The good shepherd, that tireless hero of Jesus’s parables, led his flock to summertime meadows and mountainside forage, far from cultivated lands. The staff, with its hooked end crafted to pull the wandering sheep back on track. The rod, what cops call a billy club, to bash in the skull of any attacker. The outlaw and the prophet are desert dwellers by necessity—by definition. They live outside the law, outside the bounds of civilization. The wild lands are home for those who cannot follow the rules of man. Some 70 years ago, an aerospace worker named Frank Antone Martin began to question his Cold War job. A roamer since his orphan days in Ohio, Martin made his way West, laboring in the silver mines, reading Shakespeare and the Bible by firelight in the hobo camps where he often bedded down. The life of a factory employee in working-class Inglewood, California did not speak to his soul—not like those melodious psalms and sonnets did in the desert night. Assembling bomber planes for the Douglas Aircraft Company was not the way.

From concrete and rebar, Martin crafted an enormous Christ in his driveway. He hoped that Grand Canyon National Park would mount it over the Colorado River—North America’s version of Christ the Redeemer. But there were no takers for this crude statue. Los Angeles newspapers named it “the unwanted Christ.”

Only a fellow desert mystic like Pastor Eddie Garver could see the beauty—or, at least, the potential notoriety—of the statue. He brought the 10-foot-tall savior to his country gospel church, on five acres of homestead desert hillside in Yucca Valley, California. A week before Easter, 1951, the statue journeyed from Inglewood to the Mojave High Desert, strapped to a flatbed truck and dragged up the slope, its fingers breaking off against the rocks and brush. Pastor Garver was delighted, and offered the sculptor the whole hillside of sand and Joshua trees for a statuary garden, which Martin tended with his deep dedication to world peace—a world without the bomber planes he’d been building for the Pentagon’s wars.

Desert Christ Park is still there, off a side road in Yucca Valley. Martin is buried in Twentynine Palms, just down Highway 62.

The UFO is the religious vision of the technological age. Carl Jung recognized this more quickly than most, dedicating one of his last monographs—*Flying Saucers: A Modern Myth of Things Seen in the Sky*, first published in 1959—to the mystery.





*Rolling Thunder.* The geological landscape of Joshua Tree is composed of relict features inherited from the weathering of its past, resulting in the fantastic and seemingly illogical formations that populate it today.

The origin of the flying saucer sighting is less important than its symbolism. At the dawn of our own meek Space Age—with nuclear warfare threatening the entire planet—thousands of Americans saw incredible sights in the sky, spinning visions of brilliant color. To Jung, these were the mandalas of Eastern religion. When the saucers hovered or landed, strange people could be found, dressed like superheroes: blue leotards, knee-high boots, flowing golden hair like Norse gods. They spoke of a New Age, of peace, of time. From the beginning, there was a psychic element—inner space, rather than science fiction’s outer space. George Van Tassel got it all.

Like Martin, Van Tassel worked in the aerospace factories of Southern California. He became friendly with a hermit who mostly lived under a rock on the north end of Yucca Valley—an eccentric character named Frank Critzer. After that hermit was killed by sheriff’s deputies in his own home in 1942, Van Tassel decided to take over his strange encampment.

He quit Hughes Aviation and moved his family to Giant Rock, where by 1953, this Ohio native (who looked like Gerald Ford) had become a practicing mystic: meditation nights under the seven-story-tall boulder, UFO sightings, and regular channelings of a “tall, Nordic” savior entity called Ashtar.

Van Tassel spent 25 years hosting annual outdoor flying saucer conventions at Giant Rock that attracted crowds of up to 12,000 believers, and building his alleged immortality machine, the Integratron—now a tourist spot, north of Joshua Tree National Park, which hosts sound experiences. Van Tassel died of an earthly heart attack in 1978.

Desert visionaries rarely have the resources of land artist Michael Heizer, who somehow burned through \$40 million and 50 years building his *City* megalith in rural Lincoln County, Nevada. Martin built his massive concrete statues of Jesus and the apostles with spare change and Bible church offerings. Van Tassel did wonders with hundred-dollar donations from friends and supporters, remembered in small bronze plaques that remain at the site of the Integratron. But none of these projects would exist without the determination of the solitary desert mystic: Heizer may not have met Venusians, but his lifelong sense of mission is typical of the desert loner, overcome by mysterious illumination. “This land is in my blood,” he repeats in an August 2022 New York Times feature on the completion of *City*, now within Basin and Range National Monument, east of Area 51, where he has lived and worked for most of his life.

At the western edge of the Great Basin, beneath the wild and jagged wall of the Sierra Nevada, Mary Hunter Austin spent years among the Paiute tribes and pocket miners of Owens Valley. She conversed with the corvids and walked endless miles through shimmering heat. She gave in to it completely, becoming as mystic as the natives who reluctantly told their tales to this strange young woman from the flatlands of Illinois. “After a time you get the point of view of gods about these things to save you from being too pitiful,” she wrote in her 1903 classic, *The Land of Little Rain*.

The epiphanies of Austin were of a color and depth unknown to our age of Instagram banalities about Joshua trees: “Tormented, thin forests of it stalk drearily in the high mesas [...] The yucca bristles with bayonet-pointed leaves, dull green, growing shaggy with age, tipped with panicles of fetid, greenish bloom. After death, which is slow, the ghostly hollow network of its woody skeleton, with hardly the power to rot, makes the moonlight fearful.”

The somber acknowledgment of the desert’s brutality is the desert mystic’s special burden; it’s what creates its bittersweet sense of eternity. Whatever magic one encounters is littered with death and deprivation. The divine is aware but indifferent. From the age of five, Austin had frequent visions, and conversed with an “I-Mary,” who she credited as the author of her trance writings.

The home she designed in Independence, California—a tiny 19th-century town on Highway 395—is a historic landmark today. The surname Austin was the result of her marriage, which ended in 1905 when she moved to the bohemian colony of Carmel-by-the-Sea, and Stafford Wallace Austin went to





*Double Jesus.* Overlooking the high desert town of Yucca Valley is a mass of white sculptures depicting scenes from the life of Christ, amid a carefully tended native plant garden.





*Daylight, Dreams, and Echoes.* The otherworldly terrain of the Mojave Desert has attracted visitors for centuries, its vastness appealing to those seeking something sublime.

Death Valley. Looming over Independence is the Sierra peak that now bears her name, part of the rugged John Muir Wilderness.

Even the paradise of Carmel could not keep Austin from the desert. She wound up in Taos, New Mexico, that ancient pueblo center that has long drawn the world's mystics, and in 1930 published, in collaboration with Ansel Adams, her last major work, *Taos Pueblo*—prized especially for Adams's eerie, monolithic photos that today bring to mind Heizer's *City*.

Carl Jung knew the power of raw nature and preindustrial magic better than any 20th-century European. His search for human meaning took him from Africa to India to the same landscape that lured J. Robert Oppenheimer and Georgia O'Keeffe: the ancient pueblos and enchanted wildlands of New Mexico.

Jung lived a life of prophetic dreams and paranormal coincidence, from his earliest years of consciousness. Finding his psychiatry patients sickened by the suffocating disenchantment of modern life, he sought answers in wild nature, archetypal images, and preindustrial societies. Taos had already been tamed by cultured tourists, watching the Corn Dance—"hungrily too, with reverence," as Carmel poet Robinson Jeffers put it. But a century ago, it was still more like the 1500s than any other permanent settlement in the 48 states.

During Jung's travels through the American West, from late 1924 into 1925, he was part of the Taos-Santa Fe zeitgeist: artists and thinkers and hangers-on, entranced by a landscape and culture that had long moved on to a very different timeline. Jung had a memorable conversation with Taos pueblo elder Ochwiay Biano, regarding the busy visitors who flocked to his ancient land.

"The whites always want something, they are always uneasy and restless," said the elder, identified by his English name Chief Mountain Lake in Jung's autobiography, *Memories, Dreams, Reflections*.

I don't know what I saw two decades ago on the 395, and it hardly matters. I can't do anything about it—whether it was a holographic projection by some secret military unit, or space people from wherever they're from now, or an interdimensional entity, or whatever theory you can enjoy tonight on the internet. It seemed to be not only "intelligently controlled," in UFO speak, but also alive.

It noticed me from afar—just another driver on the road to Sierra ski resorts during the winter holidays—and then it was right there, like some living, electrical plasma with its great, weird eye jerking around. And as soon as I got out of the car, it was gone. Look at me, and wonder.

That's what's stayed with me in the years since: a sense of wonder, a lessening of cynicism, and an awareness of the wild possibilities within this life, this reality. Living without any real-world acknowledgement of the supernatural—whether religious or folkloric or the usual combination of both—is a very new development for humanity, barely a century out of 300,000 years of homo sapiens.



*Sound Silence.* In the year 2000, an earthquake split Giant Rock in two, exposing its white granite interior. A group of spiritual thinkers interpreted its fracturing as a message from Mother Earth herself.

While I've yet to experience anything like *that* again, there are strange, time-stopped moments just as memorable: coming around a narrow canyon bend to the surprise of a big male coyote, who is just as surprised and disappears up that canyon wall like a bighorn sheep; or standing behind the house at night as three or four baby Mojave cottontails leap over each other in some weird, moonlight game—the purest joy and surprise as they bounce ever higher; or sitting on a hilltop at sundown with the clouds turning five different colors and the ravens passing overhead in a hurry, all yakking about the dusk-time family party before darkness.

The desert still welcomes the seeker, the mystic, the artist, the outlaw, the romantic idiot. Largely the property of the US government around islands of tribal lands, the American desert remains substantially undeveloped once you branch off from the interstates and Sun Belt sprawl of Las Vegas and Phoenix and Albuquerque. There are all-but-abandoned towns in the Great Basin that are too far away for vacation-rental weekenders, and vast public lands in every direction. This patchwork of national parks and monuments and forests—from the San Bernardino Mountains of



Southern California to the White Mountains of Central Nevada—is the largest protected desert preserve in the Western Hemisphere, second in size only to Africa’s 20,000-square-mile Namib-Naukluft National Park. You can get lost there pretty easily, and on purpose if you like—on purpose like the Manson Family in the Panamint Range (now part of Death Valley National Park), where Charlie thought they’d find the secret passage to the Underworld, where they’d wait out the apocalypse.

As water for industrial agriculture and exurban development becomes costlier in this thousand-year drought, and as the value of raw desert as a crucial carbon sink becomes better understood, the Southwest might stay much the way it is, long into the next millennium. Which is good news for those seeking God, Yucca Man, E.T., La Llorona—whatever they figure is out there, in the night. The spirits of the night need quiet and darkness.



*Dawn of a New Age.* The Mojave Desert is characterized by extreme temperatures, swinging violently from biting cold to vehement heat under the rain shadow of the Sierra Nevada mountains.

# W

WE'RE RUNNING OUT OF TIME

## This Non-Profit—with Fashion Roots—Uses Art to Inspire Green Thinking

by **W Staff**  
November 1, 2019



Le Conte Glacier, Alaska, 2018. Photo by David Benjamin Sherry for Bridge Initiative.

*Bridge Initiative, founded by designer Katherine Fleming, has put Alaskan landscapes on billboards around the country.*

In July 2018, the artist David Benjamin Sherry went to Alaska to photograph landscapes at risk of disappearing, including the LeConte Glacier, a looming, 21-mile-wide slab of turquoise ice that is rapidly retreating due to climate change. “Neither words nor pictures can really convey the experience of standing in front of LeConte Glacier,” Sherry says. “We must take action immediately, all of us—today, we have no time left.”

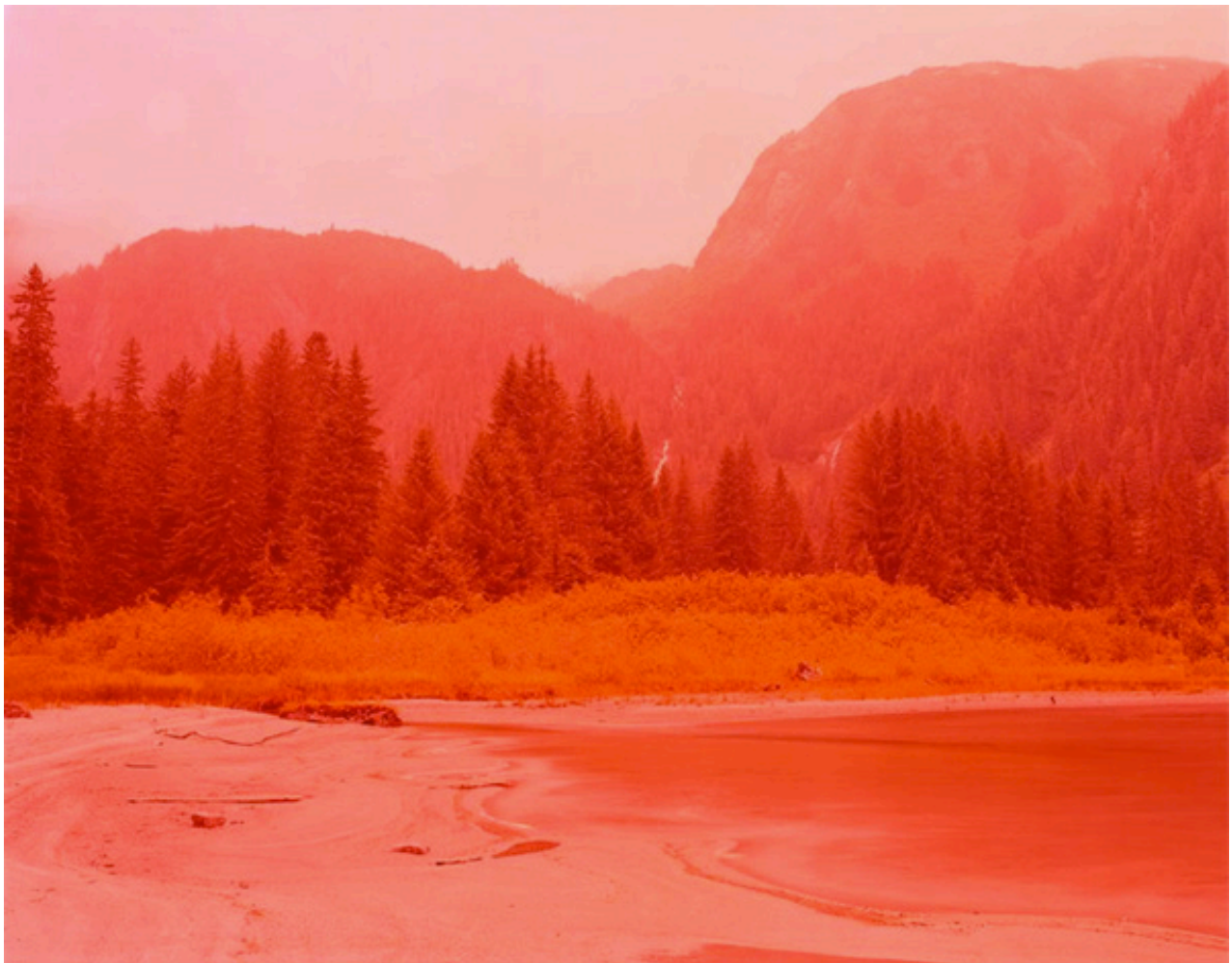
A little over a year later, one of Sherry’s striking photographs of the glacier appeared on a billboard on Lafayette Street in New York City, paired with the words “Warming Ahead.” While the pun suggests a certain lightheartedness, the image itself is a gut punch. A similar billboard, with the words “Warming Signal” prominently displayed, just went up in Omaha, Nebraska. Others will continue to pop up in various locations as we get closer to the 2020 election.

The billboards were financed by Bridge Initiative, an environmental nonprofit with roots in the fashion industry. It was founded by fashion designer Katherine Fleming, and Proenza Schouler co-founder Lazaro Hernandez is on its board of advisors. Fleming utilizes art’s unique ability to get people to pay attention as a way to spur people into action: “I believe art has the power to make people fall in love with nature again, and when people love something they will protect it,” she says. The billboards, produced in partnership with the Alaska Whale Foundation, engage the public in the fight to come up with solutions, while hopefully taking a moment to examine their own impact.



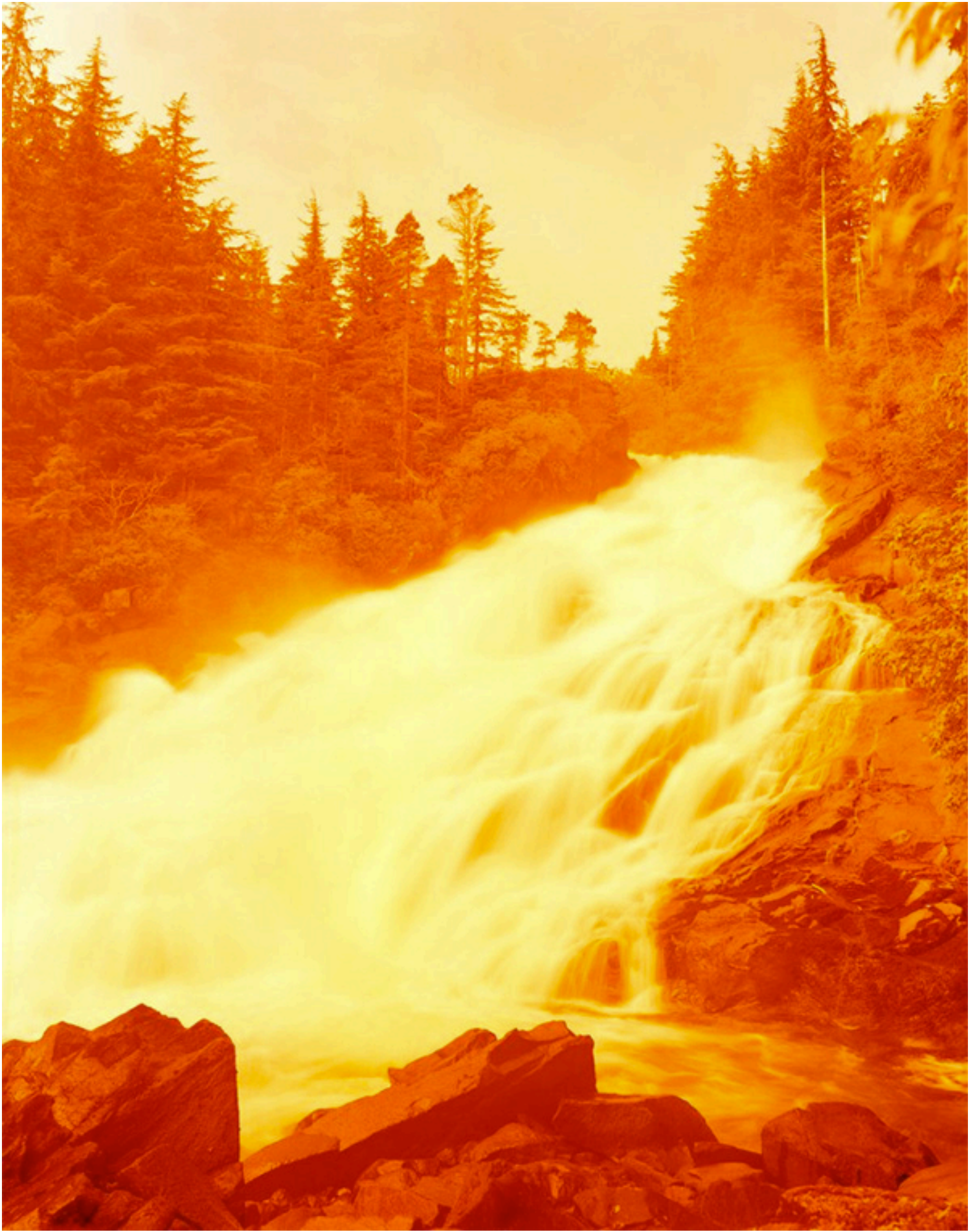


Here, a selection from Sherry's Alaskan portfolio showcases these gorgeous, fragile landscapes:



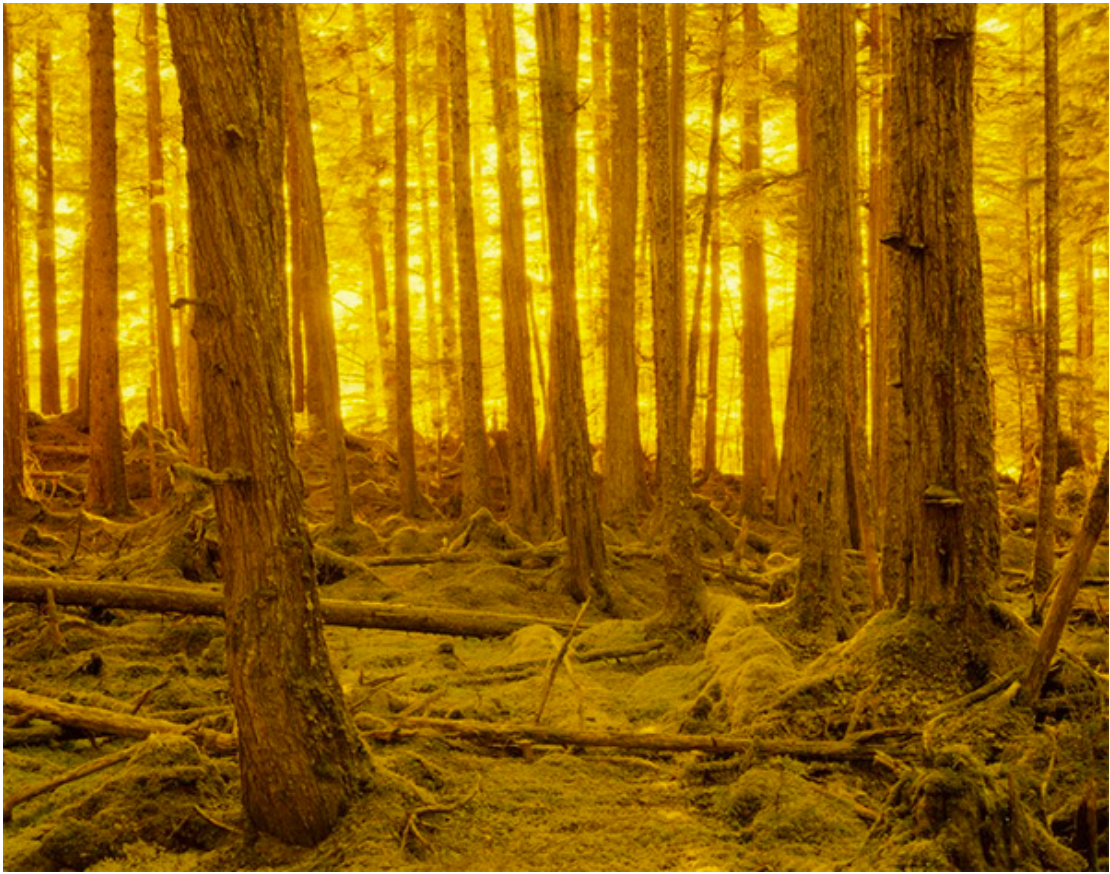
Baranof Lake I, Alaska, 2018. Photo by David Benjamin Sherry for Bridge Initiative. David Benjamin Sherry for Bridge Initiative





Baranof Falls, Sitka County, Alaska, 2018. Photo by David Benjamin Sherry for Bridge Initiative.





Brothers Island, Alaska, 2018. Photo by David Benjamin Sherry for Bridge Initiative.



Baranof Lake II, Alaska, 2018. Photo by David Benjamin Sherry for Bridge Initiative.



# aperture

## Will America's National Monuments Survive the Trump Administration?

David Benjamin Sherry's spectacular photographs of contested lands.

March 6, 2019  
By Bill McKibben



David Benjamin Sherry, Río Grande del Norte National Monument, New Mexico, 2018. Courtesy the artist and Salon 94

Before you've seen the West, you've seen the West—landscape photographs of the region, especially those by Ansel Adams, are so deep in our nation's collective imagination that you have to work to actually see Half Dome, in California, or Shiprock, in New Mexico, even when you're standing there with your hiking boots on.

David Benjamin Sherry's recent pictures help us see again. Sherry is known for his fascination with color, for his analog techniques, and for what some have called his "queer revision" of the rugged and macho legacy of western landscape photography. His images of several national monuments, photographed last year, carry the same level of detail as Adams's iconic pictures, the sublime clarity of the haze-free western summer afternoon. But drenched in unexpected and unreal color, they get you to take a second look.

And in this case, a second look is helpful for any number of reasons.

For one, looking backward, the great protected areas of the nation are not simply blank slates, empty wastes. They were often the homelands of this continent's original inhabitants, and so they tell, among other things, the stories of our nation's original shame. Their very emptiness is a reminder of what we did—all the more telling when the petroglyphs left behind at places like Bears Ears, the national monument in Utah, make clear what a bustling place it once was. These lands are as sacred to Indigenous cultures as they ever were, but there's a tragic quality to that reverence now.

For another, looking forward, these same lands are no longer as sacred to the colonizing tradition as they once were. One of the great boasts of its legacy was the protected landscape: in the late nineteenth century and throughout the twentieth, we felt ourselves rich enough to methodically put aside large tracts of land for the benefit of the rest of creation, or the future, or our idea that there was something lovely about wildernesses, even ones we might not see. Congress never got more poetic than with the Wilderness Act of 1964, with its commitment to protecting places "where the earth and its community of life are untrammelled by man, where man himself is a visitor who does not remain."





David Benjamin Sherry, Muley Point I, Bears Ears National Monument, Utah, 2018

Aside from the questions already raised about who was there originally, and aside from the obnoxious use of man that belies the text's birthdate, the statute still marks something powerful: even in the middle of America's great postwar boom, the understanding that we needed something more than we had.

But we don't think that anymore. Or at least, at the moment, those in charge don't think that. President Donald Trump, among his endless provocations, has begun trying to roll back the protections of an earlier era, beginning with the national monuments pictured in Sherry's images. For no reason other than to undo the work of the bigger souls who came before him, the petulant boy king has begun to take apart the network of protected areas that is one of the country's great legacies. Actually, of course, there is another reason: the fossil fuel industry covets these lands, just as it covets the Arctic, and the offshore lease holdings along the North American coasts, and pretty much every other piece of real estate on the continent. Not content with merely destroying the planet's climate, it must also do what it can to wreck the loveliness that has been set aside.

Somehow the saturated and unsettling colors of Sherry's photographs of Bears Ears and Grand Staircase-Escalante National Monument, in Utah, and the Río Grande del Norte National Monument, in New Mexico, among other western vistas, help us see all that splendor, all that history, and all those politics more clearly, or at least glimpse that something has gone wrong and is now going wrong in these places that have long been a comforting part of the landscape of the mind. No longer retreats or redoubts from the overwhelming bleat of our wired world, they are contested places. We must fight to make sense of them, and we must fight to preserve them, and we must fight to make sure that in their preservation they connect us back to the people who wandered them originally.



Iconic images have their place—but iconoclasm has its place too.

Bill McKibben, a writer and environmentalist, is the author of *Falter: Has the Human Game Begun to Play Itself Out?* (2019).



David Benjamin Sherry, Muley Point II, Bears Ears National Monument, Utah, 2018



## These Professional Photographers Are Still Shooting Film. Here's Why

BY **ALEXANDRA GENOVA**

JANUARY 26, 2017 9:35 AM EST

**P**hotography is arguably the most contradictory art form. It can be objective but also intensely emotional. It's immediate but not really complete until it's been processed or edited. It claims to capture reality but in fact only captures a version of it. And caught at the center of this whirling identity crisis are two distinctly different mediums: digital and analog.

The birth of digital in the 1970s marked a revolution that threatened to leave analogue in the grainy dust. But despite lightning advances in technology, there has been a small and quiet resistance among amateurs and professionals, solidified by Kodak's announcement this month that it's bringing Ektachrome film back to life.

Nostalgia for the physical means film photography is easy to romanticize. But most professionals agree that it's the tactile process not the idea of it that is most compelling. "For me there's no romance," photojournalist Rena Effendi tells TIME. "It is always about the work." Though film may be something of a novelty to the Instagram-generation, for many photographers it's simply what they've always known. "I have a deep affinity with shooting film," says Dan Winters, known for his celebrity portraiture and scientific photography. "I love seeing that image appear through the chemistry and smelling the dark room chemicals; the smells of my childhood. That grounds me." While Magnum photographer Paolo Pellegrin says film has more substance and depth: "It exists. As opposed to 0s and 1s." David Benjamin Sherry, a photographer and artist who shoots, processes and prints his own work says the physicality of it is an extension of himself: "There's a spirituality that's connected to it. I go out to take the pictures and at the end of the day I'm by myself, alone with my thoughts, in the dark room. It becomes very meditative."

Working with film requires a disciplined, considered approach. “You can make all these decisions without the camera. And then take a picture of it.” says Magnum photographer Max Pinckers. “And for me that works because I can make my decision and stick with it.” The serendipity of a moment that cannot be erased and the separation of the editing process not only demands a more thoughtful method but also frequently engenders “the perfect mistake.” Rather than discarding his errors, Pinckers, who shoots most of his work on film, celebrates these happy accidents. “I don’t review or learn from my mistakes – I use them,” he says. “The mistakes in the work very often function in a positive sense; they surprise you. With a digital camera the room for error is much smaller.” Jessica Dimmock, a documentary photojournalist, adds: “I think that there’s something a little more mindful and deliberate about film that’s really appealing and that’s part of the comeback. We can all get whatever we need on our phones anywhere at any time, there’s something really nice about removing photography from that immediate equation.”



*Wildfire in Glacier National Park, St. Mary, Montana, August 2015. David Benjamin Sherry*

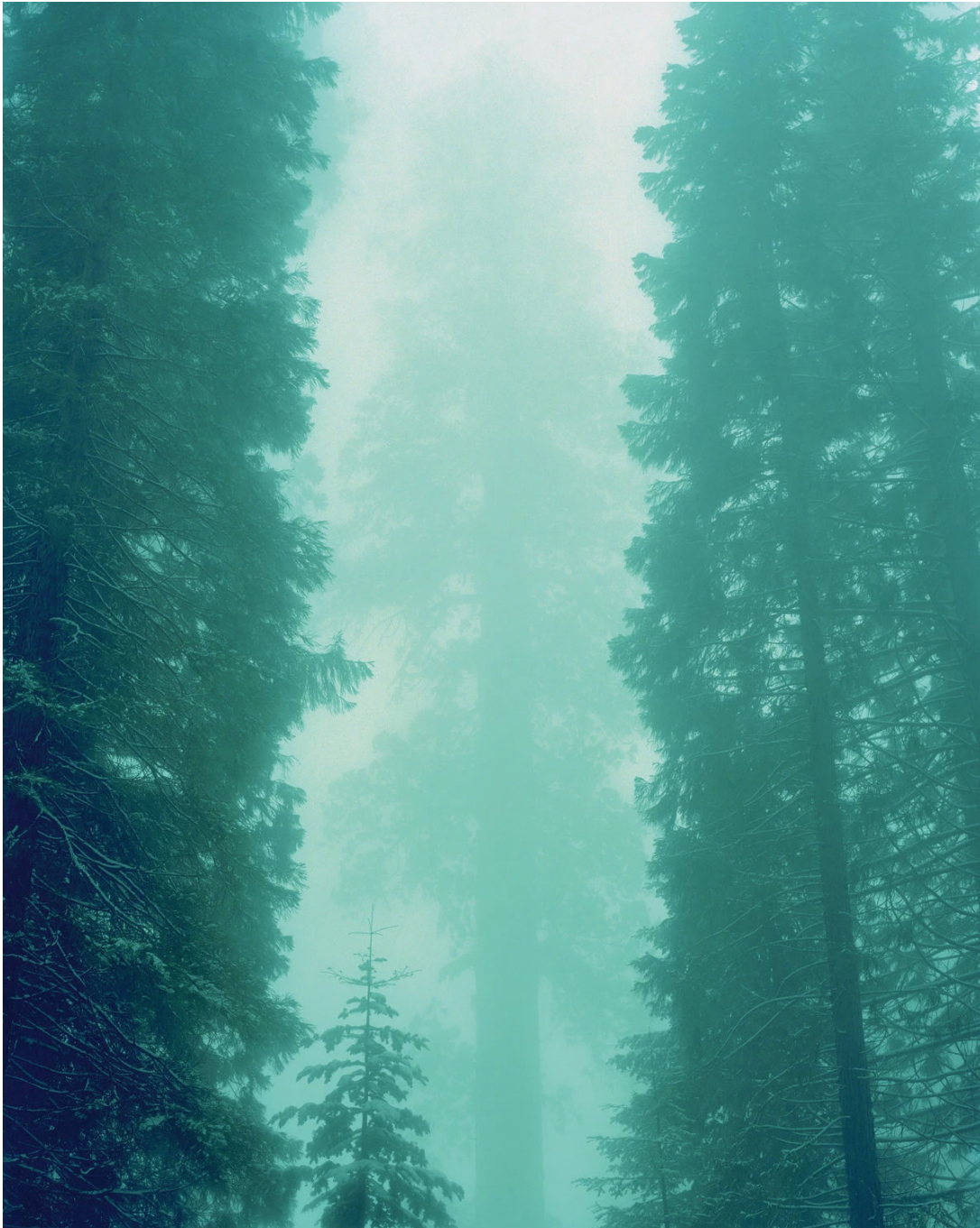


# In the Land of Giants

Communing with some of the biggest trees on Earth.

By Jon Mooallem

March 23, 2017



Titans in the fog in Sequoia National Park, California. David Benjamin Sherry for The New York Times

**T**he trees are so big that it would be cowardly not to deal with their bigness head on. They are very, very big. You already knew this — they're called "giant sequoias" — and I knew it, too. But in person, their bigness still feels unexpected, revelatory. And the delirium of their size is enhanced by their age, by the knowledge that some of the oldest sequoias predate our best tools for processing and communicating phenomena like sequoias, that the trees are older than the English language and most of the world's major religions — older by centuries, easily, even millennia. The physical appearance of a tree cannot be deafening, and yet with these trees, it is. Facing down a sequoia, the most grammatically scrambled thoughts wind up feeling right. Really, there's only so much a person can do or say. Often I found myself expelling a quivering, involuntary *Whoa*.

The first time that happened, I was driving into Sequoia National Park from the foothills of central California's Sierra Nevada, south of Yosemite. Suddenly, the Four Guardsmen came into view: a tight quartet of elephantine sequoia trunks through which the road passes. The trees have tops, too — those trunks lead to crowns — but that's immaterial; the trunks are all you have a hope of registering from inside your car. They fill the windows and function as a gateway. They were like living infrastructure, rising out of the snow.

The rental-car company had given me a squat Fiat micro-S.U.V., which, though it was equipped with all-wheel drive and seemed to be handling capably enough, was so strikingly unbrawny in appearance that crunching up the icy, winding mountain road, I wasn't brave enough to push it any faster than a feeble crawl. Now, with the squeeze through the Guardsmen ahead of me tightening, I slowed even more. I heard myself letting out an anticipatory holler, like a Hollywood fighter pilot banking through a dogfight, and threaded the needle at nine miles an hour.



There are more than 8,000 sequoias in the Giant Forest, the three-and-a-half-square-mile centerpiece of the park. The largest grow more than 300 feet tall and 30 feet across, barely tapering as they rise until, about two-thirds of the way up, the scrambling madness of their branches starts. The branches are crooked and gnarled, while the rest of the tree is stoic and straight. The branches are grayish and brownish — average American tree colors — while the trunk, particularly in sunlight reflected off snow, hums with a dreamy reddish-orange glow. The branches often seem to have nothing to do with the sequoia they're attached to; they are trees themselves. In 1978, a branch broke off a sequoia called the General Sherman. It was 150 feet long and nearly seven feet thick. All by itself, that branch would have been one of the tallest trees east of the Mississippi.

The General Sherman Tree is one of the park's primary attractions. It's 275 feet tall, 100 feet in circumference, and known to be the largest tree on Earth, by volume. (The National Park Service drives home its massiveness on a sign in front of its trunk this way: If the General Sherman were hollowed out and filled with water, it'd be enough water for you to take a bath every day for 27 years.) The General Sherman is not far off the Generals Highway, which runs through the park. It is a tree with its own parking lot. Though the pathways were ice-crusted or snowed under when I visited last month, I watched tourists of all shapes and sizes hobble and skitter over them toward the tree for photographs: the Italian dude with the soul patch posing with double thumbs up; the overweight couple huffing, "You make it to the tree?" to a few young women returning to their car; the young man looking up at the tree, eyes closed and still, face in the sun — a tranquil image of cosmic, momentary oneness were it not for his self-aggrandizing sweatshirt, which read, I AM NOT A GOD BUT SOMETHING SIMILAR. And then there was the woman with a moaning child in her arms. She was whispering, "Last one, I promise," while her husband set up a tripod and timer, far, far away, struggling to frame his teensy family against the universe of the tree. Eventually the man found he had to reposition and walked right in front of me. When we made eye contact, he said, "It's big!"

Exactly, yes. And still, it's not just that the trees are big; it's that everything about them is also big. The raised columns of bark running down their trunks are bigger than the bark on ordinary trees. The gullies between those columns are wider and deeper. The fire scars are bigger. (Sequoias are mostly fire-resistant, even when wildfires or lightning burn away at their bases, opening triangular, vaulting caverns in their trunks, like grottos in a sea cliff.) The burls on the trees are bigger. Even the woodpecker holes are bigger, which seems illogical — you'd expect woodpeckers to hammer out the same size holes, regardless — but honestly, they are. Every element of a sequoia is freakishly, but also flawlessly, proportionally big. And this creates a subconscious sense that you're not looking at a normal tree that just kept growing until it became very tall but a tree that was somehow supernaturally inflated to unimaginable dimensions, all of its features swelling like some fantastically transformed mushroom or a cursed cartoon man bloating into a giant. This aspect of the sequoia's size is also a tricky thing to pick up from photographs. Even if there's a fence or person in the shot for scale, the human eye can find a way to correct for the sequoias' unacceptable gigantism: It reads the fir trees near the sequoias as bushes, to make the sequoias seem like ordinary trees; or it flattens the perspective, so that, say, four far-off sequoias appear to be right alongside six cedars in the foreground — fusing all of them into a single line of 10 perfectly boring-size trees. In one of these ways or another, virtually every sequoia picture I took wound up a dud. Later, when I texted a friend what I thought was the best one, she mistook it for a shot of my backyard.

“I feel like I'm in a fairy tale!” a woman named Angela Fitzpatrick announced one afternoon. Fitzpatrick and I were the only two people who had shown up for a snowshoe hike led by a nonprofit group called the Sequoia Parks Conservancy. The park's sparse winter crowds heightened the otherworldliness of the trees. So did all the snow. The woods were hushed around us, a cradle of pure whites, reds and greens.



Fitzpatrick was an information-security analyst from Tampa, Fla., who had been flown out to audit a credit union in a nearby town, then planned an extra day to see the trees. She was excellent company, equally not-shy when it came to fumbling expressions of stupefaction and delight. At one point, falling behind, I realized I hadn't yet touched a sequoia, so I veered off and patted one. "It's soft!" I shrieked. "What the hell?" (The trees' outer layer is spongy and fibrous — a defense against burrowing bugs.) "That's crazy!" Fitzpatrick said. She hustled back to put a hand on the tree. We stood side by side for a second, pressing and kneading it. "I'm so glad you touched that!" she said.

Later we stopped short in front of another sequoia that looked perfectly healthy on one side, but was chewed up by fire on the other, leaving a 150-foot-tall concave husk from ground to crown — a pillar of charcoal. It was shocking: a baleful black chamber the color of new asphalt, or volcanic rock, or Mordor. Deep in, at the rear, I could see another opening, a twisting pit through the mulchy ground toward its roots.

Is that even alive? we asked our guide, Katie Wightman. Of course it was, she said; a tree like this might endure for centuries. Then she asked, "You guys wanna get inside?" We did.

**There's a type** of enchantment we feel from afar, for certain places and things, that's hard to pick apart or defend after years of feeling it. I used to live in San Francisco and had encountered the sequoias' cousins, the coast redwoods, many times. They were, in my mind, the slightly less spectacular of America's two spectacularly large tree species: taller than sequoias, in many cases, but plainer — more conventionally treelike and slender, with pinnacled, Christmas-tree tops and duller, browner bark. But mostly they were just more accessible, at least to me. Their range runs from south of Monterey up the coast into Oregon. One of the most famous groves, Muir Woods, was close enough to the city that I once chaperoned my daughter's preschool field trip there.

Sequoias, on the other hand, existed only at the edges of my personal geography. In all the world, there were only about 70 native groves of them, flecked across a relatively thin stretch of the Sierra, far east of San Francisco and Los Angeles, beyond the Central Valley's citrus groves and almond fields. It was arbitrary, but I'd lived my life in California predominantly on a north-south axis, road-tripping more often along the coast than inland to the mountains. Redwoods were creatures I ran into from time to time without trying, while sequoias remained effectively hidden. They were the giants I needed to search out and pursue. And this implied something, too, about the alluring enormousness of the world that contained them.

Now I wanted to go see some of the oldest, biggest trees on Earth so I could feel small. The literature of sequoias is, counterintuitively, also a celebration of smallness. There's a promise of renewal and transcendence in the juxtaposition of self and tree. The ecstatic naturalist John Muir, among the first to go gaga for "King Sequoia," wrote that "one naturally walked softly and awe-stricken among them ... subdued in the general calm, as if in some vast hall pervaded by the deepest sanctities and solemnities that sway human souls." (Muir also made "wine" by soaking the trees' cones in water and drank it as a "sacrament." He wrote, "I wish I were so drunk and Sequoical that I could preach the green brown woods to all the juiceless world.")

It seemed like a particularly good moment in America for humility, for perspective-taking, for recalibrating my sense of scale and time. But the night before I was supposed to fly out, a snowstorm unexpectedly hit the Sierra, provoking a long and brutally disincantizing warning on the National Park Service's website. "Roads may close," it said, and tire chains were now mandatory — equipment I'd always found irrationally intimidating, even more so, perhaps, than the prospect of skidding off a mountainside. The alert concluded: "If you're uncomfortable driving in the mountains during winter storms, consider postponing your visit."



I suppose it was typical winter-mountain stuff. But in my inexperience, I panicked. And I continued panicking until I eventually reached the park — a day later than I had planned, after deciding to indulge that panic and spend a night at the base of the mountain, betting the roads would at least partly thaw in the morning. “Snow panic,” a friend called it, a friend who had been considering meeting me in the sequoias and was now bowing out. It was a familiar strain of jittery duress and intensifying fragility that comes from trying with all your energy to figure out exactly how bad the future will be.



Sequoias, when photographed, defy efforts to maintain a sense of their true size. Note the teeny-tiny sign at bottom right. David Benjamin Sherry for The New York Times

In retrospect, I recognize that the weather was just one more uncertainty — and one too many — to withstand; already, I worried that a strange-but-minor injury on the ball of my foot might become inflamed and keep me from hiking around the park, and that a scratch in my throat was the beginnings of my daughter's flu. And beneath the foot and the flu were other worries — namely, about the recklessly accelerating gush of world events that I'd been pummeling myself with many times an hour online. All it took was returning after a few hours away from Twitter to discover a long record of outrages stacked up and hardened like signs of ancient droughts or fires preserved in the rings of a tree. The timeline was quickening, tightening; there were certain days on which we'd all lived through centuries. When I called William C. Tweed, a former ranger at the park, he told me, "On a good day, the sequoias remind us that we're not really in charge of the world." I wanted *that*. But the snow was a reminder that not being in charge also means being powerless. That kind of smallness didn't feel liberating at all. I hated it.

**Sequoia National Park** was established in 1890, at a moment in America not so wildly different from our own. It was an era of intensifying inequality, vulnerability and dislocation. Urban industrialization upended rural tradition, and populist uprisings, like the Pullman Strike and the Haymarket Riot, pitted an exasperated working class against a government that seemed to collude with the corporations exploiting it. As a labor leader in San Francisco named James Martin wrote, with society seemingly in "chaotic condition, there is ample scope for the most dismal speculation." And so, in 1885, a collective of radicals, including Martin, decided to build an alternate society, applying to purchase government land in the Sierra where they could construct a glimmering socialist utopia. Kaweah Colony, they called it. Fifty-three individuals filed claims for 8,000 adjoining acres, centered in the Giant Forest.



American settlers had been enraptured by the giant sequoias since they first stumbled onto them 30 years earlier, and yet the government had never seen any reason to protect the land; in fact, the federal Timber and Stone Act, under which the Kaweah colonists were purchasing their acreage, was meant to encourage logging in the West. And this was the colonists' plan: They'd be lumberjacks, bankrolling their utopia with that enormous storehouse of wood. All they had to do was build a road in and out of the forest — 20 grueling miles straight up a mountainside pocked with jagged eruptions of granite. A tremendous job, but doable, they decided. They were optimists, after all.

By the end of the following year, there were 160 Kaweah colonists on site, throwing themselves at the road-cutting project and establishing the structures of their new civic life. The colonists split into “divisions,” then subdivided the divisions into hundreds of different “departments,” like a Hand-Craft Department and an Amusements Department. They exchanged man-hours as currency and got a lot done; Kaweah quickly turned into an egalitarian cooperative. “Brute passions,” Martin reported, were “surrendering to moral restraint,” and an “inoffensive and charming rivalry exists to outdo the other in neighborly acts.” Colonists picnicked together, dried fruit, sewed clothes and never spanked their children. One photo shows dozens of them posing in front of one phenomenally large sequoia — a tree so unmistakably magnificent they named it the Karl Marx Tree.

By the summer of 1890, the colonists had pushed their road within a few miles of the sequoias. They decided to pause there and start felling pine trees, to scratch together the money they needed to finish. But that fall, Congress created Sequoia National Park, only the second in what would become America's national park system. The government didn't try to seize private land for the park; in this case, the Kaweah colonists didn't technically own the acreage. Their application to buy it had never been officially approved. Only private citizens were allowed to purchase land under the Timber and Stone Act, and because all

53 original Kaweah claimants had used the same San Francisco address on their paperwork, officials had flagged it, suspecting they were a large and devious corporation. (Logging companies were, in fact, grossly abusing the law, coordinating groups of locals — sometimes just by buying rounds at the local saloon — to claim chunks of land on their behalf.) The colonists were aware of this bureaucratic hiccup, but had gone ahead, expecting it would eventually be resolved. In the end, it wasn't. They were stripped of the land, and the government claimed the road they built as well. Several members were charged with federal "timber trespass." America renamed the Karl Marx Tree after General Sherman.



The General Sherman Tree, 275 feet tall,  
100 feet around. David Benjamin Sherry  
for The New York Times



Historians now see evidence that the government's actions were influenced by the Southern Pacific Railroad, which was moving to protect its own interests in the area. That is, the Kaweah colonists spent four years working as unpaid labor on a nightmarish infrastructure project to improve land for the same exploitative governmental-industrial complex from which they thought they were breaking free. They had tried to resize themselves — to create a smaller, separate and more perfect world in which their lives and values could be bigger — but the real world was still all around them, and in it, they were still painfully, negligibly small.

It's hard to diagram the Kaweah story as an allegory of any contemporary ideology of good and evil, heroism and villainy. It gets confusing: The federal government, partly at the behest of an underhanded corporation, sabotaged a community of hardworking and benevolent utopians — but only to create something fundamentally idealistic and to protect an irreplaceable ecological wonder from capitalistic loggers. And yet, the loggers were the utopians. The capitalists were socialists! Which would have been fine, except that the government had mistaken them for an underhanded corporation.

Baffled, I called William Tweed, the retired Sequoia park ranger, who has also written about the colony. “You reach a stage in life where what you most frequently see in history is irony,” Tweed told me sagely. “Perhaps the lesson for 2017 is that ideology rarely explains what happens.”

**It was almost** dusk on the first evening by the time I rented my Fiat at the San Jose airport and reached the entrance to Sequoia National Park. I pulled into the tiny outpost of Three Rivers, Calif., and headed straight to a place called the Totem Market to rent a set of tire chains, still toying with the idea of pushing up the mountain that night.

The market is a combination gift shop, bar, deli and full-service tire-chain-rental depot — a sleepy-seeming establishment with wagon wheels and barrels on its roof. But inside, the scene was incongruously lively. A couple dozen mostly younger people stood around the bar, shouting conversation over that song that goes “Amber is the color of my energy” again and again. It felt like a rehearsal dinner; I couldn’t figure out how everyone knew one another. Then a woman in full Park Service garb — green wool pants, khaki shirt, government-issue leather boots — stepped out of my peripheral vision to order a beer.



The canopy in Sequoia National Park, where the branches are large enough to be impressive trees in their own right. David Benjamin Sherry for The New York Times



Almost all of them were “parkies,” as one man eventually put it. They were giving a going-away party for one of their supervisors, who was leaving for a new detail at a park near San Diego. Someone pointed him out: an older, smiley, muscular man in a T-shirt that said, “Yard Sale.” They eventually sang “Happy Birthday” to someone, too — a younger guy in a camouflage hat, holding a generous glass of red wine lazily aloft and squinting. At one point, another man dropped a pint, and it shattered. The entire room shouted and applauded. Then Yard Sale graciously, dutifully appeared with a broom and — maybe, I wanted to imagine, just to leave his troops with one final image of how a true leader behaved — swept up the glass.

Off in a corner, I struck up a conversation with Thor Riksheim, a tree-size Park Service veteran with an impressive mustache. Riksheim directs historical preservation at Sequoia. He had recently restored the only Kaweah Colony building remaining in the park, a remote cabin that the government calls, a little ruthlessly, Squatter’s Cabin. The colony had been conspicuously written out of the official story of Sequoia National Park, and its road has long since reverted to a trail. But Riksheim spoke affectionately of the cabin, which he called “Squatty’s,” and the colonists, too. (He also called the General Sherman Tree “Sherm,” as if they’d gone to high school together.) Right away, I liked him immensely. It was clear his connection to the trees was deep and singular. He was currently living in another historic building he had restored in the heart of the Giant Forest — in the shadow of the famed Sentinel Tree, a cluster known as the Bachelor and the Three Graces and other sequoias. It was touching how privileged he seemed to feel, how proud. “I’m Giant Forest, population 1,” he told me.

To a human being, a 2,000-year-old sequoia seems immortal. But I noticed that people like Riksheim who have lived closely with the trees aren’t prone to mistaking their longevity and resilience for indestructibility. To know sequoias means being cognizant of their weaknesses, understanding them as provisional

objects in some vaster, slower-moving natural flux. In fact, there's a prominent exhibit at the park's Giant Forest Museum chronicling how the government nearly undid the trees' entire ecosystem through misunderstandings and mismanagement. By the 1930s, the Park Service had constructed a small resort town for tourists in the center of Giant Forest. There were restaurants, cabins, a gas station, a hotel and a grocery store — nearly 300 buildings, erected over the sensitive and shallow root systems of the sequoias, which never reach more than about six feet below the surface. The Park Service vigilantly fought back the beginnings of forest fires; this seemed wise, fire being a reckless and destructive force, but it actually kept the sequoias from reproducing. (It was not yet understood that, among other ecological benefits, heat from wildfires opens the trees' cones and allows them to spread their seeds.)

All of this was gradually corrected. Then droughts started intensifying. The climate was shifting. The Park Service is now contemplating "assisted migration" of the sequoias: manually planting them farther north to keep pace with climate change. But of course, Tweed, told me, it's now conceivable that the Trump administration might not allow climate change even to be mentioned at national parks' visitor centers. Or that the administration, which picked a Twitter fight with the National Park Service on Day 1, might decide to privatize management of those lands. Who knows, Tweed said: "The worries are deep and profound."

That is, there is another time scale on which the trees are vulnerable, on which the trees are small and come and go as we do: sprouting, growing up, suffering through storms, receiving scars, losing limbs, before they finally drop. Every so often, the imperceptible turbulence and instability in which the trees exist does upend them. Apparently, the first thing you hear when one is falling is a blistering and percussive crackle — the roots snapping, one at a time, underground. It may be far less likely, at any given moment, that one of the sequoias in the park will keel over than that one of the tourists will, but it could



happen. It must happen, every now and again. Earlier this year, a famous sequoia with a road tunneled through its base, known as the Pioneer Cabin Tree, farther north, near Sacramento, toppled over in a storm. At the Giant Forest Museum, I saw photos of another one that flattened a parked Jeep in August 2003.

I don't know why, but I could not stop thinking about this while trundling around the park that weekend: I kept privately picturing them cracking and crashing down. It was a tremendously upsetting image, but still never felt possible enough to scare me.

Late one afternoon, I lay down in the snow at the base of one for a while, watching as the fog poured in through its crown, and I remembered how untroubled Riksheim sounded at the bar the previous evening when, lowering his voice, he mentioned that there was a particular sequoia near his house that he was keeping an eye on. He could wake up dead tomorrow, he said. "It's just that flying, fickle finger of Fate. Every once in a while, it's going to point at you." Then he fluttered his long, bony index finger through the air and lowered it with a sudden whoosh. Out of nowhere: crash. And I realized that his experience of it — a feeling of forsakenness, of arbitrary cruelty — would be essentially the same as the tree's.

Two days later, I was snowshoeing around alone when I discovered I was standing in front of the same sequoia I had lain under. There, in the sloping snow at its roots, I saw my imprint. My back and legs and arms were joined into a wispy column, with the perfectly ovular hood of my parka rounding off the top. It looked like a snow angel, but also like a mummy — an image of both levity and dolefulness, neither all good nor all bad. I took a picture of it: what little of myself was left after I'd gone. The figure looked smaller and more delicate than I thought it should, but the Giant Forest was so quiet that I couldn't imagine who else it could be.

# ARTFORUM

## David Benjamin Sherry

Morán Morán Los Angeles

By Suzanne Hudson



David Benjamin Sherry, *Wildfire Rising Behind Crater Lake, Oregon, August 2015*, ink-jet print, 30 × 38 1/4".

For his third solo show in Los Angeles, David Benjamin Sherry presented a series of nearly two dozen photographs of the American West. As with his past work, the large-scale prints were made in and around national parks with an 8 x 10 field camera. And as with his earlier images, these photos of lakes, glaciers, canyons, and granite domes are uniformly crisp to the point of unreality, with equally crystalline details in the works' backgrounds and foregrounds. Sherry pays homage to the technical brilliance of modernist photographers of the land and, more specifically, to the sites they frequented. But if politics was problematically displaced in the masterful, highly aestheticized work of forbears such as Ansel Adams, Sherry is overt in his concerns. Indeed, he titled his show

"Paradise Fire," in reference to the name given to the recent wildfire in Washington State that burned almost three thousand acres of rainforest—a devastating natural disaster and an omen of the climate change that renders its occurrence unexceptional.

Environmentalism has been a consistent through line for Sherry, and the show presented a compendium of tragedy in the Anthropocene, with a lake nearly drained of water in *Mono Lake, California, February 2014* (all works 2015); a suburbia set to encroach on Mount Whitney in *Near the Future Site of Portal Preserve, a Housing Development, Lone Pine, California, July 2015*; and so on. Continuing one aspect of his work, "Paradise Fire" was noteworthy for jettisoning the vibrant, near-psychedelic effects of overlaid color—cyan, magenta, and yellow—that characterized his previous efforts to effectively queer the scene. The new shots, by contrast, intimate authorship in other ways, whether in the self-portrait reflected in the sunglasses of Sherry's subject in *Tess, Near White Sands Missile Range, New Mexico, July 2015*, or in the cumbersome titles themselves, which detail the location and date of their capture and serve in their totality as a kind of diaristic mapping of Sherry's perambulations. Many such places were also the subjects of his earlier works, making Sherry's turn to truer coloration ever more pointed (*Canyonlands, Utah, June 2015*, for example, now foregoes the intense pink of its precedent for local color that better holds the finely etched lines in the sand). Even without the earlier examples as reference, pieces such as *Wildfire in Glacier National Park, St. Mary, Montana, August, 2015* are terrifically lurid in their appeal to facticity, their coruscating color the result not of postproduction alterations but of atmospheric conditions generated when the flames erupted.

Perhaps this turn to a kind of "straight" photography stems from a realization that landscape indelibly bears the traces of human presence, mostly ruinous, and that this presence is deleterious enough to puncture the possibility of autonomy posited by Adams and other

photographers of yesteryear. Adams avoided photographing people on the trails next to him and thus maintained a fantasy of natural preserve that he spent his later years defending as a form of social service. In Sherry's photographs, people do appear, taking selfies in meadows or throwing themselves from bridges, tethered to bungee cords. In Swingarm City aka Caineville, Utah, June 2015, film crews work amid props and a green-screen ramp. Somewhat more elegantly, in what might also be his most potent rejoinder to Adams and the tradition he represents, Sherry shows Yosemite's El Capitán dotted with climbers—specks on the enormous rock. In this new body of work, Sherry seems to veer toward a sort of humanism necessarily personal enough to incorporate identity but also capacious enough to allow for the possibility of exceeding it, the works offering themselves to a world that, soon enough, none of us will inhabit.

—Suzanne Hudson

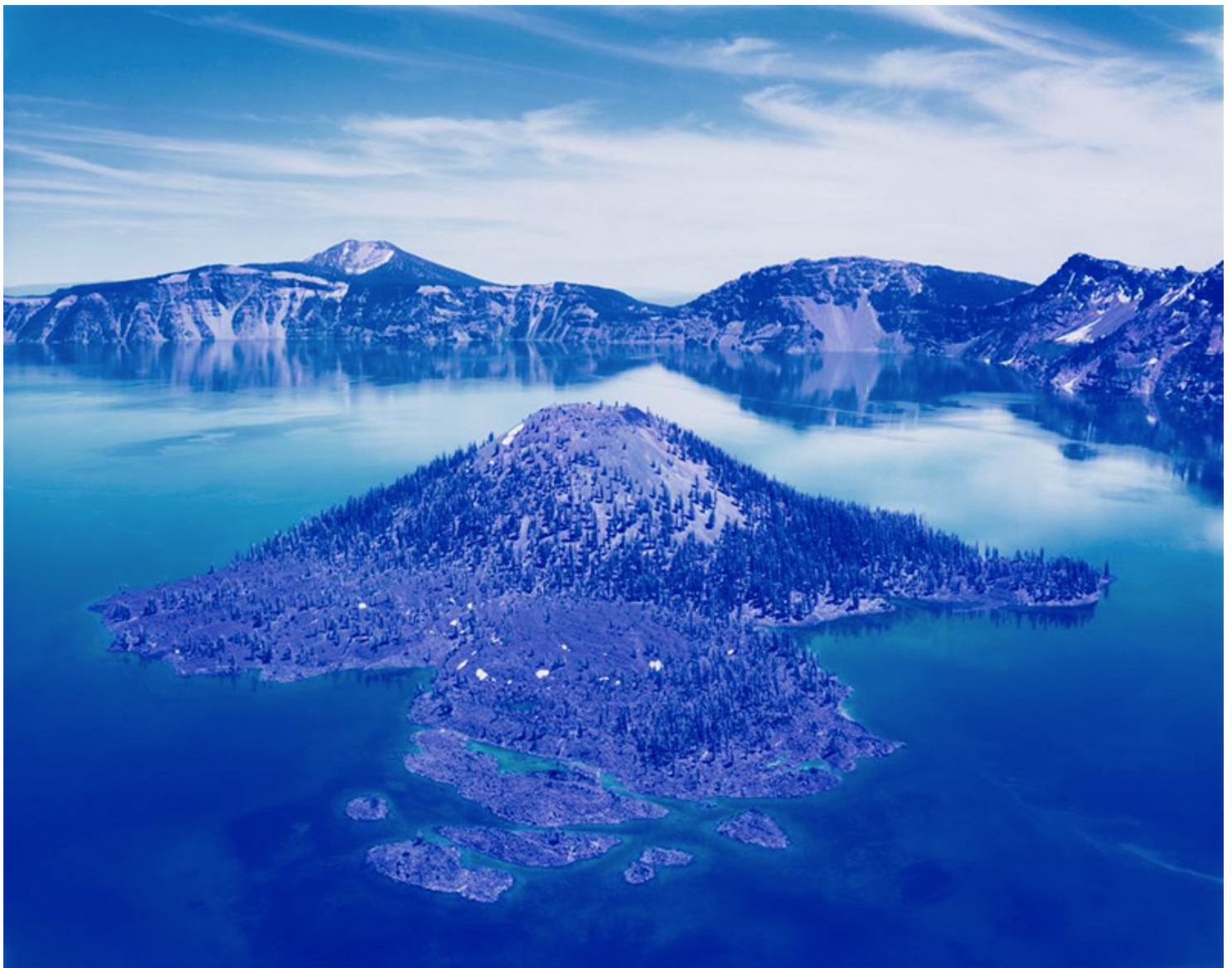


# SLATE

## One Photographer's Beautiful and Devastating Response to Climate Change

BY DAVID ROSENBERG

SEPT 22, 2014 • 1:10 PM



*Deep Blue Sea Rising, Oregon, 2014.*  
(David Benjamin Sherry/Courtesy of the artist and Salon 94)

Almost a decade ago, David Benjamin Sherry began taking trips through the American West. Although he grew up around the Catskill Mountains, once he began photographing the terrain on the other side of the country, he knew he was on to something. He felt drawn to the classic landscapes around Yosemite National Park and Death Valley, as well as the work of Ansel Adams and Edward Weston.

“The pictures, they just spoke to me and it felt like a natural thing for me to be doing,” Sherry said.

A couple of years after graduating with an MFA from Yale, Sherry moved to Los Angeles with the intention of being closer to the places where he wanted to photograph. While he had long been interested in the study of climate change and its effect on the Earth’s landscapes, moving to Los Angeles and exploring the National Parks sharpened his focus on the dramatic shifts in the environment.

“Living in L.A., I feel that the air quality, the draught, the earthquake presence, and the wildfires make it feel more real than it ever had before” he said. “I felt like this is how I need to be making my work and documenting change ... reacting to it (the environment) and thinking about it took over my entire headspace in every possible way.”

Sherry said examining older photographs and reading the placards at National Parks that indicated where specific sites had been altered due to climate change has been shocking. One day, while driving and listening to the radio, he was moved by an interview with Elizabeth Kolbert and, subsequently, her book *The Sixth Extinction: An Unnatural History*. Kolbert’s work became a driving force behind his reactions to the world around him and what he was seeing.

That work, part of an ongoing series of monochrome landscape images shot with a large format camera at f/64 are currently on view at Danziger Gallery and Salon 94, both in New York City.

As a student, Sherry had honed his photography skills by experimenting with a variety of film formats. A friend of his owned a handmade wooden 4-by-5 camera from Keith Canham and Sherry ended up saving his money to buy a larger 8-by-10 model, inspired by the equipment that Adams and Weston had used years before.





*Climate Vortex Sutra, (For Allen Ginsberg), Hana, Hawaii, 2014.*  
(David Benjamin Sherry/Courtesy of the artist and Salon 94)



*Wave on the Coyote Buttes, Paria Canyon, Arizona, 2013.*  
(David Benjamin Sherry/Courtesy of the artist and Salon 94)



“I like to say it’s a game changer,” Sherry said about using the camera. “It’s extremely difficult to use and to manage and the most costly thing I’ve ever had ... but it’s worth it.”

Part of the worth comes together when Sherry makes his large prints, since the detail and depth of field allow for incredibly sharp photographs—even when printed as large as 70-by-90 inches.

At Yale, Sherry said there were few other students working in the darkroom so he pushed himself to explore alternative techniques and to experiment with color processes. That experimentation opened up a new language for him to give his photographs a voice. “The color acts as a vehicle to emotional response and intensity that is already in the landscape,” he said. “That’s my intention of it, a type of enhanced reality.”



*Wave on the Coyote Buttes, Paria Canyon, Arizona, 2013.*  
(David Benjamin Sherry/Courtesy of the artist and Salon 94)

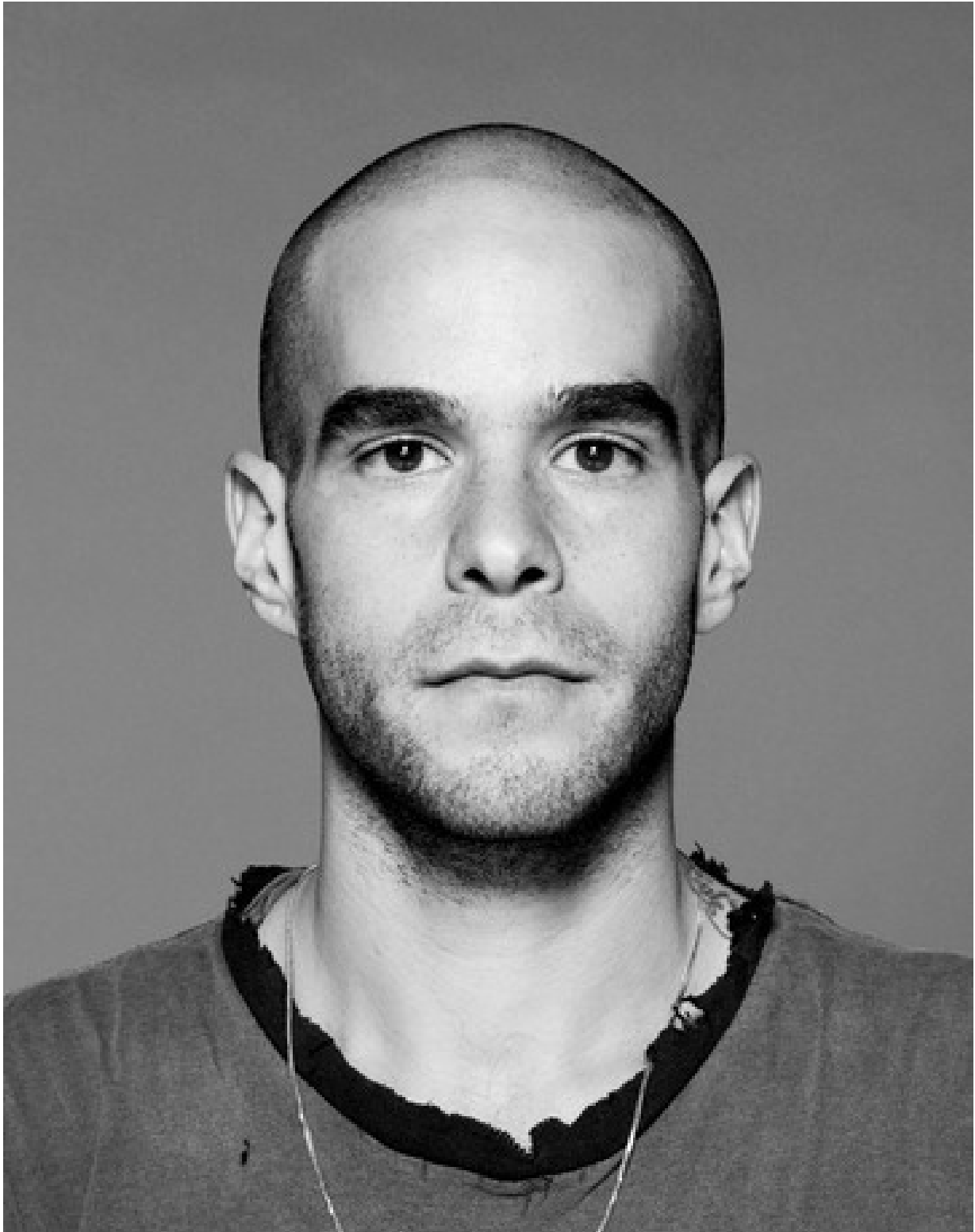
Sherry said his work is inspired by an appreciation for the analog film based photographs and printing processes that were developed over the past 100 years. While there is a nostalgic element to his work, he also seeks to find new territory within that aesthetic and carry on a tradition for printing photographs.

“We digest so many images daily that people have gotten lazy,” Sherry said about print-making. “I’m generalizing ... but there is less care and precision in the printing process and I’m really in tune to that. It’s pretty much half of my process. It’s where things come to life.”



*Winter Storm in Zion Canyon, Zion, Utah, 2013.*  
(David Benjamin Sherry/Courtesy of the artist and Salon 94)

**THE NIFTY 50  
DAVID BENJAMIN SHERRY, PHOTOGRAPHER**



*David Benjamin Sherry*



*This month, T celebrates the Nifty 50: America's up-and-coming talent.*

The photographer David Benjamin Sherry spent his early 20s wondering when it was going to happen, "it" being his career as an artist. With a recently released monograph, as well as his second solo show, at the Schlechtriem Brothers gallery in Berlin's Mitte district, it's clear that Sherry has his answer.

Born in Long Island, Sherry's family relocated to Woodstock, N.Y., when he was 5. The hippie-ish environment was a formative influence. His iconic landscapes envisage humans as part of an organic whole, placing them in a natural context and using body paint as camouflage to blur the lines between the body and its environment. Other images deploy psychedelic symbols, from the inverted pyramid to washes of color that mimic an auric field. It's all very trippy, without the dippy.

His work exhibits a refreshing lack of irony; instead, sincerity seems to be his guiding principle. There's truth in the work for me," he says. "I look to the images for a sense of who I am, and I hope people can sense that. A lot of these pictures have me in them. Some people ask, 'Are you a narcissist?' But I don't think so. ... I'm just dealing with myself."

Sherry first became interested in making art thanks to a high school teacher who pushed him to explore his potential. After graduating from the Rhode Island School of Design, he attended Yale's prestigious M.F.A. program. Once he left New Haven, Sherry had to adjust to the harsher reality of trying to make it on his own. You're babied and then you get out there and you don't have a ready-made audience, he says of the world beyond Yale. He seems to have managed, partially by being open to exploring avenues that might scare other artists. He was approached after his thesis show by an agent from AFG Management, and his work was embraced by the fashion community. He has shot for I-D, Dazed and Confused, Japanese Vogue, Another Man and 032C, among others. He's comfortable with the different intentions that underlie his fashion versus fine-arts shoots, observing that it's a different type of work. It's people who really want to problem solve, to make this glove or this model look good. Art, on the other hand, can be problem-making.

Pressed about the potential pitfalls of being a young art star in the making during one of the most difficult periods in the history of the contemporary art market, Sherry is optimistic. "I couldn't think of a better time," he says. "It's the end, literally [of a decade] ... and we've entered this whole great moment. It was about how you were living and what parties you were going to, but since the economic meltdown, a lot of artists are now coming up. We can't go back and make work in this sensational money, money, money way. It's a new era." Spoken like a true child of the Age of Aquarius.