

Concealed Wetlands: Rendering the Invisible

Pierce Cedar Creek Institute Final Report

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As the 2013 Pierce Cedar Creek Institute (Hastings, Michigan) Gordon Art Fellow, I sought to make art that would expose people to the negative impacts they may have on nature. Many people overlook the effect of invasive species and occasional litter. They fail to see the sizable impact upon the environment once all of these occurrences add up. For my project, I photographed both the cause and effect of several issues that have negative impacts on nature. By surrounding each photograph of an effect with numerous photographs of its causes, I hope to grab the attention of my viewers and show them how dangerously and quickly “little things” do add up.

Artist Statement:

Infrared light falls outside of the visible light spectrum. By manipulating a camera, a photographer can capture near infrared light as a photograph. Infrared photography has different aesthetic qualities; if black and white, the photographs have nearly pure black skies and very light grey foliage.

I have used infrared photography as a representation of how bleak and seemingly unimportant wildlife, forests, and nature in general has become to most of the developed world. The infrared photographs represent the urbanization of nature and essentially how humans keep destroying natural habitats to create their manmade habitats. Capturing these images in infrared is symbolic of the limited spectrum of living we might experience one day if left unmanaged. In recent years, Michigan’s wetlands have been threatened. My project mainly focused on the wetlands at Pierce Cedar Creek Institute near Hastings, Michigan.

Recently, wetland destruction has been caused by commercial, industrial, and residential expansion. The estimated 11 million acres of Michigan wetlands existing in pre settlement times has now been reduced to less than 3 million acres.

Background:

I spent my time at Pierce Cedar Creek Institute working on a project of conservation and awareness. Like Ansel Adams bringing attention to the American West through photography, I want to bring awareness to a more regional and contemporary issue. The wetlands of Michigan

are being threatened by urbanization. “Recently, much wetland destruction has been caused by commercial, industrial, and residential expansion. The estimated 11 million acres of Michigan wetlands existing in pre settlement times has now been reduced to less than 3 million acres.” (Michigan.gov) According to the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, 100,000 acres of wetlands are lost each year. Pierce Cedar Creek Institute has a good variety of protected land including a large amount of their parcel designated as wetlands. I used infrared photography as a representation of how bleak and seemingly unimportant wildlife, forests, and nature in general has become to most of the developed world. Infrared photography has different aesthetic qualities; the photographs have nearly pure black skies and very light grey foliage.

The Gordon Art Fellowship at Pierce Cedar Creek Institute funded me to dedicate a large period of time to create and develop a body of work that exposes the abundance of wetlands at Pierce Cedar Creek Institute. I plan to sell some of the works with a percentage of the sales being donated to Duck’s Unlimited, to help preserve wetlands on a larger scale.

The fellowship allowed me to explore a technique of photography and a subject I have been thinking about for two years. *Night Lights* was a series of photographs produced around rivers at night. A lot of my work over the summers consisted of hiking along rivers photographing waterfalls. I have been overly attracted to waterways in general. A lot of my work over the summers consisted of traveling to Michigan’s Upper Peninsula, Ohio and Pennsylvania to hike along rivers photographing waterfalls. I believe the poetic beauty that such an active ecosystem can be majestic and grand, and so subtle and minute within a very short distance, such as, a waterfall compared to a marshland or swamp near the stream at the bottom of the waterfall, is something truly divine.

Methods:

For my project at Pierce Cedar Creek Institute I used my Nikon D80 infrared digital camera. I was typically using a 16mm fisheye lens for total coverage, but also used a Nikon 50mm fixed lens for closer, more open compositions. I often used a tripod or a homemade 25 feet tall monopod, allowing me to capture images from a nearly bird’s-eye-view.

Image making strategies:

The first step to any photograph is to visually determine the “crop” of the image. The photographer needs to pre-visualize the photograph before meeting eye to viewfinder. Then, the photographer needs to match a lens to the scene. I needed to determine if a 16 mm or 50 mm lens would capture the entire scene I wanted in the photograph. With my project, I got pretty good at understanding what the correct exposure would be for direct sun on a scene would be. (Generally, 1/30-1/60sec. f/11 ISO 100) Exposure varies dramatically if photographing in the shade. The image becomes very flat in shade too.

If the scene I wanted to capture only required a tripod, the process was relatively short. However, if the composition I wanted was going to be from a different perspective, say, 10 to 20 feet above my head, I would attach my Nikon D80 with the 16 mm lens to a monopod. Then, after extending the pole about 5 feet and holding the camera parallel to the ground, I would set the camera self-timer for 20 seconds. After setting the time, I would quickly launch the camera on the monopod some 10 to 25 feet. Once I heard the camera fire, I would lower it to check the composition and exposure. This process would be repeated many times until I achieved the desired composition.

In addition to photographing with the correct lenses and angles, I also had to be selective about the time of day and weather, as its impact on lighting is *very* important. If there was more than 60% cloud cover, I could not photograph. Direct sunlight between the times of 10 am and 5 pm was essential for the stark contrast of the photographs.

Post Processing:

I primarily processed the images in Adobe Camera Raw. This program allows me to quickly narrow my selection, and adjust overall contrast. From there, I would import the photographs into Adobe Photoshop. From there, I would resize the images to the proper size; adjust sharpness as necessary, and correct local contrast throughout the image very meticulously. After the “magic” happens, I unsaturated the photograph and corrected the color balance to produce a lightly red image which is what digital infrared with a 715 nm filter looks like. The reason unsaturated and added color is simply because my camera did not produce an even color. All sensors are different, and my camera sensor had an odd color shift making half the image a greenish tint. I mimicked the red tones from the area of the photograph that did not render green. Once I found that formula, I could easily apply it to all the photographs thereafter.

Results/ Discussion:

These images bring attention to wetlands from the art elite to the everyday Joe. The goal is to start a conversation of conservations. Donations to Duck's Unlimited from print sales will also be made to further impact the wetlands of North America in a positive way. I have selected 20 photographs that are 12" by 18" in print size and framed in a 24" by 30" wooden frame.

Summary:

This summer at Pierce Cedar Creek Institute I learned the technique of digital infrared photography. This fellowship allowed me to spend undivided time with a subject matter I have always been very passionate about. The amount of quality time I could dedicate to photographing has never been matched in my seven years of shooting. The concluding suite of twenty photographs is already booked for exhibitions for more than five months into 2014! The show will live on as catalog version after the foreseeable shows are closed.

Future Plans:

Immediately after the five images in Art Prize exhibit is over, the prints will scatter to various locations around Kalamazoo locations including the exhibit at Western Michigan University's *Spare | Change* show. After that, *Concealed Wetlands: Rendering the Invisible* will be shown in its entirety for the first time at Western Michigan University's Gallery 1206. The full suite of twenty images will be on display from October 20th until October 25th with a closing reception on October 25th from 5-8 pm. A week after that, about half of the series will be on display at WMU's Office for Sustainability for about three months. Days after that exhibit comes down, the prints will travel back to their originating location at Pierce Cedar Creek Institute for a period of time.



Figure 1. Sample installation of framed photos at Western Michigan University.



Figure 2. Sample photos from the collection.

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Pierce Cedar Creek Institute

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