Outside Spaces, One Artist's Journey

Bonnie L. Schroeder
Governors State University

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Outside Spaces,
One Artist’s Journey

By

Bonnie L. Schroeder

B.A. Western Illinois University, 2005

GRADUATE THESIS

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirement for the

Degree of Master of Art with a Major in Art

 Governors State University

University Park, IL 60466

Spring 2015
I would like to dedicate my graduate thesis to:

My husband, Michael

My children, Chrissy and Steph

My mother, Margaret (and father, Richard, who passed in 2001)

My brother, Mark and his wife, Kim

All my family and friends

My professors

I want to thank all of you who taught, guided, encouraged and supported me throughout my graduate endeavors.
The beauty and simplicity of outside spaces often overlooked in a busy world are intimate places to regenerate. There are simple moments in life going on all around us which can be most profound, effortless catalysts triggering memories or creating new ones. Looking at something and interpreting it comes from one’s inner self construed by those defining moments that make who we are, a product of our life experiences. Taking time to day-dream, quiet or settle one’s mind, even if momentarily, transports the viewer to another place, a solemn way to achieve peace of mind. There are gifts all around us just waiting to be opened. The image is brought to the forefront, resetting the stage of the experience taking on a theme of its own. An object, often strategically placed, adaptable in countless spaces of satisfaction, draws in casual observers offering a notion to stop and take a moment in time; past, present or future. Some spaces absent of objects continue to advocate places to visually unwrap images that can transcend the ages. Spaces become sensory images of treasured art located just outside the door. (Bonnie L. Schroeder)
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Introduction

Intrigued with outside spaces, this exhibit consists of a series of outdoor photographs developed and completed over time. The objective is to bring the observer through a journey of my evolution as an artist, in hopes of sharing a better understanding and appreciation for the outside subjects that are all around us.

When I was in junior high I created a camera from a shoebox. It consisted of no moving parts and could be built by just about anyone. The theory behind this type of photography is that when light passes through a very small hole, an image is formed. The size of the hole determines the sharpness of the image\(^1\), the smaller the hole the sharper the reflection. The image is then formed on film, such as photographic paper, that is placed just inside the sealed box. When the object you are taking a picture of is exposed to sunlight or similar light, light beams are reflected (scattered) in various directions. When using this shoebox technique, only certain light beams can pass through the hole, while other light is blocked by the box. Only the light beams passing in the direction through the pinhole onto the sensitive paper form the image. The principle behind this technique that allows you to take a picture with a shoebox is called pinhole photography\(^2\). My art teacher at that time encouraged all of us to attempt this.

Recess was the occasion to put it to the test. After placing the readymade camera box on the ground using a worm’s eye view vantage point, and gathering up my friends, it was now time. The results were amazing! A contrast of

\(^{1}\)http://www.pinhole.org/index.php/about-pinhole-2/

\(^{2}\)http://www.kurabo.co.jp/el/world/en/room/3d/page2.html
black and white photographic image of my friends lined up against the brick wall and then just the brick wall. I was amazed that this simple phenomenon could actually work! (Image A, 4” x 3.5” & Image B, 4” x 3.5”) With my immediately purchased Kodak camera, accompanied by an assortment of flash cubes, my sparked interest in photography would be the beginning of countless streams of pictures soon to be tumbling in.

In high school, my continuation of art courses took place when possible. It would be in college that I would further my understanding and knowledge of the arts by pursuing and acquiring an Associate of Arts degree in Art. Back then, the digital era consisted of a standalone Apple computer with no foreseeable future of the Internet, only a concept. Therefore, the foundation of my undergraduate studies in art would encompass elements consisting of drawing, design, painting, and art history. Upon completion of my associates degree I started working downtown Chicago as an underwriting assistant/analyst where they encouraged me to further my education. I would eventually receive a Bachelor of Arts degree, however, not in art, but in liberal studies with an emphasis in business and a minor in marketing. My passion remained high in the Art World especially photography. As advances in technology grew, so did my interest in computers. I still remember the day we connected to the Internet; it was a little mind boggling to say the least. As technology advanced so did cameras. After years of taking thousands of indoor and outdoor photographs, simultaneously reading about some of the greatest photographers in history, it would now be time to pursue my next endeavor, my visual expression through the exploration of digital photography in graduate studies.

Photography before Alfred Stieglitz, “He communed with nature, asked nature to reveal itself, and saw the final result more as a wonderful natural event than
the product of his own talents.”

3 Buckland writes about William Henry Fox Talbot. Talbot, whose photographs were considered by some as the foundation of photography, was even thought to be one of the fathers of photography. In 1839 Talbot’s photographic methods were published, eventually being accepted by the Art World that the birthdate of photography had been established. 5 Soon afterwards there was the ‘boy in the darkroom’, Alfred Stieglitz. Stieglitz started off as a mechanical engineer; however, eventually to become intrigued by a certain machine, the camera. Following his passion, he moved his focus towards photo-chemistry. “Since he has set earnestly to work with the camera, he has come to feel for the first time that he has a right to life,...” 6 “And he is possessed by a curious certainty that his instruments will record to his satisfaction everything he now feels, and afterwards will feel, about the world.” 7 His depth of field goes way beyond the camera. Stieglitz was a mechanical engineer. I too was surrounded by engineers growing up where numbers, drafting tables and angles were often themes of conversation. Only I viewed things in a different light, through a lens. Like Stieglitz, my father too was a mechanical engineer. He also


would be often seen with a camera in hand. My father and I shared the love of photography and computers. It would only be after my father’s passing that the photography world would turn into a digital form of expression. “Before Stieglitz, photography had been a thing apart from the arts of expression. Because of Stieglitz, this can never be true.”

Ansel Adams, another immense influence in my journey as an artist, used his abilities to capture a potential image in its finest form; hours of waiting to capture the magic moment. That ideal moment where outdoor light and ideal patterns of shadows and highlights transversely meet, revealing the imagery at its optimum was astonishing, a combination of simple and complex. “It is my intention to present – through the medium of photography – intuitive observations of the natural world which may have meaning to the spectators”, quoted by Ansel Adams. The pioneers of photography seem often underappreciated for their efforts with the methods employed by them as opposed to what is available to us now. These inspiring artists and their efforts to capture more than an image are true inspirations and have helped make my voyage more conceivable.

One of the first books introduced to me in my graduate program was, “Poetics of Space”, by Gaston Bachelard. This was a profound read for me. Skimming through portions of chapters, not in any particular order, was the best and most effective way for me to digest it. The book made such an impression on me that I decided to name this series of my work, Outdoor Spaces, One Artist’s Journey.


9 http://www.photocriticism.com/demo/archivetexts/photoquotes/demoarchivequotes1.html
Throughout my educational endeavors, my eyes have been opened to the many ideas that have contributed to my body of work. My coursework has allowed me to experience and enhance the ability to capture an image in a particular way. Panoramic pictures to taking images at ground level looking up (worm’s eye view), or from an elevated view looking down (bird’s eye view), making use of light in its best form, dawn and dusk, allowing the image to be photographed in its truest form. I would not be able to be where I am without the professors that have taught me about the digital world. Now taking photos in the raw, also known as digital negatives required an upgrade on a digital camera. My Canon Rebel XTi Digital EOS is the machine I used to complete this series of work. Lastly, post-production, the use of digital tools in Adobe Photoshop are the final processes used when enhancing the image, as needed, allowing a particular focal point to stand out, or adjusting the proper lighting to bring the flattened image to a more dimensional state. All these areas combined have made me a better digital photographer today as I continue to develop my talents as an artist.

Bachelard’s book was also a vast influence to the composition of my artist statement. He shows us how to see the “simplest of simple”\textsuperscript{10}, allowing us to experience the modest spaces all around us. My artist statement begins, “The beauty and simplicity of outside spaces often overlooked in a busy world are intimate places to regenerate. There are simple moments in life going on all around us which can be most profound, effortless catalysts triggering memories or creating new ones.”\textsuperscript{11} All of the elements of the landscape converging at a single


\textsuperscript{11} Schroeder, Bonnie L., Photographic Digital Imaging Artist
moment in time and once captured can be shared for an eternity. I hope my images can capture a meaning for the observer in anticipation of creating their own moment in time.
Outdoor Spaces, One Artist’s Journey: Graduate Works and Developments

This series of work is a combination of outside spaces in attempt to conceptualize my appreciation and passion for the outdoors, capturing moments in time. For several years, the inspiration for this theme has remained consistent in order to develop and capture this idea.

My first piece I have named, “Journey” (Image 1, 14 x 11 Digital Print). The movement of geometric colors swirled circular in shape, ever so subtle yet lit with bold, dramatic contrast of light. The saturation of color seemed to intensity as we progressed through the naturalistic tunnel, the illusion of space capturing much depth as we ventured through. Fortunately, my camera was in hand and our daily walk was captured through the lens holding on to a memory in time. “Journey” would be the start of my continued mission as an artist developing something that was always within. By capturing the image of the circular movement of color just outside the door, it would take us on an expedition that will last a lifetime.

The island of treasures, Isle a La Cache, is a wonderful place to explore 18th century history. A field trip would inspire me to revisit this area on my own self-guided tour. If it were not for the field trip, I may not have stumbled upon it. It was during a different time I would revisit the location experiencing the nature with the absence of noise. The morning was comprised of sunshine that was determined to make an appearance as the sun rose in the east allowing the light to land just right. My second piece is called, “Inspiring” (Image 2, 11 x 14 Digital Print). As mentioned earlier, one of my influences is Ansel Adams. He is well known as an iconic figure of nature photography, along with an advocate of wilderness

12 http://www.reconnectwithnature.org/visitor-centers/icm
preservation. As you view the darkened sky, it reminds us how the subtle changes of light can alter the image, allowing for reflection of time, in anticipation of inspiration. “Then it occurred to him that if he used a dark red filter, both sky and cliff would register darker in the finished print than in the actual scene. He changed the red filter, with this dramatic result. He described this episode as his first “visualization” – his attempt to express the emotional and aesthetic feelings he felt at the time he made the photograph. Adams considered it a seminal moment in his development as a photographer.”

“Peaceful” (Image 3, 11 x 14 Digital Print), transcends the thought of meditation into relaxation. “Comfort” (Image 4, 11 x 14 Digital Print), cave-like surrounding of nature looking out, only to capture a more sense of calm. “Spiritual” (Image 5, 14 x 11 Digital Print), sense of God’s fingers gazing through as we watched in hopefulness.

Throughout my experience in graduate studies, I found having a camera charged, sufficient memory, and keeping it readily available is an important part of the equation in hopes of capturing a unique moment at any time. This particular series was in effort to seek out that special moment. Attempting to chase the fall colors as some might refer to themselves ‘Leaf-peepers’ we set out to do just that. We mapped it all out, waiting for the conditions to be just right for what we were searching for; clear skies and peak colors. So off we went on our excursion heading to the north woods. Our chase began at the break of dawn only to find that where we were headed seemed as if the autumn colors

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had already peaked. The colors were slightly spotty, with some brilliance left behind. We remained optimistic in hopes of finding what we thought might still be out there. We stayed on track with our original plan and headed towards our first destination exiting the car often shooting many images along the way hunting for something that may or may not capture the beauty we sought. We continued to search and ended up on a dead end road nestled in the woods. At the end of a road, there was the entrance of a path. We traveled so far; therefore, we had to take a look. Putting our coats back on, I grabbed the charged up camera and started up the path. The trail was covered with leaves and many fallen branches so we were not sure how far we would be able to go. Then, as we were walking, we glanced down noticing a lake, a lake that was located deep in a ravine. We knew we had to get a closer look in hopes of finding that diamond in the rough we had been searching for. We had to exit the path, creating our own. As we approached the lake, the water was like a sheet of glass. The trees still had leaves and consisted of summery evergreens along with a mix of vibrant color. It was truly amazing! I started capturing images continually layering the shots both horizontally and vertically in orientation walking around the lake as far as it would let us. As I looked through the lens the reflections were indescribable. The lines, the textures, the tones were all working together. I just kept shooting until I felt satisfied. It was interesting because once I felt complete and started walking away I looked down at my camera noticing just at that instant the memory was full. The timing of the shots was impeccable. It was a very moving experience! This entire series is called “Reflections” (Images #6 through #18, 11 x 14 and 14 x 11 Digital Prints).
Starved Rock, voted #1 attraction in the State of Illinois\textsuperscript{15}, this is a place of literal spelunking and an occasional picnic. There are national parks all around us and being able to frequent one is momentous. The day we went on our venture was late afternoon. The objective was to go deep into one of the canyons to visit the waterfall. Because of the drought we were unable to obtain a water sighting, however, upon exiting the canyon we rotated around on our final leg only to capture an image of the luminous sun, a gift peeking through the towering trees upon our climbing departure, “Luminous” (Image #19, 14 x 11 Digital Print).

Conceptualism, not often used in the business world however more in the Art World, is a process that can broaden an artist’s senses. It was an idea that I had to relearn. My next piece is in hopes of a continued, conveyed meaning through conceptual visual means, beyond what can be seen or touched. This method also helped me develop my artist statement. It would be heading back from the ‘fall leaper’ excursion, using up every ounce of sun we would make our final stop on this particular journey. A cloudy day had covered the region, with no indication the sun would break through just before setting for the night. Tired and cold, we used every last grain of energy we had to make the steep climb up Rib Mountain. We drove up the back to the peak where we made our final efforts to climb to the highest point of Granite Peak’s lookout tower. At the top of the tower we had to wait for the sun to break through an opening in the clouds at the horizon and offer the image we hoped for. For the first time, we experienced the sun setting on top of a mountain we had visited many times. However, this time instead of a sea of green, it was a blanket of color. My next image is called, “Calico” (Image 20, 11 x 14 Digital Print).

\textsuperscript{15} \url{http://www.starvedrockstatepark.org/}
We were actually searching for this park when we were driving around on our ‘chasing the fall colors’ excursion. It was on our list of places to discover. It took us several attempts to finally locate the park. "Every community has its own unique and interesting history, and Tomahawk, Wisconsin is no exception.” As we drove through the park, we got out frequently, circling the park numerous times. These three images are named, “Refreshing 1, 2 and 3” (Images #21 through #23, 11 x 14 and 14 x 11 Digital Prints) due to their ‘camp-like’ settings.

A trip to Florida would bring us to the infamous Edison & Ford Winter Estates. As we toured the grounds we came upon “Enchanted” (Image #24, 11 x 14). The vertical botanical root system stopped us in our tracks only to capture the space that intrigued many passersby, extremely adventurous in nature. Intrigued by another outside space, this root system, symmetry of nature, flowed of “Balanced” (Image #25, 11 x 14). It was appealing to my eye and a safe predictability.

Hoover Dam, formerly called Boulder Dam, the dam in Black Canyon on the Colorado River, at the Arizona-Nevada border, was nearby the town of Henderson where we communed for a week during a dance convention. We were able to take a glimpse of the vast beauty of space during a break in the week’s events. Either side would capture the same moment, Nevada or Arizona, it did not matter. The view was wondrous! Crossing over you could see for miles in either direction. It was a perfect morning, a picturesque scene. The sea of blue outlined with black walls was awe-inspiring which was why I named it, “Astonishing” (Image #26, 11 x 14 Digital Print).

16 http://www.tomahawkhistoricalsoc.org/home
17 http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/271416/Hoover-Dam
The infinite blue sky underlined in activity was an immense feeling of possibility. Not a cloud in the sky only to capture an image of opportunity. “Brilliance”, (Image # 27, 11 x 14 Digital Print) was the best way to describe the dunescape before us. A morning treasure upon us just was waiting to be unveiled.

It was a chilly, rainy start to the day. We hoped the skies would open up to blue skies. As we approached our location, the sun peeked through, the chill remained. We traveled locally to many spots. Some urban, some rural taking pictures along the way. The lake is where we would meet our final destination of that day. The images captured gave us a sense of a Maine-like setting. Just up our own coast, it was perfect! “Unpredictable 1” (Image # 28, 11 x 14 Digital Print), “Unpredictable 2” (Image # 29, 11 x 14 Digital Print), “Timeless” (Image # 30, 11 x 14 Digital Print) and “Moments” (Image # 31, 11 x 14 Digital Print).

As the sun rises or sets, everyone seems to stop what they were doing and gravitate towards it, viewing something as if they are seeing it for the first time. This happened often, drawing the casual observer in. This mirrored image effect of the sun and the space around it, gives the depiction of a mood that transcends a sense of calm. “Soothing” (Image # 32, 14 x 11 Digital print) and “Relaxing” (Image # 33, 14 x 11 Digital Print) are captured not as an end but as a means of what may originate as we consider the subjects all around us, capturing them in a timeless manner.
Summary

My objective of creating artwork by capturing photographic digital images is to establish a framework for documentation in support of my body of work through exhibition, bringing my artist statement to the observer, helping them experience my evolution as an artist. This has not only been an artistic journey, but a personal one as well. The collection of artwork of outside spaces is in hopes of being able to draw the observer in, taking a moment in time, creating their own experience.

“For me, a landscape does not exist in its own right, since its appearance changes at every moment; but the surrounding atmosphere brings it to life – the light and the air which vary continually. For me, it is only the surrounding atmosphere which gives subjects their true value.” – Claude Monet

http://www.theartstory.org/artist-monet-claude.htm

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Works Cited


## Appendix

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Image 31 – *Moments*…………………………………Digital Image
11” x 14”
2014

Image 32 – *Soothing*…………………………………Digital Image
14” x 11”
2010

Image 33 – *Relaxing*…………………………………Digital Image
14” x 11”
2010
Image A

“Untitled I” 4” x 3.5” Shoe Box Pinhole Photography Image

Image B

“Untitled II” 4” x 3.5” Shoe Box Pinhole Photography Image
"Inspiring" 11" x 14" Digital Print
"Peaceful" 11" x 14" Digital Print
Image #4

“Comforting”  11” x 14” Digital Print
Image #5

“Spiritual” 14” x 11” Digital Print
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“Reflections 6” 14” x 11” Digital Print
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“Reflections 7”  11” x 14” Digital Print
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“Calico” 11” x 14” Digital Print
Image #21

“Refreshing 1” 14” x 11” Digital Print
Image #23

“Refreshing 3” 14” x 11” Digital Print
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“Unpredictable 1”  11” x 14” Digital Print
“Unpredictable 2” 11” x 14” Digital Print
Image #31

“Moments” 11” x 14” Digital Print
“Soothing” 14" x 11" Digital Print
"Relaxing"  14" x 11" Digital Print