Greif Alumni: Q&A with John Sanderson

Article

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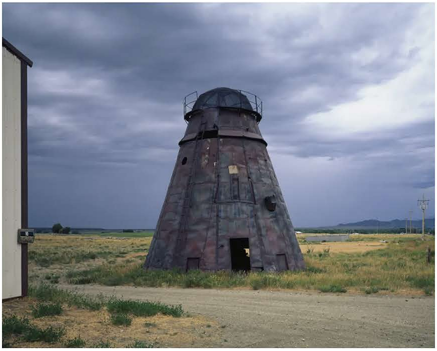
We periodically invite our alumni, artists we have featured in the past, to share their work and projects with us. John Sanderson's work was first featured in our Guest Room curated by Matthew Leifheit ↗ in 2019. Sanderson works with broad topographical subjects within the United States of America. His photographs reconcile American motives of impermanence and expansion within the contemporary landscape. His projects include themes such as transportation, leisure, residence, industry, and decay. The influence of growing up in New York City's Midtown Manhattan underpins much of Sanderson's work rooted in a passion for architectural design. Zatara Press published his Carbon County project in 2019 and he wrote an artist blog ↗ about the project for us in 2020. Now we have invited John back to give us a more in-depth description of the project.



Der Greif: Hi John, thanks for sharing your project, "Carbon County" with us. What initially drew you to the landscapes of Carbon County, Wyoming, and how did your perception of the region evolve during your residency and employment there?

In 2015 I traveled to the Western United States to find more photographs. I was searching for something different, and that summer I was awarded an artist residency at the Brush Creek Ranch in Wyoming. I returned in 2017 as the ranch photographer, a job that allowed me intimate access to the ranching community. As a child, the myth of the American West entered my mind through movies, music and television. It has always been my desire to experience it for myself. The artist residency and later employment at the ranch allowed me to further explore these ideas.

There is a slowness to living in Wyoming that appealed to me. This came through in my interactions with people as well as through experiencing the land. I turned to the great expanse of sky as a motif throughout the project. There was a respect for the people and land that set in a month into working at the ranch. The High Plains elevation of 7,000 feet can be an extreme environment when spending time outdoors. The summer months give infrequent cloud cover and the sun beats you down. Working in this kind of environment demands physical stamina. My respect for the people who live there grew deeper once I understood the hardships of being in such a rugged and isolated environment.

On the whole, I think my expectations of photographing the West were exceeded. Before going there, I often relied on the built environment to structure my photographs. The Railroad Landscape has been a muse since I began photography in my teenage years. I relied on the tracks and the structures built up around them to form the vocabulary of my images. Going West, I knew there would be tracks, but I felt there might be something missing. I was wrong. I found such interesting structures such as the WigWam Burner seen in the image "Conical Burner" from *Carbon County*, and the striking juxtaposition between the Medicine Bow Mountains and church in the *Ride on Faith* photograph. I felt liberated because I could now use the horizon and unobstructed sky as a tool to capture the spatial depth unique to the West.

Der Greif: In your project, you explore the counterpoint between natural grandeur and human ambition in the American West. Can you share some specific examples or experiences that highlight this contrast within Carbon County?

Yes, I have one, and it is related to the image *Beetle Kill*: As I walked up the forested western precipice of the Medicine Bow Mountains, I stopped to rest among the destroyed trees. The destruction was impressive on a scale I had never seen before -- it looked like a job man had done, however, an invasive beetle species was guilty of this present-day destruction. Strangely enough, in the 1860s man felled this forest to create crossties for the new transcontinental railroad which was being constructed about 30 miles north. I considered this history as I rested there. An image began to form in my mind, one which reconciled the current destruction of the natural order with the past. I removed my hat and hung it on the tree, one of the few left standing. Here I stood as witness to the historical and contemporary all at once. The placement of the hat indicates man's present impact on the land, for better or for worse, and my complicity within it.

The first image from the series relates to your question as well. In this picture, we see a Union Pacific freight train photographed from the driver's seat of my van. This rail line is part of the original transcontinental railroad completed in 1869. Since that time, trains have crossed through Carbon County en route to California or New York. The construction of a rail line bisecting the most difficult terrain on earth is perhaps the paragon of human ambition checking natural grandeur. Before the railroad, westward travelers passing through Wyoming had to take the Oregon Trail by foot or wagon. This was a journey marked with suffering. Death from extreme weather, or at the hands of noble Native Americans defending their homes was not uncommon. The arrival of the railroad throughout the vast western territories provided an arterial connection by which people could inhabit the west. The groundbreaking technology of rail met with a primordial human ambition to move Westward. This accelerated the closing of the Frontier, allowing it to enter the American Social Contract.

Der Greif: Your essay mentions the influence of popular culture and media in shaping your perception of the American West. How did this influence manifest in your work, and how did you strive to uncover a more authentic understanding of the region's history and identity?

I began with trying to understand what brought people here at first, but I soon realized (much as it is today) that this region is mostly bypassed by rail and road. Very few people call Carbon County home, and those that do brave severe winters due to the 7,000 ft elevation. In my essay, I refer to the false mythos inherited from the media. This refers in part to the glorification of the region as somewhere to "bask in the beauty of the land." I sought to explore this idea through photographing Carbon County from various angles including the people, architecture, and the influence of the natural landscape.

Der Greif: Could you elaborate on the metaphorical significance of the project's title?

The region was given its name Carbon County in 1868 because of the rich deposits of coal found in the area. This coal fed the newly constructed Union Pacific Railroad. It may seem a stretch, but I thought it an interesting dichotomy that a limited resource such as Carbon is juxtaposed next to County, which denotes a territorial division of land. It's as if the nomenclaturist assumed those resources would last forever. In another way, it is a metaphor for our futile pursuit of rather limited natural ressources.

Carbon
County

Der Greif: Can you discuss the role of the Noble Cowboy archetype in your project? How does it intersect with the contemporary landscape drained of its natural resources, and what do you hope to convey through these contrasting elements?

The cowboy appears in various forms throughout the book, from cattle wrangler to executive oil baron. To explore the Noble Cowboy archetype in more detail, let us look at two example photographs from *Carbon County*. These two images are *Rodeo Moonrise* and *Ramon*.

In the first, a gallant horse and rider are caught in prolific repose during an event. The rider gazes outward to the far distance. He seems concerned with what lay ahead. This kind of distant gaze occurs throughout the book and presents an acquiescence to the passage of Time. The horse, as if acknowledging the past, reflects in the opposite direction of the rider.

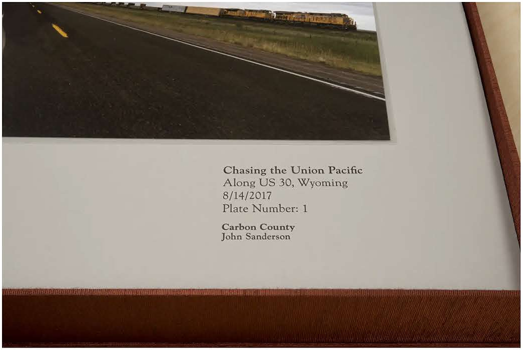
In *Ramon*, we see a man framed between two shipping containers. His experience stands in contrast to that of the rider on horseback. Ramon was originally from Mexico and was working in the ranch's kitchen. I photographed him on his last day of work. He had a mysterious quality about him which I quite liked, and he was different from most others whom I met in Carbon County. He still embraced the cowboy spirit through his appearance and personality. Through depicting contrasting views of Carbon County in the series, I hope that one discovers how complex and mysterious the American West continues to be.

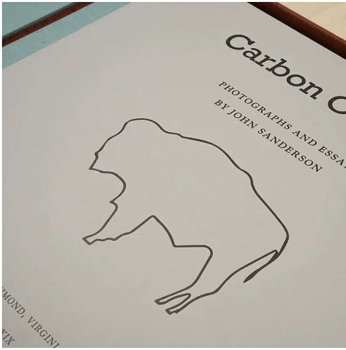
WAYNE
MARTINEZ

Der Greif: How does your experience in architectural design shape your perspective when capturing landscapes and structures?

My interest in design stems back to childhood. I gravitated to the paintings of the Dutch Renaissance and later on to those of the American Modernists. The world-view paintings of Pieter Bruegel the Elder, complete with staffage and allegory, were the earliest artworks I studied. They fascinated me with their spatial depth and humanity. Perhaps an even greater influence on my sense of design was where I grew up, in the Theater District of New York City. Being surrounded by the street grid of the city, with its long avenues and cross streets, developed within me an understanding of what buildings *feel* like. Photography allowed me to capture this feeling.

I grew up middle class in a diverse city without many cultural barriers between myself and those around me. I think this is why I relate to those people I photograph. We lived in a small one-bedroom apartment right off Broadway, near Times Square. My mother still lives there. I had access to the museums, libraries and concert halls of New York. My older sister -- an actress and writer -- took me under her wing early on and made sure I was exposed to all these cultural resources. Thanks to these twin influences, I find myself looking towards architecture as a foundation for designing my photographs to this day.





Der Greif: Could you share some insights into your creative process and the equipment you use? How does large-format guide your process?

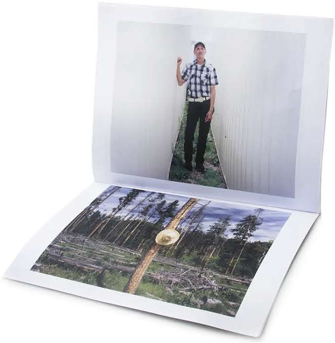
The opportunity to live and work on a project in one singular place like Wyoming for a long period of time allowed me to scout locations and return at different times of day or season. This is a luxury, one is not always accorded, for as artists we are usually required to balance our time on projects against obligations and commitments we have to work, and family back home. Having the time to observe and plan for the type of light is often critical to my work. I feel each location should be rendered in a specific type of light in order to bring out its nascent purity of form. With regards to large format photography, I usually break down the process into two parts: the first is Photographing With Intention and the second is Composing With Large Format. I will elaborate on them briefly:

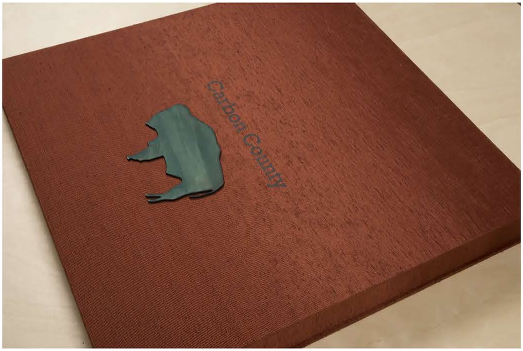
For most applications, the large format camera requires the use of a tripod. This slows you down. The larger film size requires a commensurate increase in f/stop, which in turn lowers the shutter speed. A sensitivity towards the stillness of mind and image begins to develop, both in the photographer and his process. Because of the camera weight and completely manual camera operation involved before exposing film, one begins working in a state of accumulated intentions.

What this means is simple: one tends to do a lot of the compositional, conceptual and camera placement deliberations “in the mind’s eye.” Naturally, one could use a smaller format camera with the same cautioned slowness of large format, but I would argue the inherent qualities of the latter (large print sizes, color tonality, smoothness of grain) to be of greater benefit when working with the typical, unmoving subjects of a large format photographer.

Der Greif: Can you discuss the significance of the choice of folio box and booklet format? How do you envision this presentation enhancing the viewer's experience and engagement with your work?

Zatara Press and I created the *Carbon County* Folio Box and Booklet for a few practical and conceptual reasons. I am a print-maker at heart. Shooting large format film is a direction I chose almost exclusively because of the quality it produces as a print. Therefore, as a portfolio, the Folio Box is designed to enhance the impact of each print it contains. We designed the box so that the red book cloth fabric, the turquoise of the leather bison on the cover, and the gray letterpress boards could all call back to motifs found in the American West. On a more experiential level, the presentation of tipped-in prints is designed to lend a certain weight to the project. I personally helped print and assemble the boxes in-house with Zatara Press' team. The portfolio boxes of Ansel Adams, Paul Strand, and even Diane Arbus were influential to our project as well. After the fact and during the construction of the box, we conceived of the booklet version of *Carbon County* as a way for there to be an affordable object for me to bring back to the people of Wyoming. The Folio Box and Booklet seem to have been well received! I feel as an art object everyone should see and experience it in person. There are less than 10 boxes remaining out of an edition of 50.





Der Greif: Lastly, how has your artistic journey evolved since the publication of "Carbon County," and are there any upcoming projects or themes you're currently exploring?

The experience of *Carbon County* shaped me into a better photographer. Wyoming was the first opportunity I had to live and photograph away from home for an extended amount of time. Before that, most of my work was created on two to four-week-long road trips. This intimacy sparked a closeness with those I photographed. Prior to *Carbon County*, I photographed figures within the landscape, typical of the staffage found in Dutch and German paintings (see "Bearded Lady, Willets Point, New York" selected in the Der Greif Guest Room). People were isolated and often at a distance. I left with a renewed interest in photographing people up close with more intimacy. This led to the *Ferry Project* which I began almost immediately upon returning home to New York City from Wyoming.

Carbon County directly helped me become commissioned by the Kentucky Documentary Photographic Project to travel the State of Kentucky in April 2022. This led to a new body of work in that area, which is still in progress. The central themes from *Carbon County* of human interaction with the landscape continue on through this Kentucky project and my work as a whole.